Popular Music in Southeast Asia
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Modern music for the Muslim Malay masses

The 1970s-1980s was a time of both uncertainties and new opportunities. It was an era in which the new-born nation states of Southeast Asia boldly took the road of Western-styled development with economic successes that were nothing short of spectacular. The new-found prosperity was well reflected in the massive growth of metropoles such as Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, or Bangkok, which now drew hundreds of thousands of newcomers from both the nearby countryside and often remote islands, resulting in a hotchpotch of cultures, ethnic affiliations, and a variety of lifestyles in the city’s neighbourhoods. Also, the 1970s, and continuing in the 1980s, saw the resurfacing of religion in the public sphere, with especially the Islamist movement in much of Muslim Southeast Asia rapidly gaining ground. As a result, Southeast Asians were increasingly (re-)embedded in alternative trajectories of globalization, the West no longer serving as exclusive role model on how to be modern.

This was also an era marked by a rapid coming and going of new musical technologies, genres, and audiences. In terms of novel technologies, these were the years of small, cheap, and oftentimes democratizing media, such as samplers, and especially the cassette player, allowing, respectively, for an incorporation of traditional sounds into modern pop genres and easy and quick multiplication of recorded music without the need for heavy investment by large record companies. Such smaller media similarly allowed for commercial release of genres that hitherto had long been ignored or deemed commercially less viable by the industry, including new hybrid genres of religious and ethnic music. Such genres would soon become popular among audiences in Southeast Asia’s metropoles. Having left their home villages and root cultures behind, many still seemed to struggle with adapting to modern city life and the values it came with. The rise
of a modern Islamic musical genre called nasyid – songs with Islamic content and the implicit aim to convey a moral message and spiritual advice (dakwah) in an everyday context – may help to illustrate this phenomenon.

Islamic music has been recorded and consumed by a mass audience ever since the advent of the recording industry, but it was only towards the end of the 1960s that companies began to realize its full potential. They started to target the vast Muslim Malay market in Southeast Asia. Much inspiration was found in gambus, a musical genre rooted in the Arab-Indonesian community and available on record since at least the 1930s. But gambus comes with the disadvantage that it was mostly sung to in the Arabic language. And although Southeast Asian Muslims were well acquainted with Arabic through their religious practices, it was not the language they used for daily communication. Towards the 1960s, Muslim Malay performers in Indonesia and the newborn nation states of Malaysia and Singapore started experimenting with gambus using the Malay language. This resulted in a hybrid genre variously branded as nasyid (padang pasir), qasidah moderen, orkes dakwah, or orkes padang pasir. The latter two terms refer to the gambus-style ‘desert rhythms’: the musical beat that invoked a Middle Eastern, and thus, Islamic mood.

It is Ahmad Baqi (1922-1999) from Medan who is generally considered the ‘Master of Desert Rhythm’. He was an early pioneer of nasyid. With Baqi, a modern practice of Islamic music surfaced that addressed the needs and aspirations of a contemporary Malay Muslim audience that increasingly had become aware of itself. Baqi’s father, a religious teacher in the Deli Sultanate on Sumatra’s east coast, wanted his son to follow in his footsteps, but Baqi preferred playing music on the violin and other string instruments. His religious background, however, continued to inspire him as a composer; it is believed that he composed over a thousand songs. In 1956, Baqi teamed up with an Egyptian group led by the musician Mahmud Ibrahim. It enabled him to meet with some of the religious teachers of the prestigious
Al-Azhar University in Cairo. On that occasion, he was given a 78-stringed *gannuni* zither, which he managed to master in only a short time, or so the story goes. Over time, Baqi performed with a succession of musicians and bands. He joined forces with prolific lead vocalists, such as Rokiah Zain, Asmidar Darwis, and especially Hajah Asiah Jamil. Asiah, who had already gained wide popularity during the late 1960s, not only recorded with Baqi, but across a range of Islamic music styles, including *gambus*, *qasidah*, and *nasyid modern*. In the late 1960s, Asiah and others joined the Padang Pasir Orchestra that Baqi had launched to provide his students with a musical home. This Orkes Nur El-Suraya, or just El-Suraya, performed at hotels in and around the Medan area, but also at marriage ceremonies and during Islamic festive occasions.

El-Suraya’s first and best remembered commercially released song ‘Selimut Putih’ (‘White Linen’) was an arrangement by Baqi himself with lyrics by Ustaz Haji Mohammad Ghazali Hasan. It was created in 1968, but first released on record in Malaysia around 1970, as a two-song mini-album on ABC Records (the other side had ‘Usah diingat’ or ‘The Necessity to Remember’). On this occasion, it was Atiqah Rahman’s chilly vocals that caught the imagination of many a Malay Muslim listener and the song soon became iconic. The release of this mini-album proved how fluid the market for Melayu-inspired music still was, with records being equally and simultaneously consumed in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. It also demonstrated that an almost eschatological message – the song tells the story of a human being upon her or his death, who finally meets with archangel Jibrail – could have commercial value.

