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## Studying Minority Performing Arts in Southeast Asia

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## Studying Minority Performing Arts in Southeast Asia

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With the advent of globalization and transnational mobility, minority discourse has become a central issue, particularly in postmodern, postcolonial societies. The movement of refugees, asylum-seekers, migrant workers, and others across national, ethnic, and religious boundaries has led to increasingly pluralistic, multicultural, and heterogeneous societies in many parts of the world. While this has contributed to what may perhaps be called a worldwide “crisis” of cultural identity, it is particularly meaningful in Southeast Asia owing to the region’s historical context of European colonial rule followed by various independence movements, as well as to contemporary realities of rapid urbanization and post-Indo-China War migration.

In this short paper, I would like to consider this point in relation to the papers presented at this session, and offer some suggestions for fostering further research in the field of minority performing arts and cultural identity. Before we begin, however, we must examine the meaning of “minority,” which is a complex and ambiguous term, one that is no less difficult to define than the terms “authenticity” and “identity” appearing in the title of the symposium. “Minority” is an inherently relational concept, involving center-periphery, major-minor, and dominant-subordinate relationships – a concept that invites comparisons and implies differences, discrimination, and oppression. To put it simply, to have a minority one must have a majority. Here, minority and majority do not denote sheer numerical distinction, nor are such groupings static. A Chinese group in Penang, for instance, comprising 70% of the total population, is a “minority” in Malaysia where Malays are given preference. The expression of Chinese cultural identity through the performing arts was once banned or controlled by the dominant governments of Malaysia and Indonesia. In spite of this fact, or perhaps because of it, the Chinese have maintained, revived, and recreated their performing arts, which serve as a powerful means of asserting cultural identity.

For the purpose of this discussion, I will follow the definition offered by the Study Group within the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) on music and minorities. After much discussion, the Council settled on a definition of “minority” as “a group of people distinguished from the dominant group out of cultural, ethnic, social, religious and economic reasons” (Pettan 2001: 15-16).

While acknowledging that the blurring of cultural boundaries is a worldwide phenomenon, we also need to look at the geopolitical, historical, and social conditions peculiar to Southeast Asia to provide an appropriate context for discussion

of minority performance in this vast region. Even though the issues concerning multicultural and pluralistic communities in Southeast Asia are not new, the way in which they are perceived and talked about have greatly changed.

First, the geography of the region has political and social consequences. Each of the Southeast Asian countries comprises many ethnic groups of different sizes<sup>1</sup> and types, in different proportion and relation to dominant groups. Many so-called ethnic minorities live in the hills and mountains and are considered “others” by the groups inhabiting the valley regions. This situation is quite prevalent in Southeast Asia, where every country but Singapore has a hill/mountain-valley distinction, representing not only a geographical but also a class-based division. Thus, the geographical division contributes to the economic, social, and cultural distinctions between the dominant valley and/or urban dwellers and the subordinate groups inhabiting the hills and mountains.<sup>2</sup>

Second, all countries but Thailand were colonized by European powers during the past two or three centuries. The presence and domination of obvious outsiders in the region, although varying in degree depending on areas and times, impacted the dominant-subordinate relationships not only between the colonizers and the colonized but also among the indigenous peoples themselves, depending on their relations to the colonizers. Chinese and Indians who migrated to Southeast Asia during colonial times as mining and plantation workers formed long-lasting minority groups, in addition to the earlier migrants and traders who had settled in the various regions of Southeast Asia long before the colonialists’ arrival. This factor is crucial in discussing Chinese minorities in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Third, since independence after World War II, the Southeast Asian countries have struggled to build strong nation-states and thriving economies. Such efforts have increased the stratification of the various groups within each country. Moreover, the Indo-China war was another tragedy that caused a great number of people to migrate outside the region, creating many minorities in diaspora.

The papers included in this panel represent some of the most current research concerning minority study, ethnic conflict, and the negotiation of cultural identity and national culture policies.

Takasi Sameda’s paper concerns ethnic minorities who live in Borneo. His detailed field studies show how each group manipulates its ethnic and cultural identity by negotiating between the preservation of individual group identity and the unification as a larger group, even at the cost of its own cultural identity, to gain government recognition in both economic and political areas. His involvement as ethnomusicologist and friend in the process of choosing individual or corporate identity through the performing arts seems to have an impact on the groups’ decisions. In fact, he advocates the creation of a new style of performance using a common language that is intelligible to other ethnic groups; for instance, performing

an improvisatory song originally sung in a particular ethnic language in this common language. Simeda's suggestion poses several questions. How do the ethnic groups and their audiences perceive the change of language in this singing tradition? How does the change problematize issues of authenticity and of tradition? And how does this kind of intervention affect the transmission of a tradition? These questions offer additional avenues of research.

Tan Sooi Beng's case study of the lion dance by Chinese people in Penang, Malaysia, and Medan, Indonesia, illustrates the long history of discrimination directed at the Chinese in both countries. Even though the present generation is more conscious of the contemporary conflict over government policy towards minority groups, the Chinese immigrants' experiences as plantation coolies or tin miners since the nineteenth century are embedded in the Chinese groups' insistence on maintaining their own cultural identity.

