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## **INTERCULTURAL INTIMACY: MALAYSIAN POPULAR MUSIC AS AN EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL COHESION (1970S AND 1980S)**

*This article applies a conceptual framework that merges interculturalism and cultural intimacy to analyse Malaysian popular music as an expression of everyday-experienced social cohesion amidst the nation-state's ethnically diverse population. It draws on cases of intercultural intimacy found in the production, performance and studio recordings of Malaysian artists and groups with attention paid to Sudirman Arshad and the Alleycats. Sudirman was a Malay artist who became an intercultural pop icon in Malaysia, while the Alleycats (and other groups explored) are a band of non-Malay musicians that appealed to a wide Malay(sian) audience. The cases presented here uncover how Malaysian popular music, specifically from the stage of maturing nationhood during the 1970s and 1980s, provides an important means of intercultural cohesion among its citizens who intersect across various ethnicities, religions and social class. The article analyses aspects of musical production (style, genre, aesthetics) and musical-textual content (lyrics) from studio recordings as well as related contexts of performance (live shows, concerts). The intercultural and affective dynamics of these artists and groups highlight how Malaysian popular music offers intimate, creative expressions that enable processes of everyday-experienced social cohesion.*

**Keywords:** *Popular Music; Interculturalism; Cultural Intimacy; Social Cohesion; Sudirman; Alleycats*

### **Introduction**

Through a study of popular music artists and groups from the 1970s to the 1980s, this study aims to ignite three important considerations in advancing knowledge on Malaysia's history of interculturalism. First, academics of history and the social sciences must acknowledge the importance of popular culture in expressing the social, cultural and political dynamics of Malaysia as a nation-state comprised of intercultural formations.<sup>1</sup> Second, to truly understand the political, social and cultural dynamics within this nation-state, Malaysian scholarship should consider the interdisciplinary potential of their studies that not only merge methodological but also conceptual paradigms for analysing Malaysia's complex dimensions; especially, the cultural interactions

across its diverse population. Third, there has been a dearth in understanding Malaysia's interculturalism in affective (read emotional) terms, for which a study of popular music and its intimately expressive texts (lyrics) and sounds (aesthetics, genres, styles) provide a relevant area of inquiry.

This article will address such issues by first outlining a conceptual framework that considers how interculturalism and social cohesion occur in the context of Malaysian popular music. Next, the article introduces the concept of *intercultural intimacy* to analyse select cases of Malaysian popular music from the 1970s to 1990s. Biographical and discographical analyses of Malaysian artists and groups reveal the intercultural dynamics found in a multiethnic music industry that drew on local and global popular music trends that appealed to a mass public. Sudirman features prominently as an intercultural pop icon in Malaysia, especially with his song, '*Balik Kampung*', which appeals to citizens of diverse backgrounds. Next, I draw attention to the global aesthetics and intercultural dynamics found in Malaysian groups fronted or led by non-Malay-*bumiputera* artists: Streetlights, Revolvers, Carefree and the Alleycats. Finally, the article presents a biography of the Alleycats as the "quintessential Malaysian band"<sup>2</sup> and analyses the affective/sentimental qualities of their hit song '*Andaikan Aku Pergi Dulu* (If I Depart Before You)'. The cases presented here uncover how Malaysian popular music, specifically from the stage of maturing nationhood during the 1970s and 1980s, provides an important means for intercultural cohesion among its citizens who intersect across various ethnicities, religions and social class. From the cases of artists and groups presented, aspects of musical production (style, genre, aesthetics) and musical-textual content (lyrics) from studio recordings as well as related contexts of performance (live shows, concerts) are read to highlight how Malaysian popular music offers intimate, creative expressions that enable processes of everyday-experienced intercultural cohesion.

## **Interculturalism and Social Cohesion in Malaysian Popular Music**

In the context of the Malaysian state and popular music, it is useful to consider interculturalism as an approach for analysing cultural integration and social cohesion. Cantle offers a conception of interculturalism to explain an increasingly globalised and super-diverse society of individuals whose 'ethnic and communal identities...seem irrelevant...through...constant interaction(s) across cultural and national boundaries'.<sup>3</sup> However, while Modood has reduced Cantle's interculturalism to merely a reformulation of cosmopolitanism and "a valuable complement to a communitarian" multiculturalism,<sup>4</sup> I believe that the term has value in analysing the context of popular music expressed in Malaysia. Cosmopolitanism is better applied to an earlier period of uncertain, newly-forming postcolonial national identity.<sup>5</sup> Interculturalism however, provides a better vantage point for analysis in the period of Malaysia's early

but established nationhood, when for example, the racialisation “of public life, especially after 1970” had “encouraged” minority groups “to eschew the hybrid (if not, cosmopolitan) and choose between Indian (or Chinese or ‘Other’) or Malay identity”.<sup>6</sup>

Bouchard’s conceptualisation of interculturalism then, as “a model for integration and the management of ethnocultural diversity” within a nation is applicable in considering the socio-political context of Malaysian popular music.<sup>7</sup> Bouchard calls for the application of intercultural policies within the francophone province of Quebec to manage its threatened position as a cultural-linguistic minority within Canada and North America, while also fostering a reciprocal accommodation of minorities (e.g. anglophone Quebecers) and newer immigrant communities. This diverges from Canada’s policy of multiculturalism that rejects the imposition of a majoritarian national culture. Bouchard argues instead for a *pluralistic integrationism* that considers “the interests of the majority (culture), whose desire for affirmation and development” may be recognised as valid.<sup>8</sup> In his formulation of interculturalism, Malaysia is a “multi-polarity” paradigm of “ethnocultural diversity”, wherein “two or more national groups or subgroups” are “officially recognised as such and granted a kind of permanence.”<sup>9</sup>