Although ‘White Linen’ seemed to counter the optimist tale of progress and secular modernity propagated by the post-colonial state, Baqi and El-Suraya were asked by the local Malaysian authorities to join the campaign for the Federal Land Development Authority scheme (FELDA). This programme was aimed at relieving poverty among the Malay population through modernization. To be successful, these endeavours needed religious
and especially popular justification and that is where El-Suraya came in. Through their music, the musicians morally addressed the Malay rural poor who were brought en masse under the management of FELDA. At the same time, El-Suraya’s Islamic nasyid music counterbalanced the growing popularity of the ‘foreign’ pop yeh yeh among Malay youth.

But there was resistance to this Islamic pop music too, from both state and religious circles. In September 1974, newspapers announced that Radio Televisi Malaysia had decided to officially ban ‘White Linen’ (together with 62 other songs, including the ‘obscene’ ‘Screw You’ by Elton John), and declare it haram, forbidden by Islamic law. The newspapers quoted disappointed female listeners who wanted to know where they would still be able to purchase the record, as it was no longer in stock. They stated that the music touched them deeply and that the lyrics contributed to religious awareness among their families. Only a week later, the newspaper announced that, after an intervention by the Minister of Information, fans of ‘the song with a religious and desert rhythm character’ could rejoice as Radio Televisi Malaysia had started playing ‘White Linen’ again.

This story of Ahmad Baqi, El-Suraya and the song ‘White Linen’ features some of the tendencies that were manifest during this particular era: the rise of formerly obscure musical genres through ethnic and/or cultural religious framing, a musical message that worked with the state’s ideas of modernity and progress as often as it ran contrary to such a message, and the introduction of new and cheap audio technologies that made it possible for music lovers to play the music they held most dear, whenever and wherever they wanted.

Pop history, as we know it

Another feature highlighted in the story of El-Suraya is the tremendous speed by which new labels and genres came and went throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. This was not least
due to the hunger of both the industry and audiences for new musics that were considered at once ‘modern’, hip, and fashionable, and yet somehow distinctive from what other artists in Western and especially neighbouring countries had been doing. This was achieved by mixing local music or music styles with foreign sounds. The recording industry was thus quite inventive; at times, social and cultural values were transgressed during the creative process. But the very same industry could be utterly conservative as well; too much musical frolicking would lead to low sale numbers.

This ambiguous attitude of the industry explains why, upon entering the 1970s, rock and roll and Western pop continued to be by far the most dominant genres in the larger part of Southeast Asia, in spite of the often-heard demand for a decolonizing of the cultural sphere. It is a dominant culture that is epitomized by the Bandung-based youth magazine Aktuil (1967-1986). Aktuil captured the spirit of the rock era, its creative slang and blue jeans fashion in an experimental and, at times, entertaining way. But this somewhat belated 1970s, middle-class consumption of ‘rock and revolt’ is also formative, as pop scholar Emma Baulch has argued, for much of Indonesia’s musical journalism and criticism today, defining rock and its rebellious image as more ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ than other genres.

However, not all musical developments of that era equally fit such ‘middle-class myth making’. The early 1970s also saw other, less prosaic, appropriations of globally popular trends, examples including the popularity of ‘blaxploitation’ music and movies such as Shaft (1971) or Superfly (1972), in which black artists had the lead and stereotypically featured as hero, warrior, or the cool bad guy. Another worldwide and simultaneously Southeast Asian phenomenon was the fame of, for example, the Charlie Angels TV series (locally rendered into Indonesian action flicks such as Cewek Jagoan, or ‘Deadly Angels’, or 1981’s Mystics in Bali, with almost identical content). 1970s Southeast Asia, like most other regions in the world, saw young people also dancing to funk, soul, and especially disco (see box on ‘disco’).
During this era, Indonesian President Suharto’s New Order regime broke with his predecessor Sukarno’s condemnation of Western pop as being perverse and imperialist. Much like what happened during the Malaysian New Economic Policy, a financial restructuring of the Malaysian nation that took place from the early 1970s onwards, Suharto primarily invested in Western-style development. These were the formative years of what today is still called *pop Indonesia*. This term refers to a musical industry label of all sorts, hinting at Anglo-American-inspired popular music (mostly love ballads using vocal harmony), sung in English or, more often, in the national language. *Pop Indonesia*, with artists such as Titiek Puspa, Andi Meriem, Rafika Duri, Emilia Contessa, or Broery Marantika, stood for modern amplified music, using Western instruments, mostly played at indoor venues. This kind of music came to be dubbed *gedongan*, from the Indonesian word for ‘building’, *gedong*. It marked the music as modern and progressive, as many traditional performances took place under the sky. *Pop Indonesia* musicians frequently cooperated with the Suharto administration, if only to prevent themselves from being accused of being leftist, something that had happened to many an Indonesian artist since the coup and subsequent large-scale persecution of (assumed) communists in 1965 and 1966. So-called soldier stages are a good example of such co-optation. Artists helped to popularize the regime’s message of development through their performances at mass gatherings organized by the reigning political party.

