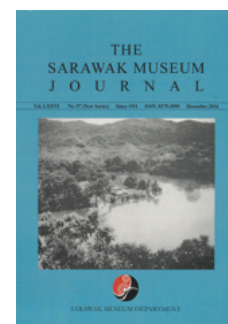




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ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF MODERNITY IN THE HISTORY OF IBAN POPULAR MUSIC

Connie Lim Keh Nie

ABSTRACT

The Iban make up one third of the Sarawakian population and is the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, Malaysia. As with other ethnicities in the nation, modernity has presented challenges for socio-cultural development and lifestyle of Iban people. Historically, the Iban are a cultural group located geographically and politically in Sarawak, Malaysia. Iban society had gone through a state of flux where people have gone through the process of readapting themselves in meeting the demanding challenges of modernisation. Drawing upon Barendregt's (2014) 'alternative conceptions of modernity' this paper examines how the Iban associate both a national as well as a local music industry particularly through their use of language as an expression of Iban. First the paper will examine changes in Iban society through political and economic modernisation. Differential transformation within Iban music industry is examined in relation to exposure to agents of change such as the influence through Christian missionary and education. This reflects how the Iban react and interact in adaptation of modern demands of change as a result of the effects of historical processes on the social, cultural and physical environments.

Keywords: Modernity, Christianity, Colonisation

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INTRODUCTION

Modern, modernity, modernisation and modernism are the terms used spontaneously in describing a transformation of socio-historical process today. 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: 6).

From the colonial period to post-colonial era, Southeast Asia nation states have gone through dramatic historical developments and experienced political and economic 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' that problematise nation-centered 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, un-made and re-made, paying ample attention to how such reconfigurations may serve various claims and are constantly haunted by yet others" (Barendregt 2014: 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 of that particular time period as well as create their own trends and developments within the society.

Theoretical Framework

Recognising the defiance of Western modernity, 'alternative conceptions of modernity' avoids nation-centered narratives and takes a holistic approach towards examining the multiple ways in which popular musics are attached to socio-cultural developments in society. Some of the multiplicity of factors include 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. These are some of the critical factors influencing definitions of modernity in the Iban society. The Iban in Sarawak have encountered various waves of modernisation since the arrival of James Brooke in August 1839 where the history of Sarawak as a modern nation-state began (Kedit 1980). Adapting to the new environment after the arrival of Western influence, the Brookes administered and maintained order to prepare the Iban to meet the needs and demands of a modern economy.

During the Brooke administration, influence from the Christian missionary and education had exposed the Iban to Western music through hymn singing where they were exposed to Western melodic structures and harmony through the expectation of memorising the hymns. Since 1950s, the Saribas Iban had listened to the radio on regular basis (Postill 2006), the Iban established their contact to Western, Malay and Indonesian popular music played by the radio station. With radio providing a model, the Iban soon accelerated these innovations creating their own popular music, while expressing 'Iban-ness' through their own language, they adapted Western pop music melodies into their own early creations of pop music. Nevertheless, mimicking could also be seen as a reconfiguration in conveying their culture and expressions as social entertainment.