Adelaida Reyes' paper does not address Southeast Asian issues in particular, but considers the general problem of studying "minority" music in the field of ethnomusicology. She analyzes why and how the music of minorities was virtually ignored in ethnomusicological studies until quite recently when societies have become increasingly pluralistic and when the interaction among groups of diverse cultures has been accelerating. Reyes advocates for the methodology of looking at more than one culture, including both the minority and the dominant, useful in dealing with performing arts by minorities. She suggests that migrants offer an instructive example, since they are inevitably involved in more than one culture before finally setting in a country.

These three excellent papers present some of the main points concerning so-called minorities in Southeast Asia. The way in which cultural identity is expressed in each case and the intention and influences governing the performance of cultural identity – whether they are political, economic, social, cultural factor, or a mixture of them – varies greatly.

Nonetheless, many areas of investigation remain unexamined: the performance of minority culture in relation to tourism and the media, to name just a few. How are minority musical forms and musicians employed in the ever-growing tourism industry, and what impact does it have in terms of indigenous cultural identity? Another related area is that of a people's beliefs and values: Is the local and traditional notion of power – which used to incorporate experiences of the supernatural and to be associated with certain persons and objects – completely unrelated to the contemporary idea and practice of power?

Yet another area of investigation concerns pedagogy, in particular, the representation of minority groups in school teaching materials. What picture of minority performing arts in Southeast Asia is depicted in textbooks within or outside the country? Are the representations balanced or prejudiced? Is there any implication

of orientalism, say, of exoticizing the “native”? How can teaching materials be more inclusive in content and interpretation of minority performing arts?<sup>3</sup>

How should the conflict between the desired expression of identity and other types of identity be negotiated? Similarly, how does one negotiate a perceived preference for acculturated or westernized versions of the performing arts to the “authentic” or traditional version? And what is the role of scholars and ethnomusicologists, if any, in the process of constructing cultural identity through performance? Should they/we cooperate with and/or contribute to the process? What about involvement in transmitting a minority tradition? (Shelemay 1997: 189-204)

These questions are endless. So, it is worth mentioning the suggestions offered by Ursula Hemetek (the chairperson of the ICTM’s Study Group on Music and Minorities), concerning methodology and theory in music and minority research (Hemetek 2002: 15). They are:

- 1) Interdisciplinarity—through the exploration of new disciplines, such as political science and economics, the topic could expand the interdisciplinary scope of our field.
- 2) The relationship between minority, majority, and shadow majority—a comparative approach seems to be more important where different categorizations of minority groups should be considered.
- 3) Music from an emic and etic perspective—as there are so many different factors in the study and interpretation of the music of minorities, the researcher has to be very careful to consider both the perspective of the object of study and that of the ethnomusicologist.
- 4) Applied ethnomusicology—the applied dimension of ethnomusicology seems to be most important in connection with music and minorities. There are many directions this approach can take, especially in the educational, communal and political spheres.

Any representation of a society’s culture that focuses solely on what is considered mainstream or major or famous is discouraging. Thus, it is crucial to avoid a biased picture of the performing arts in Southeast Asia; by biased, I mean one that does not give due emphasis to the arts practiced by minority groups. Unfortunately, this is the general practice, as can be seen in textbooks offering introductions to the culture of a particular region. For example, the *gamelan* of Central Java, which is a regional court tradition, has often been depicted as the music of Indonesia in its entirety or even of Southeast Asia.

Finally, I would like to propose that a collaborative study group be formed among scholars of SEA and Japan, focusing specifically on minority performing arts in relation to cultural identity. One concrete task would be to create educational materials that present a balanced picture and explanation of minority performing arts and cultural identity. Scholars need to provide inclusive materials to fill in the gaps

created by excessive focus on mainstream arts centering around dominant cultures. But scholars must also take care not to exaggerate differences or exoticize the peoples under study. Instead, they must offer balanced perspectives on minority performing arts and provide more accurate background information about the political and social context of the different groups. The cultural diversity and complexity of contemporary Southeast Asian societies require us to assess the interactive aspect of various cultures, and to send balanced messages about the richness of such cultures to the general public and to students, in particular.

## Notes

- 1 Indonesia, 250-300; Myanmar, Philippines, and Vietnam, over 50; just to name a few.
- 2 I must mention that the hill-valley distinction does not always apply to minority-majority or dominant groups, particularly when it concerns spiritual power. It has been believed that hill people are the reservoir of spiritual power against the valley residents. Also, the hill people could provide their knowledge when a lowland army move across the hills and mountains (Osborne 2000).
- 3 Amy Catlin's video production, *Hmong Musicians in America*, is an example to be appreciated and examined from this point of view. Kay K. Shelemay's textbook, *Soundscapes*, which includes a chapter called "Music and Migration" is also useful.

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