

Musical practice of Keronchong

Keronchong is believed to have originated in 16th century Portuguese music of the Portuguese colonies in the Moluccas and Batavia while in Malaysia (and Malaya) keronchong is mainly associated with practice in Malacca. Malaysian keronchong is thought to be derived from Javanese keronchong. Chopyak¹ informs us it is not so much a musical form as it is a style of performance. Therefore he points out that an asli langgam song becomes a keronchong langgam song when performed in a keronchong style on keronchong instruments. This is evident in Ernst Heins' entry on keroncong in Groves where typical instrumentation of the ensemble would comprise two *kroncong* (small guitars), among other instruments. Craig Lockard goes on to describe how keroncong orchestras and recordings attracted both Malay and Chinese communities with a sensuous Portuguese-Indonesian musical blend originating in Java while *dondang sayang* either produced or consumed in some popularity in Melaka and western Johor seemed to bear resemblance to *kroncong*. In contradistinction however, **Dondang Sayang**, according to Philip L. Thomas,² combined the verbal art of complex poetry or *pantun* as it was known locally, with orchestral accompaniment. The *pantuns* were highly stylised repartee and required considerable effort to excel in. Lockard also referred to Popular Malay ensembles known as **orkes melayu** which he argues as being heavily influenced by Middle Eastern and Indian musical styles were seen to be popular on the West coast while *ghazal* was seen to combine Indian, Persian and indigenous influences and became *predominant in the state of Johor*.³ While it is not difficult to presume secretions further down south to Singapore, performances of these specific forms beg the question, were they all accompanied by a keronchong ensemble?

Tony Danker's recollections on his pathway as a musician begins in what he calls a keronchong band:

*I played with a Keronchong Band in 1938...19 January...I was doing Junior Cambridge then....after that it was known as Standard 8...I remember that...I used to play every week at the **Happy World Cabaret**....they used to call it the **Sarong and Kebaya night**...two bands...on one side they had **Fred Libio and his Swing Band**⁴ playing English music...on the other side was David Lincoln and his keronchong band and we used to alternate...they would play three or four numbers then stop then we would play three or four keronchong and then stop...I started with David Lincoln and his Orchestra...they used to record for the **Columbia** recording company...local but the brand was Columbia and all the Malay singers who sang were in the David Lincoln Keronchong orchestra...I was a member of*

*that band and what I was doing was playing first guitar...by first guitar, there is a thing in Malay which was called **tokal**...but that would be what a lead guitarist in a Malay keronchong band does...you would have a violinist doing the melody...and this guy on first guitar is doing all the improvisations to back the melody...and that is very difficult to do...*⁵

The David Lincoln Orchestra is not another evanescent name in a practice that seems to have missed documentation. Tan Sooi Beng's work on the 78 RPM industry pre Japanese Occupation draws attention to a list of New Malay Records in the Straits Echo of 1937 of **Columbia Singapore Artistes**:⁶

- GE 10008 Jamilah Rumba
Bukan Batu
Che Jamilah & Lincoln's Orchestra
- GE 10009 Sri Tambak
Burong Puteh
Obed & Lincoln's Orchestra
- GE 10010 Pekan Baru
Yatim Piatu
Che Yah & Lincoln's Orchestra
- GE 10011 Kliruan Dunia
Chinta Salah Mata
Miss Julia & Lincoln's Orchestra

In fact the recording industry was among the first to capitalise on recording music making. Tony Danker recalls his difficulties in recording music:

Even if you're recording in the studio, there is only one microphone...those days recording was not like today...you record there and straightaway you put your tape...you get your music being played back...no such thing!...you record on 78s...remember in the recording studio there was a French engineer...he had something that looked waxed to me...I don't know...anyway it was that thick and I know that I could see him put it there and the light would come on...we were in the next studio and he would be in his own room...as recording engineer...and the light come on red that means you start...and then you were not to exceed three minutes and twenty seconds for every record...woe betide you if you did because those 'waxes' were very expensive and the engineer would give you hell...if you break a string there while you're playing, its recorded there...he'll get mad...because it is expensive...after the thing is done...you don't get a chance to listen to what you just did...you have to wait six months because those wax things have to be sent to India for processing and they come back... the 78 plates/recordings...after six months...only then can you hear what you played six

months ago!...this recording studio was in Killeney Road [in the 1930s, Gramophone Co. of Singapore, 147 Killeney Road produced its own catalogue—the company also created a recording studio at 96 Cairnhill Road where recording engineers such as Mr. F.A. Floyd recorded singers and musicians—(Straits Echo 24 May 1934)⁷]....more like a bungalow house to me...subsequent recordings we went up to McDonald House, years later...I went through all that... and these Malay songs or keronchong bands, for every song they wanted an introduction...guitar introduction and you alone...the light is on and anything goes wrong...its hell of a thing to record...the joke is you don't hear what you played until 6 months later...you go anywhere else and perform...people are lucky today...there and then you hear what you played...and you can re-record at not extra cost at all, digital and multi-recording...those days these things were unheard of...the technology was such that was the only way...and this guy loses his cool if we ruined one of this waxed things...I remembered that but that was a good foundation for me....⁸

