Music and the Cline of Malayness

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The illustrative audio tracks referred to in this draft are not embedded, and are therefore not playable.

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Abstract: The cline of Malayness as exhibited in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula extends through tribal-Malay, rakyat-Melayu, raja-Melayu and modern urban-Melayu. As a consequence of the manner in which Malay states came into being, this cline exhibits an increasing elaboration of the cultural expression of transition and transitivity. These differences are paralleled closely in such areas of Malay cultural expression as: social personality, cooking & eating, dance, religion, grammar & lexicon. They are also manifested in the different manners of musical performance favoured in the various Malay populations (as illustrated by the recorded examples).

Introduction: music-and-culture studies

Language-and-culture studies are a well established activity in anthropology and related fields. Music-and-culture studies, on the other hand, are far less frequently undertaken. Ethnomusicologists have had much to say about the characteristics of many of the world’s musics, and increasingly about the social context of those musics. But music-and-culture studies still form a small proportion of the musicological research output, and are still somewhat controversial. Judith Becker spells out the divisions thus:

In … ethnomusicology, there is sometimes a three-way tension between (1) musicians who play, those who think and feel in music, (2) scholars who write about music as musical sound, (3) scholars who write about music as cultural expression, i.e., those who find in the music of a particular group of people an enactment of some of the deeply held values of the group. (Becker 1993: 1.)

Taking my cue from Becker’s own studies in Javanese music-and-culture, it is approach (3) that I wish to take in this exploratory study.

What is it that makes a musical tradition – a ‘music’ – meaningful to its participants? As with any other form of culturally embedded expression, there is no simple answer to this question. We cannot predict a priori just which components of cultural life are the ones that are given expression in such forms as dance, language, architecture, food – or music. But there must be some degree of coherence between these different domains, or they would cease to draw or retain anyone’s attention.

1. Linguistic studies of Malay from this approach include Alton L. Becker 1979, Asmah 1985, Benjamin 1993, Benjamin in press.
2. For recent comprehensive surveys see Fletcher 2003 and Miller & Williams 1998. See also the discussions by Feld et al. (1984) that occupy a whole issue of the journal Ethnomusicology. For a critical-sociology assessment of such studies – as applied to Western music – see Martin 1995: 126–166.
Before discussing the specifically Malay issues, let first illustrate this claim by outlining some of the connections that can be drawn between music and other cultural domains.

**Western music**
The most familiar and widespread example is provided by pop music – the omnipresent and ubiquitous musical accompaniment to modern life. Listen, for example, to this typical track of commoditised commercial pop – typical in its idiom, though not in its performers, who are a group of Orang Asli singing in Malay. I have processed the track so as to simulate the aural effect of pop music when overheard from someone else’s earphones (the tizz) or from a passing car with its audio volume turned high (the boom).³

This sounds unmistakably like (1) the clanking of machinery and (2) the thump and swish of an amplified human heartbeat, as heard by a foetus in the womb or by a doctor through a stethoscope. These two features, fused here into a unified medium of expression, well encapsulate the invasive universality of modernity. The pop-music soundscape is now the unavoidable common experience of all who live in the modern world.

Western ‘classical’ music is less universal, and it is often regarded as the epitome of an ‘absolute’ art unrelated to social context.⁴ But classical music too is increasingly being shown to incorporate encodings of deep-seated social and cultural concerns into its very texture and shape. As an example, consider Susan McLary’s analysis (McLary 1987) of J. S. Bach’s well-known *Brandenburg Concerto* no. 5, written in 1721 when he was employed as a court musician at Köthen. The first movement of this concerto contains a written-out cadenza for the solo harpsichord which, in its excessive length (one quarter of the whole movement), busy-ness and virtuosity (mostly in *allegro* demisemiquavers), is quite out of proportion to the rest of the

³ The audio examples are on a compact disk available privately from the author. For the full details of the sources of the cited tracks, see the list of recordings at the end of this paper.
⁴ This view of music as ‘absolute’ is itself an actively cultivated one, as is shown by Kingsbury’s ethnomusicological study (1991) of Western-style music conservatories.
movement. Moreover, it is written for an instrument that until then had always stayed in the orchestral background as a mere *continuo* accompanist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cadenza snippets, played by Trevor Pinnock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track 4 from <em>Johann Sebastian Bach, Brandenburgisches Konzerte</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How should we interpret this disruptive ‘revenge of the continuo player’, placed against the smug normality and sentimentality of the other instruments (which appear to ‘win’ in the end)? McLary (1997: 40–41) sees this as Bach’s powerful articulation of ‘the dilemma of an ideology that wants to encourage freedom of expression while preserving social harmony’. The composer here enacts ‘the exhilaration as well as the risks of upward mobility’ – something that is known to have affected his own life directly.