Malaysia with its competing ‘nations-of-intent’ – of divergent Malay *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* (e.g. Chinese, Indian) political affiliations fits well within this paradigm.<sup>10</sup> By turning away from the “authority-defined” political contestations observed by Shamsul, while also building on his emphasis of “everyday-defined” social identities,<sup>11</sup> this article seeks to highlight the intercultural interactions that occur in Malaysian popular music in relation to the hegemonic political imposition of a majoritarian Malay *bumiputera* national culture. Along the lines of Shamsul’s approach, this study turns toward observations of quotidian ethnic-boundary crossings and the interactive relationships that occur in Malaysia through popular music. Thus, examples presented henceforth focus on both Malay and non-Malay artists that intimate a sense of collective identity through popular music in everyday terms.

However, beyond merely the prospect of intercultural integration for the sake of social cohesion, it is necessary to shift attention to the social importance of music; specifically, Hesmondhalgh’s ideas on the role of music in the promotion of human flourishing.<sup>12</sup> His analysis of music as a means of human flourishing is built on readings of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who summarised how the ideal and universal human life – incumbent on specific needs depending on one’s culture – was based on basic “capabilities” that are tied to principles of freedom and social justice<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Hesmondhalgh argues for how “music might valuably enhance... (human) interactions, and our ability to live with and towards others, to recognize them and to show concern for them”.<sup>14</sup> Popular music, such as recorded songs that are easily accessed

by a mass public, plays an important role in enabling individuals, more so the wider community or society, to understand social and emotional experiences “towards” themselves (self-awareness and introspection) and others (empathy and reconciliation). Therefore, in the context of a multi-ethnic Malaysia, popular music and its artists have the ability to express intimate connections (rather than divisions) that speak to the cultural and social experiences of a diverse society, thereby enabling intercultural conciliation and social cohesion.

Conceptually, and within social analyses of Malaysian popular music, this paper finds solidarities with Pillai’s observations of the ‘syncretic cultural multivocality’ found in Malaysian hip hop, whereby an integrative use of multiple Malaysian languages (Tamil, Cantonese, Hokkien, English, Malay) mark the distinct social-cultural aesthetic of the genre in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>15</sup> This article however, turns to an earlier era of Malaysian popular music, when Malay-language songs dominated a burgeoning national entertainment industry and many artists of non-Malay ethnicities such as D.J. Dave and Francesca Peters @Fran were actively producing and performing for a Malay-language market. Pillai sets the historical context of Malaysian popular music in 1970s Malaysia, just after the 1969 racial riots, which resulted in greater

*... prominence given to Malay as a national language and instrument of unity amongst Malaysians ..., which brought not only Malay music and musicians into the public eye but also introduced performers of other ethnic backgrounds into the flourishing music scene. The music of this period belied the hostility and cultural duress that are often cited as a predominant characteristic of the Malaysian cultural milieu of the early 1970s.*<sup>16</sup>

Thus, such music and its artists during this period presented a counter-narrative to the presence of top-down policies that were imposing bureaucratic approaches in the increasingly centralised development of (Malay-centric) national performing arts. The implementation of the National Culture Policy<sup>17</sup> would dictate mass media policies for Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), which in effect excluded (and banned) many forms of local arts that did not align with the Malay-Muslim qualifiers of the desired national culture.<sup>18</sup> Music developed and promoted by national institutions such as the Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan (KKBS [Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports]) emphasised the primacy of Islamic practices, traditional and folk genres of Malay music, and ultimately, the standardised use of the Malay (national) language<sup>19</sup> In addition, other forms of music with pre-national historical roots in the region such as *bangsawan* and *boria* were modified from their original contexts and modes of performance— that were more culturally-diverse and vibrant – to fit the prescribed national culture mould of performances in educational institutions,

state-sponsored tourism events and official state functions.<sup>20</sup> However, popular music in Malaysia persisted in productions of various articulations, at times outside of official spaces and in resistance to top-down restrictions, but in other cases also adapted or conformed to such state-sanctioned policies.

Thus, while “nationalist policies might have been formally implemented and enforced and perhaps disliked”, Pillai highlights how “the music industry displayed a lyrical flair for the national language and perhaps created one of the rare moments” where national expressions as defined by state authorities were reconciled with the everyday-experienced expressions voiced in Malaysian popular music.<sup>21</sup> In this paper, such “lyrical flair” and social reconciliations are read against the musical content and affective nuances articulated in Malaysian popular music.

### **Intercultural Intimacy in Malaysian Popular Music (1970s and 1980s)**

Popular music is expressed through a range of mediums (artists, songs, albums, music videos) that thrive on mass-market appeal to a wide-ranging audience. Often, producers and performers of popular music achieve this by connecting with audiences and consumers through relatable cultural styles, social themes and intimate emotional content. However, the case of popular music in Malaysia must also be read in view of the nation-state’s interculturalism. Specifically, how the production and consumption of popular music in a nation-state context occurs through expressions of intimate musical texts that are articulated through intercultural conditions and interactions between the agents (producers, songwriters, artists) and audiences (consumers, listeners, citizens) of such music. These usually include narratives about interpersonal relationships, sentimentality, romance, tragedy, loss, struggle and death.