Much of Danker's recollections are corroborated by Tan:

Recording was done on hard wax. Performers had to sing into the recording horn. They had to move away from the horn when they were singing high notes and move closer when they were singing low notes. Singers were only given two-to-three minutes to sing each song. This limitation restricted improvisation; if mistakes were made the wax had to be thrown away.⁹

Instrumental configuration

According to Ernst Heins in his entry on keroncong in Groves, typical instrumentation of the ensemble would comprise transverse flute, violin, mandolin, one or two guitars, two *kroncong* (small guitars), a plucked cello imitating a drum and an optional plucked bass.¹⁰ Tony Danker recalled the instrumentation in practice as he used to play every week at the Happy World Cabaret:

They used to call it the Sarong and Kebaya night...there was a violinist, lead guitar, strumming guitar, two ukeleles, and a cello and double bass...if you are lucky enough you could play the flute...beautiful...maximum I would say 8. Singers were on their own...but they were good singers singing in the keronchong...they used to sing the lagu and aslis, as you call them...in those days they used to call it nasib...lagu nasib... I don't know why they were called lagu nasib ...they were very sad songs...mostly about tragedy...songs of fate...I'm not sure...but in those days they used to call it lagu nasib...now that's changed to asli...and that was very simple...one bass and one violinist and they had the kompong (percussion drum)...you had to know how to hit it...because if you'd hit it the wrong way...otherwise you'd just complicate things...certain beats you'd move to the

*beat...mostly they were based on love...the lyrics were written so that everybody wanted to talk about or sing about or listen to...once in a while you'd get a song about lovesickness...the loss of a mum then was a big issue...that upped the sale of records...out of sympathy...*¹¹

Support for the practice:

*At the Happy World Cabaret they used to have two bands...on one side they had Fred Libio and his band playing English music...on the other side was David Lincoln and his keronchong band and we used to alternate...they would play three or four numbers then stop then we would play three or four keronchong and then stop...people used to enjoy that Sarong and Kebaya night... the highest record sales were actually not purchased so much by the Malays but by the Peranakans...those keronchong orchestras [had] Malays acting in it...but we had Chinese singers, you know...Lily Toh...she used to sing keronchong...she only recorded four songs...but it sold very well in those days...because she was Peranakan...the Peranakan's loved keronchong and **asli** and **lagu nasib**...they were a big community then...We used to have keronchong competitions...most of them attending were Chinese...in the Happy world and all that...our singers and the band won quite a few...and when I joined another group **the Chap Singa group**...they also won. They used to have keronchong competitions and competition night, the whole of Geylang road will be crowded with people walking...mostly from the Geylang Serai...they would walk to the Happy World...and to see people walk in by the droves for the competition. It was a great journey...it was a huge job to fight for the microphone and the Happy World stadium was so large...while this was going on they would invite well-known singers from Indonesia...have all these side shows and sing together to attract more crowds...S. Abdullah was a great keronchong singer...When we were playing keronchong music he was already a famous keronchong singer in Indonesia...I know he came through Singapore only once...there was another famous singer from Indonesia called Kartini...sang very good keronchong...her husband played trumpet...Locally, there was an Abdul Rahman...Miss Julia...Miss Rose who was from the Philippines but sang Malay songs... a lady called Faddilah from Penang... very great to be there...it was simple...but we looked forward to these things...*¹²

By the late 1940s and 1950s a number of these traditions found themselves transformed either by appropriation of Western musical or instrumental influences. Yet as Lockard points out, all these popular and traditional forms, arrived at by synthesis of the foreign and indigenous, are considered today very much a part of

Malay cultural tradition. Writing in 1954, Tony Beamish informs us of the presence of Music in culture in the sixth chapter suitably titled **Music and Letters**:

Many people are unaware of the great wealth of Malay folk music in the country, because they do not often get a chance to hear it. Nevertheless it ranks as an important part of Malaya's artistic heritage. As it is not written down, there is always a risk of it dying out, but this is unlikely for several reasons.