However, *pop Indonesia*’s claim to hegemony was not unrivalled. During the late 1960s, and following a genealogy not too far removed from that of the *gambus*-inspired acts, hybridization of Anglo-American popular music and Melayu (Malay) music took place, resulting in *pop Melayu*: a genre that, from the mid-1960s onwards, enjoyed popularity in Indonesia as well as Singapore and Malaysia. *Pop Melayu*, as performed by Mus Mulyadi, Titik Sandhora, Lilis Suryani, and the likes, has its origins in the so-called *orkes Melayu*, Malay-language orchestral songs set to an ensemble that mixed Western instruments such as percussion,
guitar, piano, or violin with indigenous instruments such as double-headed drum (gendang) and the seruling flute.

The ongoing competition between pop Indonesia and pop Melayu was easily won by the former. Pop Indonesia controlled most of the mainstream media and a recording industry that was, by then, firmly settled in the nation’s capital. Pop Melayu resurfaced from time to time and in changing guises, but was always deemed utterly ‘unmodern’ by mainstream press and critics. Pop Indonesia, firmly seated on its throne next to its Western rock and pop twins, became the dominant narrative by which the history of popular culture in Indonesia is still told today. A tale of modernity and technological progress, much shaped by nationalist interests that seems little challenged, or are there other stories to be told?

Subversive sounds

Emerging from the unstable infant stage, many of the post-colonial nation states of Southeast Asia were slowly getting a grip on things and ever more daringly expressed their ambitions to citizens and the outside world alike. This resulted in master plans for progress and development of the nation, such as Malaysia’s aforementioned New Economic Policy and Suharto’s development nationalism. Yet, there are always alternative voices that challenge dominant state ideologies. Dissatisfaction with the nation’s policies and disillusionment, caused by the fact that the promised modernization did not fully materialize, prompted social critique. Where and when modernization was successful it often did exclude large segments of society, similarly shaping the formation of alternative views on the nation’s course. Frequently, these ‘subversive’ ideas found expression in music, notably popular music. In Indonesia, four musical trends were born out of this process: a renewed appetite for Islamic music, the rise of the protest song that promoted the nationalism of the republic’s earliest years, the birth of dangdut as a music for the
common man, and a return to traditional music, religious and ethnic, for musical inspiration.

In the 1970s, a worldwide ‘Islamic resurgence’ took place. It resonated especially with the post-colonial nation states of Indonesia and Malaysia, where the authorities tried to find a ‘middle way’ between the Communist Bloc and the West. Islam in all its guises increasingly became a way to express a distinct Southeast Asian identity. These two decades formed the foundational years of an Islamist movement, in which Muslim activists gave their alternative views on the government’s master plans, often in musical form. The movement enabled this newly emerging group of assertive Muslims to carve out an identity of their own by providing them with fashionable and modern lifestyles.

For many popular music makers, dissatisfaction with the nation state emerged with the loss of what anthropologist and political scientist Benedict Anderson has called the ‘deep horizontal comradeship’, which epitomized the early Southeast Asian nations. Authoritarian and often corrupt regimes now ran the country in the Philippines and Indonesia, whereas in Malaysia the National Coalition advocated an agenda of Malay supremacy, to the exclusion of at least one third of its non-Malay population. Popular music provided one of the few arenas to speak up. Freddie Aguilar, the Philippines’ most reputed folk-rock musician to date, is one of the better-known exponents of such protest singers, putting ‘the folk’ back into folk music. His song ‘Anak’ (‘Child’, 1979) – the best-selling Philippine music record of all times – gained him international fame. Folk singer Iwan Fals is, in many aspects, Aguilar’s Indonesian counterpart. With like-minded artists such as Leo Kristi and Harry Roesli, Fals belonged to the New Order’s staunchest critics. Aguilar’s version of the old patriotic kundiman song ‘Bayan Ko’ (‘My Dear Country’, 1986) became one of the most popular anthems during the first People Power Revolution of the mid-1980s. But much of his other song repertory is also critical of the corrupt Marcos regime. Iwan Fals (together with guitarist Sawung Jabo and their band Swami) is best remembered for his ‘Bento’ (1989). Even now,
in more democratic times, it is his most appreciated song. Both Iwan and Freddy seem to have inspired some sort of populist musical nationalism that left little room for ethnic sentiment, but favoured the early nationalist revolutionary mood of their nations instead. Aguilar is commonly seen as an important contributor to the Original Pilipino Music (OPM) movement that became popular throughout the 1970s. It promoted ballads, sung in the native Tagalog language, instead of in the until then dominant English language.