These two examples (which could easily be supplemented by many others) are sufficient to illustrate the ‘leaky’ character of Western musical cultures, in which the music itself is infused by the social and cultural situations of its producers and consumers. Can similar analyses also be applied to the musics of the Malay World and its immediate neighbourhood? Published studies of the Javanese, Balinese and Peninsular Orang Asli musical traditions show that this is indeed possible.

**Peninsular Orang Asli music**

Among the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia – as I noted decades ago when making my own field recordings, and as Marina Roseman has documented in detail – there is a close correlation between the structure of their ritual lead-and-response song performances and the overall pattern of their social relations. The Semang populations of the Peninsular north, were nomadic hunter-gatherers until very recently. Their ritual performances consist of heterophonic singing, in which each member ‘answers’ the lead singer in his or her own good time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Yäh [tiger]’, a Baték Dèq song. Sung by Kacang Kapès, Pos Aring (Kelantan).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded by Geoffrey Benjamin, 22 April 1970.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this recording, there is in effect no chorus. Rather, the effect is that of a disordered hum. This accords well with a minimalist social formation in which conjugal family groups can split off at a moment’s notice from the larger group, to go foraging on their own.

The farming Temiars, to the south of the Semang, build their performances out of a strict canon between the lead singer and a unison women’s chorus, in which the latter ‘pounce’ before the former has finished his verse. The regular periods of counterpoint that this produces are greatly valued by the Temiars as a re-presentation of the dialecticism that colours all of their social life, based on the interplay between village-level solidarity and a strict regard for individual – even children’s – autonomy. (For the dialecticism, see Benjamin 1994; for detailed discussions of the music-and-culture issues, see Roseman 1984, 1991, 2002.)

5. The following claims about Orang Asli musical traditions are somewhat over-generalised, but they do correspond to some significant overall tendencies.

6. Many Semang performances now have a more ‘chorus’-like structure, probably influenced by the neighbouring Temiar pattern. I suggest that this may be correlated with a shift from nomadism to sedentisation, of the kind discussed by Gomes (1982).
Other Orang Asli populations, such as the Semais and the Aboriginal Malays, prefer to wait until the lead singer has completed the verse before ‘answering’ it. There is no overlapping canon here, only lead-and-response – in keeping with the higher degree of social differentiation found in those populations (cf. Benjamin 1979: 19–22). This frequently proceeds all the way to the complete suppression of the chorus, leaving just a solo singer, as in the following example from a shamanic ceremony among the Petalangan people of mainland Riau.

Even the Temiars, when performing in ‘Malay’ style, follow this pattern too. As Roseman has remarked (1984: 427), this implies a differentiation into leader and follower, performer and audience, as befits the varyingly ranked character of these Malayic social formations. The following example illustrates this pattern, from a performance of the barely surviving Mak Yong theatre by a rakyat-Melayu group from Kijang, on Bentan Island, Riau.

Balinese gamelan music
Balinese gamelan music is familiar, if only superficially, to many people. Foreign tourists regularly hear performances in their hotels, and the market for ‘world music’ recordings contains a significant proportion of Balinese material. But the music is nevertheless highly regarded by the

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7. Conversely, in some Malay(-style) performances among the Orang Asli, there may be a unison monophonic chorus, with no solo voice.
Balinese themselves, and it forms a regular part of their community-level activities. It may sound ‘classical’, but it is authentically popular. (For an accessible account of Balinese music, see Tenzer 1998.)

Two highly distinctive features of Balinese gamelan music are significant in this respect. First, the unusual quavering tone-colour is produced by the acoustic ‘beats’ produced by pairs of instruments played in unison but deliberately off-tuned from each other by a few cycles per second. This holds true for all the instruments of the ensemble, high-pitched or low-pitched, percussion or woodwind, made of bronze or bamboo. Second, the apparently unitary melodies played by the higher-pitched instruments are in fact produced by the hocket-like overlapping of two separate lines of music, played in pairs. The nature of these ‘resultant’ melodies is illustrated in figure 1.

Given that Balinese gamelan is essentially a community activity, it is not hard to discern the socio-cultural meaning that lies behind these features. They betoken the complete involvement of the performers in each other, and the consequent suppression of their individuality within a higher-level unity. The music itself is frequently highly virtuosic, but it is nevertheless constrained from becoming the vehicle of any individual display that might dilute the all-important feeling of communal corporateness.