However, such content also has to relate the specific social, stylistic and cultural contexts of being in Malaysia, and this is where cultural intimacy in musical expressions play a significant role in binding the collective experiences of a community, ethnicity or nation.<sup>22</sup> While Stokes and Herzfeld observe cultural intimacy in relatively more homogenous ethnonational contexts (Turkey and Greece), studying Malaysian popular music requires, instead, an examination of *intercultural intimacy*; that is, how differently conceived, prescribed or experienced cultural groups may interact with each other and share a collective aesthetic-affective experience that encourages mutual enjoyment, connections, and even shared socio-economic success. Elsewhere, I explore how music in commercially produced Malay films from the 1950s and 1960s expressed the cultural intimacies of a cosmopolitan network of converging cultures during the postcolonial period of nation-making in the region.<sup>23</sup> Such musical developments in this early period, therefore, set the precedent for hearing interculturalism in Malaysian music during the 1970s and 1980s, during which the boundaries of Malaysia’s multiethnic state are more

clearly experienced by its citizens. Specifically, ethnic divisions were clearly cemented through an established (postcolonial) Malay-*bumiputera* hegemony that integrated East Malaysian-*bumiputera*, Chinese, Indian and ‘other’ ethnic groups.<sup>24</sup> But how might we understand the cultural interactions between seemingly disparate identities and individuals of (supposedly) different (ethno) cultural backgrounds who, through collective interactions, produce creative content for a national market/audience?

This section analyses the musical styles and narrative texts of select cases of Malaysian popular music that express such intercultural intimacy; that is, cases of artists’ biographical development in the national context and the stylistic/aesthetic and lyrical aspects of their songs that encourage cohesion through shared social and emotional themes. Cultural dimensions are analysed alongside themes of emotional affinities by unpacking the discographies of select artists and groups to reveal a constellation of mass-produced Malaysian popular music recordings that express the intercultural dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s.

### ***Sudirman Arshad: Intercultural Icon of Malaysia***

Rising to fame upon winning Bintang RTM’s Best Singer competition in 1976, Sudirman Arshad (b.1954, d.1992) would move on to dominate the Malaysian music market with his chart-topping hits and engaging stage performances. In 1986, he held a free open-air concert on Chow Kit Road, attended by over 100,000 people. The height of his fame and recognition from the nation saw him win ‘Asia’s No.1 Performer’ award in a singing competition held in Royal Albert Hall, London, U.K. He performed a song in English titled ‘One Thousand Million Smiles’ with music and lyrics by Malaysian musicians, Michael Veerapen and Paul Ponnudorai. He was also a household name among all Malaysians regardless of their backgrounds, appealing to fans of all ethnicities.

He would include performances of songs in Cantonese, Tamil and Hindi alongside Malay and English numbers. In his live concerts, he introduced his songs with short speeches about the importance of embracing diversity to foster national unity. In such public concerts, Sudirman would approach specific audience members and serenade them on stage. During his free concert tour to promote his own brand of soft drinks called SUDI, he invited a Malaysian-Chinese woman named Lim Ah Yoke to the stage. Before singing a Cantonese song for her, he made a short speech which reads as follows:

*Unlike the other countries that face all sorts of disasters and unrest, we need to be thankful for living in Malaysia. And in our state of harmony we can learn and experience the customs and cultures of our diverse nation, hence (with that in mind) I will sing this special song*

for *Lim Ah Yoke*.<sup>25</sup>

At the same concert, Sudirman invites a young Indian-Muslim woman named Mazkiah and proceeds to serenade her with a famous Tamil song, “Puthiya Vanaam” from a film that starred the famous actor MGR. In similar fashion, just before singing his serenade he makes another speech about Malaysian diversity:

*This song is dedicated to all Malaysian citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion. One of the messages of this song speaks of the need to live united, as one family in God’s great earth, without caring about (our differences in) nationality, colour, class or ancestry.*<sup>26</sup>

This inclusivist nationalist spirit and his wide appeal across the nation can be heard in songs about the everyday struggles of working-class citizens who had migrated to city centers. Along these lines, Sudirman also sang about Malay(sian) poverty, rural-urban migration and adjusting to working in the city.<sup>27</sup> Songs such as ‘*Aku Penganggur* (I’m Unemployed)’, ‘*8 ke 4 ¼* (8 am to 4:15pm [Punchcard])’, ‘*Pulang Dari Kilang* (Returning from the Factory)’, ‘*Hidup di Kota* (Life in the City)’ and ‘*Chow Kit Road*’ all express the struggles, aspirations and allure of migrating to and working in the city. In fact, Sudirman dedicated an entire album *Lagu Dari Kota* (*Songs from the City*), which contains the last three songs mentioned above, to the theme of young Malays(ians) adapting to working life in Malaysia’s capital city, Kuala Lumpur.<sup>28</sup> Also striking in this discography is the use of various African-American pop styles, such as the 1950s doo-wop vocal style in ‘*Pulang Dari Kilang*’ and the upbeat disco approach in ‘*Aku Penganggur*’ and ‘*Chow Kit Road*’.