Iwan Fals’ music and public persona, as popular music scholar Jeremy Wallach has keenly observed, provided his audience with a compelling example of modern Indonesian manhood that was rooted in Sukarnoist popular nationalism and utopian democratic ideals that are, in a sense, not very different from the patriotic ideals of American rock star Bruce Springsteen. Like Springsteen, Iwan Fals performs a self-deprecating yet heroic masculine identity that is intimately connected with a critical, populist nationalism. It is no wonder that a popular representation of Iwan Fals found on T-shirts, stickers, and posters in outdoor markets throughout the archipelago, was that of the singer dressed like Sukarno, Indonesia’s first president.

The third alternative sound came from the proponents of the same pop Melayu music briefly referred to above. Orkes Melayu and its successors were seen as music for the ‘ordinary people’ or the ‘masses’. Elite youths regarded its musicians and audiences as kampungan, rural or backwards, simply because they played ‘an older kind of music’. Yet, in uncertain times, the trans-national Malay identity served as a safe haven to those same musicians and audiences. Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia were young nations on the brink of chaos at that time, and a widely-shared Malay identity offered an alternative rallying point to the respective nations.

While throughout the 1970s pop Melayu slowly gave way to its near contender pop Indonesia, it was soon invigorated by some of orkes Melayu’s most distinctive and leading artists, among them A. Rafiq, Mansyur S., Elvy Sukaesih, and Rhoma Irama.
Named dangdut, this new hybrid had various, distinct audiences, but was, above all, music that stood ‘close to the people’. As live music, it was an outlet for young, male, lower-class audiences. Female dangdut aficionados, in contrast, mostly listened to cassettes in their homes, where they also watched dangdut-inspired TV shows with often sentimental content. In contrast to the political messages in Rhoma’s songs, more recent dangdut acts, such as Inul, Trio Macan, or Dewi Persik, seem more geared to unleashing sexual energy, much to the discontent of the ‘King of dangdut’ himself.

Lastly, as the idea of the centralized state and, perhaps, modern life and everything that came with it, began to lose its lustre, people turned back to their regional, ethnic roots. Ethnic, ‘traditional’ sounds had long been ignored by both state and industry, as they were deemed incompatible with progress and a modern life. Musicians found inspiration in their own regional music and wedded its sounds with those of Western pop music. This new hybrid became immensely popular, and will be delved into deeper in the remainder of this chapter.

Making noise in the big melting pot

The late 1970s was a time of rapid urbanization. In an attempt to initiate to modernize society and the economy, Southeast Asian governments promoted industry and the urban sector over agriculture and the city over its rural hinterlands. The result was an annual average increase of the urban population by almost five per cent, with metropolitan areas growing four to five times faster than the whole of the country itself. This was combined with a mind-blowing steady annual growth rate of GDP per capita of more than eight per cent in most of the Southeast Asian countries. Southeast Asian megacities like Greater Jakarta, the Kuala Lumpur Klang Valley conglomeration, and Metro Manila attracted people of different ethnic origins and became true melting pots. National and ethnic cultures mixed with each
other and with global lifestyles. While such cities were meant to push Southeast Asia as rapidly as possible into the world economy, many of its inhabitants were still making a meagre living in the informal sector.

In these large cities, the emerging middle class struggled with its identity. Its members had left their hometown villages, but were not yet global citizens, at least not culturally. Living in proximity to so many different ethnic groups, the newcomers felt the need to mark their ethnic identity. This tendency made national policymakers fear political and social unrest and, in an attempt to quell ethnic sentiment, they resorted to various nationalist tactics, such as the folklorization of the regional arts in Indonesia. Those less content with such state policies increasingly felt the need to express an ‘ethnic modern’ sentiment. They achieved this by connecting familiar local traditions with foreign ideas and, especially, technologies. A recurring theme in this era is the idealization of village life, as opposed to life in the modern metropolis.

Musically, the ethnic modern project came about by connecting regional musical traditions, often rural in character, to the latest urban trends and newly imported Western instruments. Especially the introduction of the sampler during the 1980s is worth mentioning here, as it enabled musicians to record and perform without having to rely on a full orchestra. This device made musical practice a more affordable and better controllable business that could be done almost single-handedly from home. But as the sampler could not always emulate traditional tunings and instruments, these sounds were lost in the new musical mix.