Figure 1

8. This feature criterially differentiates Balinese from Javanese gamelan music, which prefers a solid non-wavering sound, and in which the performers play unitary non-hocketing parts.
Javanese gamelan music

The ‘classical’ court-linked forms of Javanese gamelan encode cultural, rather than social, concerns. Judith Becker (1979; see also Becker & Becker 1981) has shown that the music is structured out of the interplay of the same three elementary features that lend coherence to the Javanese worldview. First, the music almost literally goes round in circles. Strokes on the very large gong ageng and medium-sized kenong indicate the beginning-and-end points between overlapping cycles (gongan, kenongan) of melodic sequences, that otherwise go their own ‘horizontal’ (modal) way without any regard for ‘vertical’ (harmonic) alignments. Second, the music is organised into three or more melodic ‘layers’, each running at half the speed of the one above it. Third, the points of coincidence marked by the big-gong strokes are especially valued: they are rare – separated in some cases by more than one minute – but they represent the happenstance momentary coming-together (jadi) of otherwise independent motions. (In the following, relatively fast-tempo example, the gongans are roughly 18 seconds apart, and there are at least four melodic layers.)

Track 8
‘Jipang walik’ (three gongan s). Track 1 from The Gamelan of Cirebon.

This recalls the way in which the Javanese calendar is structured, through the simultaneous cycling of a five-day (marketing) week, a seven-day (civil) week, a twelve-month year, and an eight-year cycle. The running together of these multiple temporal and musical cycles places emphasis on the points of coincidence, both calendrical (which are celebrated by festivals) and in the relatively infrequent kenongan and gongan strokes on the larger gongs. At the same time, the binary augmentations and diminutions built into the music’s layering recalls the oppositional binariness that underlies much of the Javanese view of their world: mountain/sea; holy/profane; sun/moon; head/feet; male/female; North+East (positive)/South+West (negative). Binariness is thus a quality of Javanese space, and cyclicity a quality of Javanese time. Together, these features also characterise Javanese gamelan music.

The cline of Malayness

Can such a music-and-culture approach be applied to Malay musics? I believe that it can, and that the keys to such an understanding are the same as those that have proved useful in explaining other features of Malay social and cultural organisation.

Elsewhere (Benjamin 1985, 2002), I have argued that the Orang Melayu – the Malays ‘proper’ – form a subset within a broader congeries of ‘Malayic’ populations in the Peninsula, Sumatra and Borneo, that share certain organisational features in common, while differing in other respects. These differences form a cultural cline of Malayness, from tribal-Malay to Melayu, marked by varying degrees of involvement with a transcendental mode of orientation and associated with a concern for spatial, temporal and cultural transition.

Why should Melayu polities exhibit such a concern for transition? The answer is to be found in the particular historical trajectory that led to the founding of the many Melayu states that have been formed at various times during the last one-and-a-half millennia. The story is comparatively well known, so I shall not present it here in detail. (For further discussion, see Benjamin 2005:

9. For an alternative, more ‘sociological’, view of the balance between horizontal (‘modal’, pathet) and vertical elements in a range of different forms of Javanese gamelan, see Perlman 1998.
10. Although I have borrowed the term ‘Malayic’ from the literature of Austronesian historical linguistics, its usage here (as in my other ethnological papers) refers to a particular pattern of social organisation.
Suffice it to point out that the pre-modern Melayu states arose as a consequence of long-distance trade in goods that were regionally produced, but which were of greater interest (as exotics) to people in other parts of the world. Eventually, some of those who had managed to gain control over this riverine and maritime trade at the significant choke points made themselves into kings. Initially, their courts were organised on principles derived from Indian ideas of statecraft and religion (Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist). Increasingly, they managed to incorporate some of the hinterland populations, who had been the main source of the traded goods, into the kingdom as subsidiary peasants; those who rejected such incorporation became tribespeople. In this way, there was set up a tripartite societal division of rulers, peasants and tribespeople, all of them linguistically and socially broadly ‘Malayic’, but differing from each other in several key characteristics. This pattern was further reinforced when, from the thirteenth century onwards, Islam progressively replaced Hinduism and Buddhism as the favoured state-supported religion. The newer religion was able to penetrate well beyond the court, whereas the earlier religions were much more limited in their spatial extent. Consequently, Islam became a major metric of Malayness – a function it still holds in the Malay World, despite important differences in this regard between the five nation-states that currently contain portions of the Malay World.\textsuperscript{11}

**The Melayu concern for transition**

The cline of Malayness thus runs from tribal non-Muslim Malays (such as the Jakuns of Peninsular Malaysia and the Suku Anak Dalam of Sumatra), through the Muslim rakyat Melayu (the peasantry), to the aristocratic, royal and modernised Melayu (who show the greatest degree of concern for transition).\textsuperscript{12} This cline has already been shown to be significant in such cultural domains as language and transitivity (Benjamin 1993, 2009) and temporality (McKinley 1979, Wee 1987). But it pervades many other fields of Melayu life too. Let me illustrate this by outlining some of the relevant normative features of everyday Melayu life – as thrown up by a contrastive analysis with the quite different Chinese way of doing things.