However, the one song that all Malaysians can relate to or at least recognise to this day is ‘Balik Kampung (Returning To My Village/Hometown)’. A recent study of 12 diverse focus groups residing in urban centers across Malaysia (Klang Valley, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu) revealed that the “most recognised songs from... (a) playlist (of 16 Malaysian pop songs) are two recordings by Sudirman, Balik Kampung... and 31 Ogos both registering at 100% recognition across all focus groups”.<sup>29</sup> While the song is commonly associated with being a Hari Raya song, it is also relatable to any Malaysian of any ethnicity or religion returning to one’s family, hometown or village for a festivity or from a long journey away from home:

*Perjalanan jauh tak ku rasa  
Kerna hati ku melonjak sama  
Ingin berjumpa sanak saudara  
Yang selalu bermain di mata*

*Nun menghijau gunung ladang dan rimba  
Langit nan tinggi bertambah birunya  
Deru angin turut sama berlagu  
Semuanya bagaikan turut gembira*

*Balik kampung oh oh oh...*

[A long journey I do not feel,  
Because my heart skips in anticipation,  
The meeting of my family and relatives,  
Projected in my eyes,

The evergreen mountains and jungles,  
The elevated skies of blue,  
Even the winds sing along,  
As if everything joins me in happiness,

Returning to the village/hometown oh oh  
oh...]

Sudirman's song of wide intercultural appeal within the Malaysian social context, also highlights the affective potency of popular music. '*Balik Kampung*' conjures images and the related emotions of excitement and elation that are felt when Malaysians return to their hometown or village for a cultural festivity such as Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Gawai, Kaamatan or Christmas. And, while the song is predominantly heard and used as a Hari Raya song, its culturally neutral lyrics allow for its mutual enjoyment across Malaysia's diverse population regardless of their ethnic background or religion – the phrase "Hari Raya" is absent. It also highlights how public holidays based on cultural festivities are enjoyed by all Malaysians. However, the sense of positive emotions tied to a traversing of the national landscape - from urban to rural locations also mark the shared geographical territory of Malaysia that binds and contains Malaysians on affective terms as expressed in the song such as longing, anticipation, happiness and affection for one's family and relatives. The theme presented in '*Balik Kampung*' share many sentimental resonances with other songs that fueled the success of the 1970s and 1980s Malaysian popular music industry. To further explore the interculturalism of the industry, the following section examines how such themes were utilised by Malaysian groups that were fronted or led by non-Malays.

### ***International Styles and Intercultural Sounds***

The period of the 1970s and 1980s saw a thriving popular music recording industry in Malaysia. Artists and groups performed a variety of popular music styles and many integrated and combined Malay forms of folk music (such as *joged* and *asli*) with globally-consumed Afro-Anglo-American<sup>30</sup> styles of popular music (rhythm & blues, funk, disco, blues, rock). The focus of this section will be twofold: first, on non-Malay artists and the intercultural dynamics found in the production of popular music and second, the intimate narratives expressed in these artists' songs that appealed across cultural barriers within Malaysia. Aside from successful non-Malay artists such as Francesca Peters @Fran and DJ Dave, this period witnessed a flourishing of multi-ethnic



groups who performed, released and recorded hit radio singles and albums in Malay, such as Discovery, Sweet September, Carefree, Revolvers, Streetlights, Cenderawasih and the Alleycats. And, the hit songs of many of these artists and groups centered on intimate themes such as romance (e.g. '*Belaian Jiwa* [Caressing The Soul]' by Carefree), separation (e.g. '*Perpisahan* [Separation]' by Revolvers), belonging (e.g. '*Biarkan* [Let It Be]' by Streetlights) and loss ('*Andainya Aku Pergi Dulu* [If I Depart Before You]' by the Alleycats).

Before proceeding, it must be noted that non-Malay women artists such as Fran and the all-girl duo Cenderawasih, comprised of sisters Helen and Irene Savari, were prominent in the Malaysian music industry of the 1980s, appealing widely to a Malay-language market. However, this article will focus mainly on male groups from the period, as the topic of (non-Malay) female Malaysian artists are deserving of dedicated studies that could further integrate a coherent analysis of gender and interculturalism.<sup>31</sup>

This section draws examples of studio recordings from the groups Streetlights, Carefree, Revolvers and The Alleycats as they were multi-ethnic groups led by Malaysians who are identified (or categorised by the state) as 'Indian'.<sup>32</sup> And they performed and recorded hit songs written and produced by their own members or other Malay producers and songwriters such as M. Nasir and S. Atan, to be largely consumed by Malay fans in Malaysia and Singapore. These groups were appreciated by a mass Malaysian public and their patronage by international record labels based in Malaysia offers a glimpse of their commercial value at the time.<sup>33</sup> Carefree and Streetlights were signed to EMI (now acquired by Universal Group since 2012), and The Alleycats were signed to Philips Records. The brief biographies and analyses of these groups' select repertoire reveal the intercultural dynamics of music performance and production and the emotional textual content of their songs that afforded their mass appeal in 1970s and 1980s Malaysia.