The technology with probably the most enduring impact on the production and consumption of music in Southeast Asia is the audiocassette. The advent of cassette technology in the 1970s resulted in a decentralization and fragmentation of decades-long state and multinational monopolies. Compared to old and relatively costly media like radio, cinema, and gramophone, the cheap cassette technology and the sampler facilitated grassroots musical initiatives, aimed at niche markets for genres hitherto
overlooked and omitted by the industry. A direct consequence of the introduction of such technologies was that, in much of Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, the 1970s and 1980s ushered in a golden age for regional pop music. Various regional genres like *pop Minang* or *pop Sunda* became so popular that, for years to come, regional stars would outstrip national ones in popularity. Most regional pop was produced far from the region that inspired it, i.e. in the nation’s capital Jakarta. There, in the melting pot, migrants felt the need to articulate their ethnic identity. Only at a later stage did recording companies blossom in provincial towns like Medan, Padang, Bandung, or Makassar.

**What is so modern about the ethnic?**

Two observations about ethnic modern music or regional pop need to be made here. The first is that modern ethnic music is not as novel as it might seem. And second, modern ethnic music can take on different guises from one place to another, depending on its social context. One should always keep in mind when talking about this kind of music that ‘ethnicity’ and ‘modern’ are social constructs, and that their interpretations may vary over time and space.

Recording ethnic music is as old as the music industry in Southeast Asia itself, as has been outlined in Chapter 1. At the beginning of the twentieth century, foreign record companies targeted the local markets in Southeast Asia with recordings of local, ‘ethnic’ music. When, in the 1930s, first gramophone and then radio were introduced in the Netherlands East Indies, it was difficult to find a common denominator that would help shape a single market. Instead, ethnic genres such as Javanese *macapat*, Sundanese and Sumatran music were sold on record and aired on the radio. At the same time, modern technologies and mass media shaped and united new audiences and helped to create some of the most vivid national genres in the Southeast Asian region, such as *kroncong* and Hawaiian. The
popularity of these overarching, urban musical genres can be explained, according to musicologist Philip Yampolsky, by the strong impulse of mass media to maximize the audience and to market to the masses.

These same fragmenting and homogenizing forces of new mass media were active in the 1970s and 80s. The cassette recorder, for instance, helped to disseminate Western pop throughout Southeast Asia. This urban type of music could simply be re-recorded with the help of a dual cassette recorder. Cassette tapes were affordable and the music and the lifestyle that they came to represent offered the masses new ways of identification and self-expression. New, trans-regional and, in some cases, transnational audiences were born.

For a considerable time, this low-cost enterprise put locally produced music out of the market as it involved much higher production costs (musicians, recording, and post-production editing). However, within a few years, most recording labels that had hitherto devoted their attention to re-recording Western pop recordings began targeting other markets, including pop Indonesia, but especially previously ignored small niche markets. In Indonesia, but also in other parts of Southeast Asia, this new recording technology was instrumental in forging other forms of belonging that were often diametrically opposed to nationalist sentiment. Regional or ethnic pop music turned out to be highly successful and not only in generating new bonds among migrants of particular regions now living in the larger Southeast Asian megacities. The creation of an often overarching regional style of music, the emblematic use of ethnic or regional traditions, and regional language standardization also led both migrants in the cities and the inhabitants of their home region to identify with a larger, ‘traditional’ community that undercut national loyalties. Being ‘modern’ no longer automatically meant giving up one’s ethnic or regional culture in favour of a national one. The interpretation of what was ‘modern’ moved away from the nationalist discourse, as certain groups within the Indonesian society no longer believed in the direction the nation was heading.
An ethnic song can be strategically articulated as modern in quite different ways, and what counts as ethnic music, even within a restricted timeframe of a mere two decades (1970s-1990s) may be considerably manipulated. The case of the Indonesian song ‘Rasa Sayange’ is a telling illustration of this. ‘Rasa Sayange’ is an ethnic song that has been claimed by both Moluccans and Malays as part of their cultural heritage. While Indonesia can probably boast the first gramophone record to feature the song, recordings of the melody used as film music go back at least to the 1930s. Parts of the melody played on angklung (tuned bamboo shakers mostly used in Sundanese (!) music) can be found in the Dutch colonial documentary Insulinde Zooals het Leeft en Werkt (‘Daily Life and Work in Indonesia’, c. 1940), and the same melody underscores the Japanese anti-Dutch propaganda movie Marai No Tora (‘The Tiger of Malaya’, 1943). Another recording appears in the Indian movie Singapore (1960) and is sung in Hindi by two famous Indian playback singers, Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammad Rafi.

The different contexts in which the song has been used attests to its trans-national appeal, as well as to the flexibility of the label ‘ethnic’ in the context of modern music. In Malaysia, for example, the search for a modern, yet ethnically distinctive, music yielded nasyid as a recording genre. But as a religiously distinctive musical genre, it excludes other ethnicities present in Malaysia, such as the Chinese and Indian, regardless of their faith. In Indonesia, ethnic modern music has been produced in an even more complicated environment where ethnic and regional identities seem to have blurred in often confusing ways.