To save space, and by leaving complicated matters undiscussed, I have presented these ideas in the form of a table, below. The left-hand column summarises the sociocentric Melayu emphasis on change and transition, while the right-hand column summarises the corresponding egocentric Chinese concern for emphasising no-change and an uninterest in the marking of transition between things.

\textsuperscript{11}. These are Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei. See Benjamin 2002: 54–58 for further discussion.

\textsuperscript{12}. Note that, while it is not normal usage in Malaysia to refer to non-Muslim tribal populations as ‘Malays’ or ‘Orang Melayu’, such a usage is acceptable in Indonesia, and is certainly justifiable from an anthropological point of view. For a succinct account of this issue, see Yampolsky 1996: 2–7. See also Wee 1987 and Benjamin 2002.
# Kinship and Household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melayu (Gesellschaftlich, sociocentric, person)</th>
<th>Chinese (Gemeinschaftlich, egocentric, role-dyad)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neolocality</strong>: changing residence (for males especially).</td>
<td><strong>Patrilocality</strong>: staying put (for males especially).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generational kinship</strong>: conjunctive siblingship – sibling-sets (<em>saudara</em>) as the primary irreducible model of social relations, marked by use of rhyming names, and regarding the afterbirth as one’s elder sibling.</td>
<td><strong>Lineal kinship</strong>: disjunctive siblingship – elder sibling assimilated to ‘parent’, younger sibling to ‘child’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chronological age</strong> overrides kinship category.</td>
<td><strong>Kinship Category</strong> overrides chronological age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child treated as a new autonomous person</strong>: parents and adult children as autonomous ‘friends’; money-giving as free ‘gift’ (and possibly shameful).</td>
<td><strong>Once a child, always a child</strong>: filial piety, ancestor worship, kin-‘calling’, money-giving as role-maintenance (involving no shame).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children encouraged to turn outwards socially</strong>: children taught to smile at strangers, and to learning to welcome guests.</td>
<td><strong>Children taught not to extend sociality beyond already existing (and useful) roles</strong>: children taught not to smile at strangers, and to keep out of the kitchen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wider social life as constant ‘joking relations’ (like being on stage all the time)</strong>: people must talk to each other; interfering mode of social relations.</td>
<td><strong>Wider social life is minimalistic</strong>: people needn’t talk to each other; non-interfering mode of social relations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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# Religion, Ethnicity, Temporality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melayu (Transcendental orientation)</th>
<th>Chinese (Immanent orientation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>God inherently ‘interfering’</strong>: always monitoring our actions (no nakedness in the shower, because God is watching).</td>
<td><strong>Gods inherently non-interfering (=non-attending)</strong>: can be communicated with only by imposing yourself with smoke or noise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious life well-ordered</strong>: do exactly what everybody else does; a general, compulsory model exists.</td>
<td><strong>Religious life haphazard</strong>: no general model exists, non-compulsory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One’s life-course looked on as a constant moving towards God</strong>: this implies a biographical self, as exemplified by the <em>batin/lahir</em> distinction.</td>
<td><strong>No life-course</strong>: just punctuating events affecting luck and fate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cumulative temporality</strong>: moving between ‘eras’ (<em>zaman, masa</em>) matters; ‘rear-view mirror’ historical imagery; changing patronyms.</td>
<td><strong>Non-cumulative temporality</strong>: cyclical and zodiacal calendar; new dynasties starting over from year zero; unchanging surnames.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity is ‘cultural’</strong>: Malayness must be cultivated by each person separately; its cultural content is never fully attainable; the culture is assimilatory.</td>
<td><strong>Ethnicity is ‘racial’</strong>: Chineseness is given by birth; cultural content is thought of as fixed; the culture is non-assimilatory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Expressive Forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melayu (Transition elaborated)</th>
<th>Chinese (Separate entities emphasised)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cooking:</strong> long process of transformatory fusion of different ingredients (‘curry’).</td>
<td><strong>Cooking:</strong> short process in which ingredients remain recognisably distinct (‘quick stir-fry’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eating:</strong> from plate to mouth by very devious route.</td>
<td><strong>Eating:</strong> from bowl straight to mouth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitivity</strong> in formal Malay language.</td>
<td><strong>Glance-of-the-eye totality</strong> in Chinese painting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Architecture:</strong> Malay houses are sectioned, partitioned, non-linear, involving an internal ‘journey’; what you see is not what you get.</td>
<td><strong>Architecture:</strong> Chinese houses are symmetrical, four-square, and open to the world; what you see is what you get.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cinema and TV:</strong> Extended shots of actors leaving buildings, getting into vehicles, vehicles moving off, and arriving at new building.</td>
<td><strong>Cinema and TV:</strong> Sudden ‘unprepared’ cuts between scenes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music:</strong> eclectic choice of scale structures; melismatic transition between melody notes; foreign and local instruments mixed together.</td>
<td><strong>Music:</strong> restricted five-note scale; non-melismatic movement between melody notes; local instruments only.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As listed here, these characterisations certainly tend towards caricature. Nevertheless, I suspect that a majority of Malay and Chinese people would recognise them as norms that they must contend with in their own lives. The features may not correspond to people’s actual behaviour, nor need they be referred to explicitly, but they do correspond to the sort of ideals that underlie the rhetorical use of such terms as ‘culture’ and ‘values’. These sets of embedded norms are the expression of civilisations – actively cultivated ways of behaving that are spread as the means of incorporating people into the framework of some superordinate social formation.