Carefree, led by guitarist and vocalist Simon Justin Leo, were well known for their hit song, '*Belaian Jiwa*' that was released in their album *Kebebasan II*.<sup>34</sup> The eight-piece band consisted of a horn section (saxophones, trombone, trumpet) and rhythm section (drums, percussion, bass guitar, electric guitar, keyboard) and all the band members could sing as backup vocalists, with Ahmad Fauzi Darus @Jay Jay (the bass guitarist) and Simon alternating as lead vocalists.<sup>35</sup> Such a large ensemble facilitated their playing of upbeat disco and funk repertoire, that was indicative of the vibrant live-dance-music scene in Malaysia during the era. The smaller, five-member group Revolvers were led by keyboardist, Freddie Fernandez, who would move on past the band's dissolution to be an influential music industry player as CEO of music recording company, Betarecs Sdn Bhd, and founder of the *Anugerah Industri Muzik* (AIM [Music Industry Awards]) Malaysia. The group played actively in the live-music scene in the Klang Valley, prominently as a resident band for the "The Glass Bubble Disco in Jayapuri Hotel (formerly the PJ Hilton)

where...(they) packed in the crowds for more than three years from 1977 to 1980".<sup>36</sup> However, a lasting impact was made on the Malaysian music industry – and particularly among Malay fans until present day – with their hit song “*Perpisahan*” the title track of their first studio album.<sup>37</sup> Unlike Carefree’s instrumentation that featured a horn section to deliver the sounds of popular dance music styles of the era, Revolvers were unique in their use of a wide array of electronic keyboard synthesizers, which set their sound apart from other Malaysian bands.

Another unifying aspect of these dance-pop-bands was the inclusion of the Malay-folk, albeit modernised, style of joget<sup>38</sup> songs alongside other popular dance genres sung in Malay. The syncretic aspects of this style of music resonate with the unique cosmopolitan history of popular music in the Malay Peninsula<sup>39</sup> and the genre’s continuity, proliferated in the repertoire and studio albums of these 1970s and 1980s groups. Carefree released ‘*Joget Mak Enon*’ in their first album<sup>40</sup>, ‘*Joget Teruna Dara*’ in their second album<sup>41</sup> and ‘*Joget Anak Gembela*’.<sup>42</sup> The Alleycats released ‘*Joget Tersalah Pikat*’ in their third album,<sup>43</sup> ‘*Joget Gurau Senda*’ in their fifth<sup>44</sup> and ‘*Joget Terluka*’ in their fifteenth album.<sup>45</sup> The Revolvers released in their debut album, ‘*Joget Untuk Adik Ku*’<sup>46</sup> but no more joget titles appeared in their following two albums. Thus, such a prevalence of this style in these groups’ repertoire marks a natural integration of a musical style that situates them within the cultural continuity of Malay(sian) musical practices.

However, musical adaptations of Afro-Anglo-American styles dominated their album tracklists. The practice of adapting Malay lyrics to Anglo-American pop tunes was already common in the localised rock & roll a.k.a. *pop yeh yeh* music of the mid-1960s and early-1970s<sup>47</sup> And the continuity of *saduran* songs – meaning, a song that has been adapted or interpreted from another<sup>48</sup> – is evident in the use of new Afro-Anglo-American songs such as Discovery’s ‘*Mari Berdansa* (Let’s Dance)’ in their debut album<sup>49</sup> adapted from Wild Cherry’s ‘Play That Funky Music’.<sup>50</sup>

Aside from these direct adaptations, these groups also drew heavily on popular music influences from American styles such as funk and disco as evident in Carefree’s ‘*Dendangan Laguku* (Singing My Song)’, ‘*Menari* (Dance)’ and ‘*Ke Disco* (To The Disco)’ from their first album *Kebebasan* and ‘*Terimalah Persembahan Kami* (Our Performance)’ in Revolvers’ first album *Perpisahan*. Such stylistic influences for these bands came naturally as Carefree were known for performing cover versions of American funk bands such as “Tower of Power, Average White Band, and Earth Wind & Fire”<sup>51</sup> and the Revolvers were also drawing from American rock groups such as Chicago and Queen, among many others.<sup>52</sup> Sweet September’s Antonio Vincent’s vocals in ‘*Hatiku Kau Garis Luka* (You Drew A Scar on My Heart)’<sup>53</sup> was also likened to The Stylistic’s Russell Thompkins Jr’s falsetto.<sup>54</sup> Song’s such as this fall closer into the category of pop ballads that would be *the* definitive genre for hit

songs produced by Malaysian bands during this era. The groups presented thus far, demonstrate how a mix of local, international and intercultural stylistic approaches contribute to their public appeal and success in Malaysia.

However, the cases above have yet to highlight the affective texts and intercultural nuances of Malaysian popular music from this era. For such an analysis, I turn to Streetlights, who released their hit song ‘*Biarkan* (Let It Be)’ in 1984.<sup>55</sup> Set to a medium tempo reggae-rock style, the first two verses of the song narrate the journey of the vocalist travelling to two regions (*daerah*) beyond his own and never being satisfied with his surroundings, stating how “everything is so very alien (*segalanya sungguh asing sekali*)”. In the final verse, he returns to his home-region and sees it with a new sense of acceptance – “*Di sini cukup sempurna bagi ku* (Here everything is just right for me)” – ending with the song’s chorus that repeats the word “*biarkan*”, which directly translates to “let it be” or “leave it”. The Malay term articulated here carries a double-entendre depending on the context – it could literally mean to leave something behind or someone alone; thus, accepting its/their existence/presence. Such lyrics carry a further socio-cultural implication, as the Streetlights group comprised Malaysians of ethnic Punjabi descent who sang in Malay<sup>56</sup>

Considering the political position of ethnic minorities in Malaysia during the 1980s, ‘*Biarkan*’ also expresses, affectively, a sense of belonging in the nation-state, against a history of minority communities being cast as ‘others’ due to the ethnic ordering of citizens through a “racial governmentality”.<sup>57</sup> This was especially relevant in the 1980s, when government policies on national culture and media had increasingly privileged content in the Malay language. Hence, the song’s wide appeal to a Malaysian audience of the time – of which a majority are ethnically identified as ‘Malays’ – highlights the ability of popular music to simultaneously hint at underlying ethnic tensions while expressing the intercultural dynamics of social cohesion in Malaysia as experienced in everyday life, in all its contested and emotional nuances. This article now examines how intercultural intimacy features prominently in the case of Malaysia’s most successful (intercultural) group from this era – the Alleycats.