Indonesian pop or lagu daerah (‘regional song’) is targeted at the residents of a specific region, mostly, but not necessarily, members of specific ethnic groups. The better-known variants of such regional pop genres include pop Jawa, pop Sunda, pop Minang, pop Batak, and pop Ambon. Pop Sumsel, from South Sumatra’s city of Palembang, is a far more arbitrary construct. It is a hotchpotch of several traditional genres sung in local ethnic dialects, including Komering, Ogan, Semendo, and Enim.
Again, like ethnicity, daerah or ‘region’ happens to be a construct with a particular history and serving modern-day needs, such as political or commercial interests. To explain the popularity and success of some and the failure of other pop daerah genres, one has to look at the degree to which the genre succeeded in articulating a sense of ‘authenticity’. Many regional genres were inspired by local classical genres. Some of the new local music styles, such as the West Javanese pop Sunda, were considered more authentic by performers and audiences than other regional pop genres. These pop daerah were the most successful. The performers of pop Sunda achieved this by using traditional instruments and retaining the Sundanese tone systems pélog and sorog. Pop Minang, from West Sumatra, is another example of a popular pop daerah that is surrounded by an aura of authenticity.

The sound of longing for home: pop Minang

Pop Minang is a cover term for a range of popular music genres from the West Sumatran region, where the Minangkabau population traditionally resides. Yet, the pop Minang industry initially started in the Indonesian capital Jakarta. Since olden times, Minangkabau migrants gathered and met through cultural associations. Minang-flavoured ethnic music recorded and produced in Batavian studios had been on the radio since at least the late 1930s. It was also in Jakarta that the legendary group Orkes Gumarang was formed by a group of Minangkabau musicians in 1953, shortly after president’s Sukarno’s call for a more indigenized entertainment industry. Orkes Gumarang played Minangkabau songs arranged and performed with Latin American rhythms, such as mambo, cha-cha, and rumba, in a style similar to artists like Xavier Cugat. ‘Ayam Den Lapeh’ (1952, ‘My Chicken Ran Off’), an allegorical song about elusive love and composed by Abdul Hamid with lead vocals by the singer Nurseha, is still a pop Minang classic.
Pop Minang placed a strong emphasis on lyrics and recurrently used metaphors like merantau (‘to go abroad’, see also box on ‘going abroad’), and longing for one’s ‘native hamlet’ or home. From its inception in the late 1950s, pop Minang was made to ‘sound Minang’ by citing and appropriating certain Minang songs, melodies, and tunings from a huge reservoir of traditional genres. Musically, pop Minang is recognizable by the use of Minangkabau instruments that were the typical carriers of the older genres, including the one-stringed viola (rabab), the long bamboo flute known as saluang, and the talempong (gong chime) orchestra. In the 1980s, those traditional sounds were often emulated by resorting to samplers and mixed with disco and dangdut.

A key concept in Minangkabau culture that is widely celebrated in Minang performing arts and pop music is the so-called alam Minang. It denotes a West Sumatran cultural heartland, affectionately known as the ‘motherland’ or ranah bundo. Rather than an exclusively spatially defined geographical area, the motherland represents an emotional attachment to a recognizable landscape and especially community (urang awak or ‘our people’) that shares the same moral values. However, over time, the notion of both motherland and community have considerably widened. Minangkabau custom expects young Minangkabau men to seek fortune abroad and this is how the motherland came to span the whole world.

Unlike more traditional and localized West Sumatran music genres, such as rabab Pasisir or dendang Pauah, it was this genre of pop Minang that eventually appealed to the Minang community as a whole. No longer confined to a particular village of origin, pop Minang increasingly addressed an overall regional or ethnic group, including those Minang in the homeland and in rantau. To Minangkabau migrants in Southeast Asian metropoles such as Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur, the nostalgic sentiment of longing for home expressed in these songs is all too familiar.

Today, pop Minang is an established genre. The songs are not only performed by well-known Minangkabau artists, but also by nationally renowned non-Minang performers. Apart from
prominent artists like Zaenal Arifin, Tiar Ramon, and Yan Bastian, Minang popular music throughout the 1970s and 1980s has been primarily associated with the female vocalist Elly Kasim.

**Village girl and big city pop diva: The story of Elly Kasim**

Elly Kasim was born in 1944 in Tiku Agam, deep in the heart of the Minangkabau motherland. At a young age, she moved first to Jakarta, then back to West Sumatra, and later to East Sumatra, before she finally settled in Jakarta in 1961. Already at this young age, Elly knew what it felt like to be a migrant and to long for loved ones far away. It was in the big city of Jakarta that Elly started her career as a singer. It was the heyday of Orkes Gumarang, and its song ‘Ayam Den Lapeh’ was widely aired throughout the country and enjoyed by all Indonesians, regardless of their ethnic background. It was this song that inspired young Elly to participate in a talent show organized by Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) in Jakarta. Following her successful performance, she started performing with her uncle’s band. Her fame spread and, before long, she was recruited by one of Gumarang’s former members, the illustrious Minang composer Nuskan Syarif, who asked her to become the lead singer of his new ensemble Kumbang Tjari (1961-1963).