Civilisations (like ‘cultures’ generally) work by turning these normative ways of acting into the terms on which people live their lives. The ‘ways of behaving’ thus become the matter-of-fact, taken-for-granted basis for daily living. For this to be successful, they should be implicit (not explicit), in peripheral (not focal) consciousness, culturally embedded (not ‘on display’ like tourist culture). Cultural embedding of this kind is achieved through such modalities as language, kinship, interactional patterns, religion, the food system, architecture, and (as already demonstrated) music. Through their constant reiteration in the daily round of activities, these institutionalised patterns set the terms on which we live our lives more powerfully than any explicitly codified set of ‘values’ possibly could.

People don’t transmit these institutions blindly, however, for interests are involved. If people’s interests change, they alter or reject their cultural institutions. In this sense, then, it is better to talk of cultural regimes rather than ‘cultures’, and of polities rather than ‘societies’. A cultural regime is a cultural framework actively systematised by sanction-backed restrictions, so that only one mode of orientation remains capable of overt and public ‘matter-of-fact’ expression, whatever the individuals involved may privately feel. A politie is a social network institutionalised or thought of as a power-dominated domain. A structured ‘regime’ thus comes to bear the same relation to an unstructured ‘culture’ as a controlled ‘polity’ does to an uncontrolled social network or ‘society’. The same applies to individuals’ attempts to achieve change in regime-like structures. Their success depends largely on the degree to which they too manage to embed their concerns in such non-explicit forms as ritual, art, or music.


Malay music, tribal and non-tribal

Music is thus one of the most powerful means of embedding regime-linked and polity-linked concerns (or resistance to them), precisely because people normally regard music as free from any possibility of socio-political expression. (I refer here to the music itself, rather than to any sung or recited words that may accompany the music.)

Among its other characteristic features, Malay music encodes the cline of Malayness discussed earlier. At the Melayu end of the scale, performance tends to emphasise the transition between notes, through the melismatic elaboration of the basic melody. At the tribal-Malay end, on the other hand, melodies are performed in a much plainer, less melismatic manner. The melismata themselves (corresponding to what Western musicians might refer to as ‘graces’ or ‘decorations’, and what some Malays call nada-nada hiasan or grénék) are what re-present the concern with transition. Just as a polite Melayu diner will sit on the floor with the food far from the mouth, break off a yet smaller piece from the already small piece of fish or meat, ball it up with rice using only three fingers of the right hand, and then move it to the mouth – so also will a skilful Melayu singer or violinist move from one note to another by a quite devious, melismatically elaborated, route.

Let me illustrate this by playing two different field-recorded performances of the same tune, ‘Serampang laut’, one by a tribal-Malay group and the other by a group of rakyat-Melayu performers. Although both of these are unsophisticated non-professional performances, the differences between them are still quite obvious. (When listening to these tracks, concentrate on the singing: the violinists in both cases are playing in a more sophisticated manner.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track 9</th>
<th>‘Serampang Laut’, sung by Orang Asli, Pulau Bengkalis. Track 15 from Melayu music of Sumatra and the Riau Islands.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Track 10 | ‘Serampang Laut’, sung by Orang Melayu, Pulau Bentan. Track 14 from Melayu music of Sumatra and the Riau Islands. |

The first example, which is performed by a group of ‘Orang Asli’ – probably part Chinese-descended Orang Akit – from Bengkalis island off the east coast of Sumatra, is presented in an unadorned manner, entirely devoid of any elaboration of the transition between the notes of the melody. By contrast, the second version of the song, performed by rakyat-Melayu people from Kijang on Bentan island (Riau), displays a moderate but noticeable degree of melismatic elaboration of the movement from one melody note to another. It is significant that the song’s title refers to the serampang, the trident fishing spear overtly regarded by more ‘civilised’ (in this context, murni ‘pure’) Orang Melayu as a typically tribal-Malay object. Melayu fishermen use nets or lines instead (Wee 1987: 199).