### ***Alleycats: The Quintessential Malaysian Band***

The Alleycats are led by the brothers David (on lead vocals) and (and the deceased) Loganathan (@Loga Arumugam (on vocals, percussions and flute). Releasing their first Malay-language album to astounding success in 1979, the ‘Penang-born’ band was soon to become a household name among Malaysians by the mid-1980s. Beyond their distinct voices, the frontmen-brothers’ sport prominent ‘Afro’ hairstyles as an iconic brand identity – also marking the Afro-American global musical trends of the era. The commercial success and sustainability of the group – incomparable with other groups discussed

above – is evident in their release of 28 studio albums from 1978 until 2008; in which many contain hit songs appreciated by a wide Malaysian audience. The beginnings of their stardom in Malaysia occurred while they were performing a nine-year contract in a club called Mocambu in Hong Kong that began in 1976.<sup>58</sup> Their 11 years of experience as a versatile act adept in the most recent global popular music hits prepared them well for their success in Malaysia.<sup>59</sup> They had just recorded their first Malay album in 1979, and while they were performing overseas, their Malay songs were gaining mass popularity in Malaysia with radio hits such as ‘*Jika Kau Bercinta Lagi* (If You Find Love Again)’.<sup>60</sup> As recalled by the group’s frontman, David Arumugam:

*Never did we know that we had become such a success here, we only realised it when we were offered to do a road tour across Malaysia... When I saw the amount of press coverage ... also before our performances I saw newscasters mentioning us on radio and television ... I remember feeling so scared and nervous.*<sup>61</sup>

That ‘road tour’ in Malaysia would be the turning point for the Alleycats’ popularity and commercial flourishing in Malaysia, whereupon they would produce “an average of three to four albums every two years” from the 1980s to 1990s.<sup>62</sup> It is thus important to examine the factors that made their first Malay album, *Terima Kasih* (*Thank You*) such a prolific success.

*Terima Kasih* featured the Alleycats’ facility with Afro-Anglo-American popular music honed in their live music club residencies, with *saduran* numbers such as ‘*Kembalilah Kepadaku* (Return to Me)’ based on The Bee Gees “Too Much Heaven”<sup>63</sup> released a year prior and ‘*Engkau Seri Bagai Pelangi* (You’re Beautiful Like A Rainbow)’ adapted from The Commodores’ ‘Three Times A Lady’<sup>64</sup>, Boney M.’s ‘Rasputin’<sup>65</sup> was recorded as ‘Shaharazad’ and Billie Joel’s ‘Just The Way You Are’<sup>66</sup> was sung as ‘*Tiada Lain Dari Mu* (There Are None Like You)’. Aside from Western popular music, *Terima Kasih* also adapted the Filipino numbers ‘*Anak*’ by Freddie Aguilar<sup>67</sup> as ‘*Dosa* (Sin)’ and ‘*Ikau Ang Aking Mahal*’ recorded by VST & Co<sup>68</sup> was the source of their hit song, ‘*Jika Kau Bercinta Lagi*’.

Such repertory borrowings listed above point to the international and inter-regional exchanges of popular music that was characteristic of the era – Malaysian musicians (like many Southeast Asian artists) were intercultural mediators of global popular music for local audiences/consumers.<sup>69</sup> Further, within the Malaysian context, the striking combination of well-honed musical talent and a multiethnic lineup of mainly Malaysian-Indian and Malaysian-Chinese members served in “effectively ticking the multi cultural (sic) boxes of ‘Melayu’ (the band’s originals are Malay songs), ‘Cina’ (sic), ‘India’ and ‘dan lain-lain’ (others).”<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, as with many groups fronted and led by Malaysian-Indians at the time, album production personnel involved a mix

of Malay lyricists, songwriters and producers as well as Malaysian-Chinese producers and managers. For example, M. Nasir (originally from Singapore) is perhaps the most prominent (and dominant) contributor of lyrics and songs for the Alleycats, while Eric Yeo featured as a producer for many of their albums. Thus, such intercultural dynamics suggest a winning ‘formula’ in the manufactured process of producing Malaysian pop recordings that garnered the broadest national appeal.

More so, beyond the commercial production of their recordings, the Alleycats made an affective impact on the Malaysian public through the sentimental themes expressed in their songs. Songs such as ‘*Jika Kau Bercinta Lagi*’ and ‘*Andaikan Aku Pergi Dulu* (Should I Depart Before You)’<sup>71</sup> spoke of passionate romantic relationships burdened by separation or loss; expressing the intimacy of sentimental and melancholic textual narratives known as ‘*jiwang*’ (meaning, sentimental)<sup>72</sup> in Malay culture. However, many of these *jiwang* lyrics are juxtaposed against an upbeat pop style performed by the band with electric guitar, bass guitar, keyboard synthesizers, drums, percussions and string section such as is heard in ‘*Andaikan Aku Pergi Dulu*’. The song’s lyrics, penned by M. Nasir, speaks of the melancholic prospect of a departed lover:

*Andainya engkau pergi dulu sebelum ku  
Mestikah aku hidup melara  
Andainya engkau tiada lagi di sisiku  
Mestikah aku kecewa  
Ku percaya kau selalu di sisiku  
Walaupun jasadmu tiada  
Walau di mana kau berada  
Kasihku takkan berubah*

*[Should you depart before me,  
Must I live without direction,  
Should you be no longer by my side,  
Must I be heartbroken,  
I believe you are always by my side,  
Even though your form is no more,  
No matter where you may be,  
My love will not waver;*

*Di pohon cemara ku ukirkan kata cinta  
Bulan tersenyum dan bersinar  
Berguguran daun jatuh lembut ke rambutmu  
Meraikan suasana indah  
Di sini ku berjanji disaksi rembulan  
Andainya ku pergi dulu  
Jikalau ku pergi dulu  
Ku nantimu di pintu syurga*

*On the casuarina tree I inscribed my love,  
The moon smiled radiantly,  
Leaves fell softly on your hair,  
Celebrating a pristine moment,  
With the moon as my witness I vowed,  
Should I leave before you,  
If I leave before you,  
I will await you at the gates of heaven.]*

While the song is initially read as a melancholic narrative, it also celebrates (“celebrating a pristine moment”) the enduring romance between two lovers (“my love will not waver”). In speaking of two lovers contemplating their lives beyond their partners’ passing, it also affirms the narrator’s loyalty as he awaits his lover “at the gates of heaven”, thus representing a love that transcends corporeal existence. However, despite the gravity of the narrative, the song’s composer and album producer, Eric Yeo, refrained from producing it as a slow ballad; choosing instead to set it to a medium tempo (around 90 to 91 beats per minute) in the key of B flat minor, driven by the full rhythm

section of the band accenting every downbeat and orchestrated with a lush (read sentimental) string arrangement. There are no overt local ‘cultural’ (e.g. *joget* or *asli*) qualities nor Afro-Anglo-American stylings (e.g. disco, funk) in the song’s arrangement. Therefore, the song achieves a somewhat neutral pop sensibility – *not too slow, not too fast* – juxtaposed against a grave but celebratory narrative. It achieves an affective nuance of ‘in-between-ness’, and in many ways best exemplifies both textually and aesthetically the intercultural cohesion found in Malaysian popular music of the era. Such a cohesion is filled with a range of aesthetic and textual meanings, but it is one that is expressed by a Malaysian group, the Alleycats, situated distinctly in the Malaysian music industry of the 1980s. Ultimately, such expressions come from a practical approach to the performance of emotions:

*When I walk into a studio and do these songs, I pour various feelings into them: some happy, some sad and whatnot ... so for me all these songs are equally beautiful as they manage to capture what I or we as a band feel when we are making these songs.*<sup>73</sup>

Thus, the Alleycats through their intercultural collaboration of Indian and Chinese musicians with Malay songwriters, employed culturally intimate (*jiwang*) texts in their upbeat sounding music to appeal to a mass-market of Malaysian consumers. Even with the passing of Loga Arumugam in 2007, the Alleycats still perform to sold-out concerts in Malaysia and Singapore until present day.<sup>74</sup> Music journalist N. Rama Lohan summarises the unique contribution that the group has made on social cohesion in Malaysia:

*Alleycats transcends colour, creed and social standing and has earned the right to be the quintessential Malaysian band, able to get any crowd to groove to its songs, ultimately earning a place in the hearts of every Malaysian music fan who is old enough to know the band’s songs.*<sup>75</sup>

The band had achieved this transcendence of differences across Malaysia’s pluralistic society through the intercultural dynamism of the group and their affective appeal to the collective “hearts” of Malaysians. Popular music with mass appeal in 1970s and 1980s Malaysia expresses a merging of global trends with lyrical content, in the official-national Malay language, with intimate, sentimental themes that are widely relatable across a Malay(sian) public.

## Conclusion

The study of popular music in Malaysia allows us to critically refigure the essentialising categories of ethnicity in Malaysia by thinking “about race *differently*, as a product of discourse, as the effect of social processes, and therefore always as a culturally and politically situated configuration.<sup>76</sup> In heeding Gabriel’s call for Malaysian scholarship to challenge entrenched notions of racial and ethnic identities in Malaysia, this paper examined how intercultural processes and affective texts in popular music “can produce new meaning... with the potential to interrogate the hegemonic political and social discourse”.<sup>77</sup> As demonstrated in the cases of Sudirman, the Alleycats and other groups who widely appealed to a diverse Malaysian population, ethnic identities interact within (and beyond) the national context to produce new, collective national identities through popular music expressions.

Thus, popular music in Malaysia is an intercultural expression that exemplifies reciprocal accommodations between minority and majority ethnocultural groups within a national space. However, a further interpretation of interculturalism is required in the case of Malaysian music, whereby the affective dimensions of popular music must be acknowledged as a prime enabler of social cohesion – not just the political dynamics of minority groups adapting to (or producing for) and being accommodated by (or consumed by) a majority that are representative of the hegemonic national culture. The creative adaptations of global, regional and local music styles, collaborations between multi-ethnic groups of artists, musicians, record producers, managers, lyricists and songwriters, and importantly, songs that affect social sentiments must all be read in concert to truly understand how popular music sets the stage for an everyday-experienced articulation of *intercultural intimacy* in Malaysia.