- *The music gains strength from its readiness to absorb new ideas.*
- *The Malay rulers give it strong support.*
- *Energetic steps are being taken by Radio Malaya to preserve it on records and to arouse wider interest in it by broadcasting.*
- *But the main reason why the music is still played and sung in the kampongs today is because the villagers revel in it, a sure guarantee of survival in the face of the strongest competition.*

*Modern Malay "kronchong" orchestras, playing dreamy music similar to Hawaiian, record commercially in Singapore, and are a big draw with all communities. They specialise in sentimental songs that are firm favourites both in Malaya and over the water in Indonesia. It is anyone's guess whether the kronchong orchestra is more popular than its rival attraction, the Western style dance band.*¹³

The late Captain Abdullah Ahmad remembers as a 16-year old being part of a "keronchong orchestra Hawaiian band" together with Hamzah Dolmat and Zain Blackout. He recalls *I was involved in bangsawan music and had an opportunity to study many things about the elements of music with my own creative abilities.*¹⁴ The period in question was the heyday of the Bunga Tanjong cabaret, New World, Great World and The Pagoda and these performing venues were crucial years in his development as a growing and youthful musician. He recalls the demands made on good repertoire and good performance standards with the opportunity to perform in different locations which were significant for his musical development. However, these opportunities did not last long and Captain Abdullah felt hampered by the need for further development. Which is why he took the opportunity in 1946, just after the Japanese Occupation, to travel as a member of the Donyada Latin Quartet Susikuri Review, a Japanese programme, to visit various countries in Asia like Hong Kong, Manila, Taiwan and Bangkok for two months.¹⁵

The puzzling reference to a "keronchong orchestra Hawaiian band" seems to assume a merger of two performance genres. However, Tony Beamish informs us of their proximity in his description and discussion, well worth the repeat:

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The performing venues are corroborated by Joseph Peters in his observation of popular dance forms in 1950s where various dance spots or nightclubs (the most famous of which was Bunga Tanjung at the New World Amusement Park), were the venues for their proliferation.

In her academic exercise, *Popular Music and Contemporary Malay Society* (1994), Siti Shaireen Selamat’s preliminary study of Malay pop music in Singapore with two themes in mind:

1. Music as a means of cultural and ethnic identification
2. Music as a source of social commentary and ideology¹⁷

It would seem that popular culture among the Malay community was dominated by traditional and folk-arts. There was often a strong regional flavour to them with some modernisation and syncretism via variations on traditional themes. Several musical styles dominated this period;

1. Keronchong
2. Ghazal
3. Boria,
4. Asli, and
5. Joget.

Each musical form had a distinctive style of performance with a specific rhythmic characteristic and an ornamental style of singing. It was possible to associate the musical style with a geographical place...dikir barat (rhythmic chanting of verses) was favoured by those from Kelantan; boria (group choral singing with dance routines) dominated in Penang and ghazal in Johor. Until the proliferation of Music of Popular culture in the Malay community, popularity in music was arrived at via practice of the more traditional forms, or to use Howard Becker’s term solidified conventions. Joseph E.E. Peters¹⁸ offers us details of some of these popular traditional practices. The question of what is traditional and what is popular does become enmeshed in such a way as to problematise traditional and popular as mutually exclusive terms.

The Musical practice of Keroncong is probably in a very fragile present, given that it is popularised by the Peranakan community, more than it is by the Malay community. For the Peranakan community, it seems, like Bangsawan to hold for them a unique identity and signifier for their cultural identity. Perhaps it is reason enough for them to articulate it as musical practice of its own community.

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- 3 Lockard, Craig, Dance of Life, Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1998, p.213
- 4 Fred Libio's Band was featured in the Tribune, Monday October 7 1940 thanking their supporters for their letters of appreciation of their weekly broadcasts. On the same page, below their expression of thanks, is an advertisement by Happy Cabaret.
- 5 Interview with Tony Danker. 4 June 2004.
- 6 Straits Echo, 2 August 1937, cited in Tan Sooi Beng, The 78 RPM Record Industry in Malaya Prior to World War II, Asian Music, Vol. XXVIII, no.1, Fall/Winter 1996/7, pp.1-42.
- 7 Ibid., p.20.
- 8 Interview with Tony Danker. 4 June 2004.
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- 10 Heins, Ernst, Indonesia: Instrumental Ensembles, Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians, in Chopyak, James, Music in Modern Malaysia: a survey of the Musics affecting the development of Malaysian popular music, in Asian Music, Vol. XVIII, no.1, pp.111-138, p.114., p.128.
- 11 Interview with Tony Danker. 4 June 2004. Spellings are based on memory and may not correspond with the names as they might appear in other documentation and records.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Beamish, Tony, The Arts of Malaya, Donald Moore, Singapore, 1954, rev. 1981, pp.43-45, in Chapter Six, Music and Letters.
- 14 Basir Siswo, Mula dengan tiup trompet yang di jumpa, Berita Harian Monday 26 January 1987, pg. 3, Translations are mine.
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