13. For general accounts of Malay-World music, see Matusky & Chopyak 1998 and Kartomi 1998. Only selected types of Malay music performance are dealt with in this essay, but I have tried to be reasonably comprehensive. Examples are taken from several different genres, in both ‘traditional’ and commercial performances, and I have given prominence to the music of Malay communities living outside Peninsular Malaysia. The Peninsular Malays have been better studied, but they account for only one half (or less) of the population of the Malay World.

14. See footnote 19 for further discussion of these terms.
Compare these performances with the yet more sophisticated performance of the same tune (in a dangdut-like rhythm and with different words) by a professional singer from Jambi town. The melismatic elaboration of the transition between the melody notes is more obvious here – as befits a commercial recording aimed at showcasing 'lagu-lagu daerah Jambi'.

These three versions of the same tune, with their increasing degree of melismatic elaboration, thus correspond to the different positions of their performers along the cline of Malayness: tribal, rakyat-Melayu and modern urban Melayu – all from the Malay area of Sumatra. This cline extends further, into the aristocratic and royal domain, as illustrated by the following performance of the ghazal song ‘Gunung Bentan’ by Raja (Princess) Khatijah, recorded on Pulau Penyengat. Her singing displays a very rich melismatic elaboration, constantly ‘searching’ for the next note, and further amplified by the decorative use of vibrato.

15. The word *ibo* in the title of this song is presumably a local pronunciation of the Arabic *hiba* ‘yearning’. If so, this could indicate that the performers themselves would recognise something of the interpretation I am proposing here.
Pulau Penyengat is still inhabited largely by the Bugis-descended royals and aristocrats who in the nineteenth century formulated many of the early-modern ideas about cultural Melayuness that are still current in the Malay World today. Despite the ‘modern’ instrumental accompaniment and its typical electronic over-amplification, the elaborate ‘searching’ style of decoration employed by Raja Khatijah fits very closely into this aristocratic cultural context.

Let me round this picture out with some examples from elsewhere in the Malay World. The following song, performed by a group of recently-Islamised once-tribal Malays from Lanta Island off the west coast of southern Thailand, exhibits the same plain non-melismatic mode of progression that is typical of tribal-Malay performance elsewhere.\(^\text{16}\)

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16. I am grateful to May Tan Poh Mui for obtaining a copy of this privately circulated disk.
The next two tracks, both recorded in Muar (Johor), illustrate the varying degrees of melismatic elaboration found in professional performance from southern Peninsular Malaysia. The first track is taken from a cassette of light-hearted *dondang sayang* music, in which a male and female singer ‘sell’ each other supposedly extemporised verses in *pantun* format. This exhibits a moderate degree of melismatic elaboration, as befits its overtly ‘Melayu’ but still popular appeal.

The second track (which is accompanied by some of the same instrumentalists as on the preceding track) presents a much more ‘serious’ performance. This song is in the *ghazal* form historically associated with the aristocratic circles of Johor and Riau (as with the extract sung by Raja Khatijah earlier). However, although *ghazal* is still privately cultivated in that way, it also emerged decades ago as a more public form of entertainment music, performed by professional (and not necessarily aristocratic) musicians. The present example, taken from a commercial gramophone record issued in the 1960s, represents the closest approach to a Melayu ‘classical’ music within the modern tradition. Its intensity of expression owes much to the high degree of melismatic elaboration employed by the singer, Rosiah Chik, an acknowledged doyenne of this art.
As remarked earlier, it is not certain whether any of these performers would explicitly recognise the claims I am making about their performance styles. But I have recently come across at least one example of an explicit acknowledgment that a heightened degree of melismatic elaboration corresponds to a higher degree of cultural Melayuness. I refer to a commercial compact disk, Grénék Satu, produced in Medan, intended to celebrate the Melayu-ness of Deli music. The explanatory note on the back of the album insert explains the title-word grénék thus:17

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17. [In literal translation:] Grénék: In Deli-Malay tradition, Grenek means ‘ornamentation’ (nada-nada hias), which is applied in a spontaneous manner by singers and musicians, to increase the beauty of the songs they sing. Arising out of the basic philosophy of Grenek, according to which this art displays the traditional heritage of Malay musical culture, we are all assuredly charged with the duty of safeguarding the beauty of the art of Grenek. As a first step, with all respect, permit us to use the name GRENEK as a means of paying respect and raising high the quality of the art of Grenek, as stated above. … Let this intention and the steps taken allow the offspring of the country to give meaning to their Motherland. Amen.