## Endnotes

1. This article alongside my peers’ contributions to this special section are the first in this journal to explore the concepts of ‘culture’, ‘popular culture’, ‘interculturalism’ and ‘music’. A search for those keywords in this journal’s database returned no results. Articles in *JEBAT* most related to this study are on the history of Malaysian media by Lee, K.T., 2016, “Artikulasi Isu-Isu Sejarah Dalam Media Massa Di Malaysia”, *JEBAT*, 43(1), pp.1-18; Indian Malaysians and multiethnic politics in the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections in Suresh Kumar, N.V. and Sivarajan, P., 2018, “Tsunami India Dalam Pilihanraya Umum Ke-14: Peralihan Sokongan Daripada Politik Etnik Kepada Politik Multietnik”, *JEBAT*, 45(2), pp.206-231; and ethnic factors in East Malaysian politics by Suffian, M., 2016, “Pakatan Politik Berasaskan Kaum: Kerelevanan Dan Kelangungan Jawatan Timbalan Ketua Menteri Sarawak (1963-

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  7. Bouchard, G, “What Is Interculturalism?”, *McGill Law Journal*, 56(2), 2011, p.437.
  8. Bouchard, 2011, pp.457–458.
  9. Bouchard, 2011, pp.442–443.
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  14. Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p.20.
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  16. Pillai, 2011, p.6.
  17. Papers from *Kongres Dasar Kebudayaan Negara* [Congress on National Culture Policy] 1973 are contained in Kementerian Kebudayaan Belia dan Sukan Malaysia. 1973. *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*, Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan Belia dan Sukan Malaysia.
  18. Tan, 1989/1990, pp.138–145.
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  25. From <https://youtu.be/BMak4TenOvw> [23 April 2020], my translation.
  26. From <https://youtu.be/DgNNSxpcneM> [23 April 2020], my translation.
  27. Lockard, 1998, p.250.
  28. *Lagu Dari Kota* EMI, EMGS 5563, 1981.
  29. Adil, J. and Shazlin, A. H, “Malaysian Popular Music and Social Cohesion: A Focus Group Study Conducted in Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and Klang Valley”, *Kajian Malaysia*, 37(2), 2019, p182.
  30. This term – in place of the more conventional ‘Anglo-American’ – draws attention to the major contribution of African-American culture that forms one of three major traditions – alongside European and Latin American music – that contributed to the overall development of 20th century popular music in America, as categorised by Starr, L. and Waterman, C. A., *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3s*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.
  31. Cendarawasih is mentioned in Pillai (2013, p.6) and Lockard’s “From Folk Music to Computer Songs” (1996) cites at the beginning of his article (p.1), the lyrics from Francesca Peters second album *Komputer Muzik*.
  32. As mentioned earlier other Malaysian groups led by non-Malays from the era included Cendarawasih, Sweet September and Discovery, but space here is limited to cover their biographies and recordings.
  33. In fact, vinyl LP albums of these groups are still being collected, traded and sold by individual traders at the weekend ‘flea market’ in Petaling Jaya’s Amcorp Mall, Sputnik Records store in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, and online websites such as carousell.my. The author’s own

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34. *Kebebasan II*, EMI, EMGS 5540, 1979.
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  37. *Perpisahan*, Beta Records, BR1001, 1980.
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  45. *C.I.N.T.A.*, Philips 846936-4, 1990.
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  47. Adil, 2018, pp.198–199.
  48. See Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka online dictionary entry for "*saduran*", where one definition states "*cerita yg isinya (pokoknya) diambil drpd cerita lain* (a story in which its content (roots) are taken from another story" (<http://prpm.dbp.gov.my/Caril?keyword=saduran&d=139128&#LIHATSINI>) [15 April 2020].
  49. *Discovery*, EMI EMGS 5518, 1978.
  50. *Wild Cherry*, Epic PE 34195, 1976.
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57. Gabriel, S. P, “The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-Colonial and Possible New Conjunctures”, *Ethnicities*, 15(6), 2015, p.792.
58. Lohan, 2011.
59. Ibid.
60. *Terima Kasih*, Philips 6455505, 1979.
61. David Arumugam in Davasagayam, K. 2019. Alleycats Were Big in HK in 70s before Finding Stardom at Home. *The Sun Daily*, 16 October. <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/video-alleycats-were-big-in-hk-in-70s-before-finding-stardom-at-home-FN1492304> [25 April 2020].
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63. RSO, RSO25, 1978.
64. Motown, M1443F, 1978. Written by Lionel Ritchie.
65. Sire, SRE 1049.
66. *The Stranger*, Columbia JC 34987, 1977.
67. RCA Victor, PB 9425, 1979.
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69. For more on the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) dynamics of popular music see Adil, J. and Santaella, M.A. Forthcoming. *Made in Nusantara, Global Studies in Popular Music*, New York: Routledge. The issue of the global circulation and power dynamics of the popular music industries is discussed in Stokes, M. 2004. “Music and the Global Order.”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, 47-72.
70. Lohan, 2011, notes that the group’s lineup in 1979 consisted of Loganathan Arumugam (Vocals), David Arumugam (vocals), Shanmugam Arumugam (Lead Guitar), Chester Anthony Passerella (saxophone), Khoo Fook Sin (Keyboards), Frank Ong (bass) and Tan Chin Hock (drums) (as stated in *Terima Kasih* album sleeve details).
71. *Kuching*, Philips 6345146, 1981.
72. See Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka online dictionary entry for “jiwang”, defined as “perlakuan sentimental (sentimental behaviour)”. (<http://prpm.dbp.gov.my/Caril1?keyword=jiwang>, [17 April 2020]).
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