

NEGOTIATING MODERNITY IN THE HISTORY OF IBAN POPULAR MUSIC (Lightning Paper)

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This paper examines how modernity has historically framed the development of the Iban popular music industry in 1960s and 1970s. The Iban is the largest indigenous ethnic group in Sarawak, Malaysia and make up approximately one third of the total Sarawak population. Historically, the Iban have been accepted as a cultural group in the multi-cultural nation of Malaysia, although exposed to the agents of change in their lifestyle and socio-cultural development. On the other hand, the Iban were a culturally homogenous group, located geographically and politically on the periphery of Malaysia's power centres. It is seen that during the twentieth century, Iban society had gone through a state of dramatic flux where the Iban have gone through processes of readapting themselves to meeting the demanding challenges of Malaysian nationalism. As seen in the Iban music industry, this transformation of rapidly embracing modernity through the nation was to the detriment of traditional practices in culture in order to adapt them to the era of modernisation. Drawing upon Barendregt's (2014) "alternative conceptions of modernity" this paper examines how the Iban references both a national as well as a local music industry, particularly through their use of language as an expression of Iban. First, this paper will examine how modernity has historically shaped developments in the industry of Iban popular music through political and economic modernisation. Using a historiography method, I will then look at differential transformation within the Iban music industry because of agents of socio-cultural and political changes in Sarawak. This reflects how the Iban people react to and reflect upon adaptation and modern demands of change as a result of the effects of historical processes on their social, cultural and physical environments.

Introduction

Modern, modernity, modernisation and modernism are the terms used in describing the transformation of socio-historical process these days. Objectively, modernity is seen as a "process of modernization, by which the social world comes under the domination of asceticism, secularization, the universalistic claims of rationality and differentiation of various spheres of the lifeworld, bureaucratization of economic, political and military practices, and the growing monetarization of values" (Turner, 1990, p. 6). The basis of modernity consists of historical, cultural and social formations (Mee & Kahn, 2012) and includes large areas of social process and cultural orientation comprised of globalisation, transnationalism, nationalism, identity, the state, secularism capitalism, techno-rationality and religion.

From the colonial period to postcolonial era, Southeast Asian nation states have gone through dramatic historical developments and experienced political and economical changes. But looking at the history of popular music through the lens of the nation does not in itself produce the whole picture. Instead Barendregt (2014) proposes "alternative conceptions of modernity" (p. 6) that problematize nation-centred narratives about the history of popular musics in Southeast Asia. Barendregt observes that modernity's production of new fashions, markets and lifestyles offers, "a glimpse of how and why people have taken up ideas of the modern, how it is made, unmade and remade, paying ample attention to how such reconfigurations may serve various claims and are constantly haunted by yet others" (Barendregt, 2014, p. 6). Those who are attached to how and why popular music is produced and created to meet the market demand attempt to fit into the current needs at that particular time period as well as create their own trends and developments within that society.

Theoretical Framework/Discussion

Recognising the defiance of Western modernity, Barendregt's (2014) alternative conceptions of modernity avoids nation-centred narratives and takes a holistic approach towards examining the multiple ways in which popular musics are attached to socio-culture developments in society. Some of the multiplicity of factors includes issues of socio-economic and stages of socio-cultural development, educational development, Christianity, literacy, as well as stages of economic development in infrastructure, lifestyle and technology. All have been critical factors influencing definitions of modernity in Iban society. The Iban people in Sarawak have encountered various waves of modernisation since the arrival of James Brooke in August 1839 where