I am grateful to Larry Francis Hilarian for making this disk available to me.
The Grénék CD sleeve-note thus presents an indigenous theory of melisma (grénék = nada-nada hias).\(^\text{18}\) Despite this, most of the tracks on the recording actually fail to exhibit a high degree of melismatic elaboration. I suggest that there are two reasons for this. First, judging by the closely scored electronic instrumentation, the performers are clearly aiming to be ‘modern’. The detailed scoring (including choral interjections) simply does not allow much room for extemporisation. Second, judging by their names, many of the performers themselves appear not to be Malays ‘proper’. They are therefore probably approaching the task too much from the ‘outside’, artistically speaking, to carry off their artistic aims in a convincingly authentic manner – and certainly not as compared to the performance by Rosiah Chik!

This can be judged from the following two short extracts. The first, a performance of the old Singapore song ‘Tanjong Katong’, exhibits relatively little melismatic elaboration. (On the other hand, it does exhibit the Portuguese-derived hemiola rhythm that I shall discuss shortly.)

**Track 16**

‘Tanjung Katung’. Sung by Nurainun. Track 9 from *Grénék Satu*.

The second track displays the highest degree of melismatic elaboration for the album as a whole, but it still falls far short of what the sleeve note might lead us to expect.

**Track 17**

‘Numpang Manja’. Sung by Rani Dahan. Track 8 from *Grénék Satu*.

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_Grénék_: Modern Indonesian (***) *renek*, but Wilkinson (1959) has menggerenek ‘to let the voice quaver over a succession of notes’ > *renek* ‘tremulous (of the voice when singing)’. Winstedt (1960) has *gerebek* (Johor), *gereneh (meng)*, Perak, ‘bubble up (of water), trill (of voice), roll (of drums)’. For further mention of melismatic elaboration in the literature, see Arif Ahmad (2004: 85): ‘Another characteristic typical of the Ghazal singing style is the frequent use of ornamentations (*renek-renek*). Ornaments are one or more notes considered an embellishment of a melody. There are three styles of such ornamentations – Malay, Hindu and Arabic – which are closely related to melodic form used in the songs.’ Mohamed Ghouse Nasruddin (2003: 170–171) provides noted examples of what he refers to as different kinds of *merenek*. 

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**Inward and outward orientations in Malay musics**

From a cultural point of view, the cline of Malayness illustrated by the examples already presented also represents a cline in cultural orientation. At the royal and modern-urban end of the cline, the orientation is *outwards* (transcendental), leaning to involvement in the wider world, culturally, religiously and socially. At the tribal end of the cline, however, the orientation is *inwards*, away from the outer world and towards a heightened involvement of the people with each other at the local level. This too is reflected in several other features of the relevant musics.

First, there is a difference in the kinds of musical instruments employed. In his spoken introduction to the *ghazal* performance he organised on Pulau Penyengat (track 12, above), Raja Hamzah made a special point of the eclectic absorption of inputs from the West, India, the Arab world, and island Southeast Asia (*Nusantara*). The same feature is apparent in the recordings made at a Melayu music festival I attended in Jambi in 1999. Here, even the purportedly indigenous performances, employing the *kelintang* gong-chime row, were accompanied by ‘Western’ violin and ‘Arab’ drums.

Orientationally, this is very like the Melayu attachment to the great transcendental of imported rice, which they did not usually grow for themselves. It also fits with their attachment to Islam, a religion imported from elsewhere and centred on a highly transcendental view of God. Musically, this orientation contrasts with the more ‘indigenous’ choice of musical instruments found in other regional cultural regimes. Javanese and Balinese gamelan music, for example, celebrates its
indigency through its primary use of bronze and bamboo instruments. For example, as Becker (1988) has shown, there is a close relation between gongs and the ‘volcanic’ processes through which they are manufactured: fire creates both gongs and the island of Java.¹⁹

Second, there is typically a partial assimilation of certain Western musical elements into the music favoured at the urban and aristocratic end of the Melayu cline. Miller & Williams (1998: 20) have even claimed that this fusion of Western and Southeast Asian elements is the distinctive feature of Melayu music. (I am not referring here to the more recent influx of the Western pop idiom that is currently swamping most of the musical traditions discussed in this essay.) Much favoured in the more public forms of Melayu music is the Portuguese-derived hemiola rhythm, which combines 3/4 and 6/8 beats together, producing the same syncopational pattern that pervades much ‘Latin’ music in other parts of the world. This rhythm is especially frequent in entertainment music of the ronggeng and joget types. A clear example is provided by the instrumental introduction to the ‘Tanjung Katong’ track from Medan, played earlier.

Track 20
Hemiola rhythm, from introduction to ‘Tanjung Katong’. Track 9 from Grénék Satu.