Together with Elly Kasim, Kumbang Tjari was the first to perform at the Indonesian national television studio (TVRI) in 1962. This studio was set up in anticipation of the Asian Games that were coming to Jakarta that year. With this group’s exposure through national television, Minang music became part of the world of national entertainment. Recording with bands such as Kumbang Tjari, Zaenal Combo, and The Steps (the latter of disco fame, see the box on ‘disco’), Elly rose to Southeast Asian fame and, with her as one of its most prominent voices, Minangkabau music was taken up by the blossoming Southeast Asian music industry, which was still dominated by foreign companies. Elly
Kasim was the first Indonesian singer to be contracted by the Philips record company to make recordings abroad. She recorded in Singapore and Hong Kong, where she and The Steps were regularly on tour in the period 1969-1979. Many of these recordings were also released by local labels, such as Remaco, a tendency that was boosted by the shift to cassette tape releases in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Together with the cassette releases, Elly Kasim has over a hundred albums to her name, predominantly regional pop.

Gumarang’s ‘Ayam Den Lapeh’ not only triggered other Minangkabau to perform modern-day interpretations of well-known Minang classics, but also did much to raise similar sentiments among other ethnic communities in the capital. Although Elly and her fellow Minangkabau artists profited the most from the new musical developments sparked by Gumarang’s mambo-and rumba-flavoured Minangkabau hit songs, the former group chose to present traditional Minang songs in the style of Western rock and pop, which had become popular again in the early days of the New Order.

In the late 1970s, Elly Kasim married Nazif Basir, a journalist, theatre producer, and editor of various Minangkabau cultural periodicals. After her initial days of ethnic rock and the, at times, funky accompaniment of The Steps, Elly’s approach to Minangkabau music in her performances became more traditional. She began to articulate Minangkabau culture and songs without necessarily combining them with foreign or hip elements and sounds. Minang culture was now no longer regarded as an obstacle, but as an asset for modern Minang migrants living in Indonesia’s cities. From the late 1970s onwards, Elly and her husband led Sanggar Sangrina Bundo, a Minang dance and performing arts troupe that was regularly invited to the presidential palace to perform for foreign guests. The group was also sent abroad by the Ministry of Tourism to perform Indonesian and Minang culture abroad in countries such as neighbouring Singapore and Malaysia – where a large Minang community resides in Negri Sembilan, Thailand, the Middle East, and Europe. The participation of Elly’s Sanggar
Sangrina Bundo in these New Order government-initiated tours proved that Minang regional pop, initially a marginal music genre, had become fully incorporated into the national culture.

Both in her songs and visual presentation, Elly Kasim alternated between her Minangkabau roots and the image of the modern city girl. The audience saw her don folkloristic Minang outfits, seated on an old-style water buffalo cart, but also dress in the latest urban fashion complete with sexy sunglasses and seated on the back of a motorbike in Hong Kong. Elly and her repertoire epitomize a generation of migrant city dwellers stuck between two worlds: their home village and the big city. *Pop Minang* formed, and still forms, the soundtrack of their lives.

**Box 3.1  **Disco

In the 1960s and 70s, professional backing groups often accompanied Indonesian singers on their records. The Steps, led by drummer Ismet Januar, was one of the established groups. They accompanied many singers, including Diah Iskandar, Elly Kasim, and singer-actress Marini, as well as their own band members Paul Irama and May Sumarna. They were versatile and played whatever style was in vogue at the time, from rock and roll and *pop kroncong* to soul and especially disco. Throughout the 1970s, The Steps recorded several disco albums including *Non-stop Soul* (recorded in Hong Kong) and *Peep-Peeh-Yeah*. Most of these albums contained Indonesian-language versions of hits by international artists such as KC & The Sunshine Band, ABBA, the Bee Gees, or Wild Cherry (notably, the latter’s ‘Play That Funky Music’). The song ‘Mari Ke Disco’ (‘Let’s go to the discotheque’) by The Steps has all the characteristics of the disco sound, but also contains elements of earlier soul and funk styles. Such renderings of international disco songs in local languages persisted well into the early 1980s. They were found on cassette tapes, as part of ‘disco medleys’.