An instantly recognisable feature of much ‘traditional’ Melayu music is its idiosyncratic employment of what sounds superficially like Western harmony. But these harmonies typically eschew the ‘progressive’ character of true Western harmony, with its clear modulations into a succession of related key centres. Melayu music, in its adoption of pseudo-Western harmony, behaves much like Melayu dance. Just as the dancers elaborate transition by constantly stepping forwards and back, so does Melayu music merely sidestep momentarily into other keys without actually modulating to them. (This feature appears not to be found in tribal-Malay music, however, even when they use violins.) A typical examples is provided by the following extract, from a traditional song in a modern setting, from Jambi. The sidesteps can be heard in the last two of the four phrases, where the music moves briefly from B major to E minor, and back. (In terms of Western harmony, this shift to the subdominant minor would be considered a very ‘daring’ modulation.)²⁰

Track 21
Harmonic sidestep, from ‘Bunga Tanjung’. Sung by Nukman. Track A2 from Sarampang Laut Ibo.

This can be generalised. Javanese gamelan music doesn’t ‘yearn’ for anything: it just celebrates the jadi-ness of coincidence. The getting-there is unimportant, and is left to the sheer automaticity of a predetermined structure. On the other hand, the ‘progressive’ tonality of Western (classical) music, according to McLary (1987: 22), with its delaying of the expected cadences, expresses the middle class’s ‘belief in progress, in expansion, in the ability to attain ultimate goals through rational striving, in the ingenuity of the individual strategist operating both within and in defiance of the norm.’ But Melayu pseudo-Western harmony just ‘yearns’, without actually ‘getting there’ – consonant with the general emphasis on transition in Melayu culture.

¹⁹. The Javanese word gong is closely related to gunong ‘mountain’ (gong + infixed -n-) (Becker 1988: 387).
²⁰. I thank Vivienne Wee for help in identifying what happens at this point in the music.
Tribal-Malay music
Having briefly contrasted Melayu music with certain features of tribal-Malay music, let me now look at the reverse situation: tribal-Malay music in the face of Melayu music. Several studies have shown that tribality in the Malay World is an active stance, and not simply a passive condition of life. Tribality – especially on the part of tribal-Malays – involves the active maintenance of social and cultural autonomy in the face of the Melayu drive to assimilation.21

I noted earlier how Balinese music expresses the mutual involvement of the people in producing a single outcome through its employment of cooperative hocket (among other features) to produce a single ‘resultant’ melody. Something similar is also found amongst tribal-Malay performance, where such melodic cooperation frequently involves two players on a single instrument. The following two tracks present examples of this from Peninsular Malaysia (a shank-xylophone, spread across the players’ legs), and from Sumatra (a gong chime row). Despite the geographical separation, these performances are remarkably similar.

Malay shank-xylophone with two players, Jambi, 1999

Track 22
Track A1 from The Protomalayans of Malacca.

Track 23
‘Anak Tonga’. Gong-row performance by Orang Petalangan, mainland Riau.
Track 4 from Music from the Forests of Riau and Mentawei.

As Yampolsky has noted (1995: 6–8), similar features found in tribal-Malay drumming, where the performers themselves recognise the dialectic between the peningkah leader and penyelalu follower, encode a specifically tribal worldview. The music and its manner of performance

21. See, for example, Helliwell 1992 on western Borneo, Sandbukt 1984 on Sumatra, and Benjamin 2002 for the Malay World more generally.
involves a turning inwards, quite different from the turning-outwards that we have seen to be characteristic of non-tribal Melayu music. These are surely examples of the tribal employment of music in deliberate resistance to the transcendentalisation held out by the ever-present invitation to become Melayu. Furthermore,

Turner (1994) has shown how the ritual music of some tribal-Malays in Sumatra directly encodes their worldview. Vivienne Wee (p.c.) has suggested that musical features of this kind (including the presence or absence of melismatic elaboration discussed earlier) have much to do with the Melayu desire to assimilate others to their culture while simultaneously excluding the people so attracted from the upper reaches of their social hierarchy. Melisma is public and attractive. Absence of melisma, coupled with a turned-inwards performance-structure, serves to resist that attractiveness. (See also Vivienne Wee's presentation at this conference.)
References


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Wee, Vivienne. 1987. ‘Material dependence and symbolic independence: constructions of Melayu ethnicity in island Riau, Indonesia.’ In A. Terry Rambo, Kathleen Gillogly & Karl L. Hutterer (eds), Ethnic diversity and the control of natural resources in Southeast Asia, University of Michigan Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 197–226.


**Recordings**


*Grénék satu*. 2000. Compact disk album of modern Malay songs from Deli (Medan), performed by Rinto Harahap and others. Jakarta: Siti Raya Nada, SRN CD 003.