Not everyone was a fan of this foreign disco music and its novel youth culture. Released in 1979, at the height of the disco craze, the song ‘Mat Disko’ by Malaysia’s star entertainer Sudirman Arshad (1954-1992)
presents a satirical take on some of the sillier aspects of contemporary popular youth culture. Musically, the melody and song structure owe more to quasi-ethnic *pop Melayu* than to actual disco songs of the era. The arrangement, however, contains all the markers of a 1970 disco song, including the then-popular ‘syn-drum’ fills and rhythm guitar playing in high octaves. ‘Mat Disko’ is clearly influenced by the sound that was popularized by artists like the Bee Gees in the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, as well as by ‘blaxploitation’ themes like Isaac Hayes’ *Shaft*. The lyrics form a humorous commentary on the behaviour of people who are desperate to be considered young, modern, and ‘cool’, but who only succeed in making a fool of themselves.

**Box 3.2  **Dangdut

*Dangdut* is a genre of Indonesian popular music that coalesced in the capital of Jakarta during the early 1970s. *Dangdut* has its roots in *orkes Melayu*, ‘Malay band music’, which itself was heavily influenced by Indian film music and Middle Eastern popular music of the 1950s and 1960s. Today, its broad appeal and wide circulation via electronic media (radio, audio, and video recordings, television, the internet, and cellular/ring back tones), and the fact that its audience comprises the majority of Indonesia’s population, have earned it the moniker ‘Indonesia’s most popular music’. The music accompanies dance at all kinds of events, such as family celebrations (primarily weddings and circumcisions), product launches, and concerts. *Dangdut* bands provide entertainment at nightclubs, karaoke bars, and massage parlours, where large quantities of alcohol and cigarettes are consumed. But throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, *dangdut* was also performed frequently at political campaign rallies and to entertain police and military personnel. *Dangdut* was originally associated with Melayu and Indian film music. In the early 1970s, Rhoma Irama, known as the ‘King of *dangdut*’, brought the sound and performance style of American and British rock music into *dangdut*. Later, the genre was re-signified as national in the 1980s and 1990s, and evolved into a kind of ‘ethnic’ and ‘regional’ music in the 2000s. Regional or ethnic forms of *dangdut*.
incorporate regional languages, traditional musical elements, and performance practices. They are marketed to specific ethnic communities in Indonesia. Many regional forms of dangdut crystallized in the mid-1990s in conjunction with the changing landscape of politics and economics, greater access to technology, lack of enforcement on locally produced recordings, and the decentralization of the music industry. 

*Dangdut* is primarily vocal music sung by both male and female artists, accompanied by a band of male musicians. The standard set of instruments consists of two electric guitars (rhythm and lead), electric bass, a small two-headed drum (*gendang*), a side-blown bamboo flute (*suling*), and an electronic keyboard. *Dangdut* lyrics are generally set in the Indonesian language, addressing themes of love and male-female relationships, everyday life, and social and political issues that affect ordinary Indonesian citizens primarily belonging to ‘the middle classes on down’ (*kelas menengah ke bawah*).

**Box 3.3   Going abroad (in two songs)**

Labour migration (*‘merantau’ in Indonesian*) is an important aspect of life for large numbers of Southeast Asians. It is therefore not surprising that there are many songs dealing with this theme. The renowned song ‘Merantau’ is sung in Indonesian and does not mention any specific locality or region, but, instead, treats the theme of migration in general terms, focusing on the feelings of loneliness and longing for family and the home village. The song’s original performer, Titiek Sandhora, from Brebes in Central Java, was a household name in the late 1960s, when her songs could be heard almost daily on a rapidly increasing number of private radio stations. ‘Merantau’ is a guitar-based ballad of a type that was popular throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Composed by Jasir Sjam, who also supplied song material for many other singers who were popular at the time, including Anna Mathovani, Bob Tutupoly, Tety Kadi, Ernie Djohan, and Ida Royani, it received recognition as the most popular song among Indonesian military personnel in 1972.
Radio Prambors was launched in 1971 in Jakarta. Airing pop music, Prambors was a teen icon in the 1970s-1990s period. Nowadays, Prambors FM is Indonesia’s ‘No. 1 Hit Music Station’.

Indonesian youth magazine *Aktuil*, 1974
KITLV collection
However, there is probably no song that captures the emotion of melancholic longing for one’s homeland better than Ernie Djohan’s ‘Telok Bayur’. The song, composed by Zaenal Arifin and accompanied by his Zaenal Combo, was written in the mid-1960s, but as an album (Telok Bayur) was only released in 1973, which says something about the longevity of the song’s popularity. Musically, it falls within the mainstream of the guitar-based beat/rock and roll styles of that era. Ernie Djohan (1951), herself much of a migrant, was born into a diplomat’s family and has been accustomed to having to move to new and unfamiliar surroundings. She lived in the Netherlands and in Singapore, where she won several talent awards while still in high school. Ernie Djohan is of West Sumatran (Minangkabau) descent, and it may not be coincidental that ‘Telok Bayur’ (referring to a harbour in the Padang region, from which many migrants left) is a song of yearning for the homeland and loved ones. Minangkabau custom requires young Minang men to gain experience and accumulate wealth outside West Sumatra before returning home to start a family.