

# **Who Cares about Malay Music—and Why? Migrant Musicality, Christian Composition, Backlash, and Boundaries in an Indonesian Province Made for Malays**

*Nicholas J. Long*

## **Abstract**

The Riau Islands have a diverse Malay musical heritage, but also a population of extreme demographic diversity. This raises questions about the ways in which non-Malays might engage with creating and performing ‘Malay music’, and how such endeavours are received more widely. This paper explores how such issues affected the Trio Komodo, a Florinese music group resident in the Riau Islands. It examines how and why ‘Malay music’ has become a genre in which Riau Islanders of various backgrounds and ideological persuasions can be become passionately invested, and thereby outlines the political considerations that surround all performances of ‘Malay music’ in the province today.

## **Keywords**

Florinese, Indonesia, Malay identity, migrants, music, Riau Islands

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We Malays are generally simple individuals who acquire life's wisdom from Koranic studies teachers and elders at the mosque after Maghrib prayer. That wisdom is taken from accounts of the prophets, the tale of Hang Tuah, and gurindam rhymes. Ours is an old race. There are some experts who say that Belitong Malays are not Malay.

We don't put much stock in that opinion for two reasons: Belitong people themselves don't understand such matters; and because we aren't eager to be primordial. To us, people all along the coast – from Belitong up to Malaysia – are Malays, based on a mutual obsession with peninsular rhythms, the beating of tambourines, and rhyming (Hirata, 2009: 75).

Thus speaks Ikal, the schoolboy narrator of Andrea Hirata's fictionalized autobiography *Laskar Pelangi* (*The Rainbow Troops*). Indonesia's best-selling novel, and the inspiration for its highest-grossing film of all time, the book explores how a group of impoverished schoolkids (nine Malay, one Chinese) on the island of Belitong battle the forces of state and capital in their pursuit of an education. Along the way, it paints a captivating picture of the ebbs and flows of Malay life, from the crocodile shamans and spirit beliefs that animate the children's nightmares to, as reflected in the excerpt above, the musicality and the ambiguities of Malayness.

*From Belitong up to Malaysia...* Take a map and trace this with your finger. Before long you will be hovering over the Riau Islands, a place where the Malay culture is said to be *kental* – thick like treacle or strong black coffee, where neighbourhood wives gather together to sit in the afternoon breeze and craft interwoven rhythms with tambours and bells, and where police chiefs are cajoled into celebrating their force's anniversary, Hari Bhayangkara, by dressing in traditional *songket* waistcloths and performing *zapin* dances in sufficient numbers to break a national record.<sup>1</sup> Music animates many aspects of Riau Islands life. It offers entertainment, but also an affirmation that one is entering a place that is thoroughly Malay.

But unlike in rural Belitong, the phrase ‘we Malays’ does not come easily to the lips of Riau Islanders as their first-person plural. Their province is incredibly demographically diverse, its proximity to Singapore and Malaysia attracting waves of domestic migrants ever since the 1950s. Some hoped to cross the border but ended up stuck. Others were drawn by the availability of dollars and ringgit, rich pickings as the rupiah was devastated by the Asian Economic Crisis. In the urban centres of Tanjung Pinang and Batam, Malays make up only 30.7 per cent and 14.4 per cent of the population respectively (Minnesota Population Center, 2011). In the rural hinterlands, the numbers are larger, but even here there are dense pockets of migrants from across Indonesia, and the world: Javanese transmigrants on Lingga; the descendants of Chinese tin miners on Singkep, Butonese migrants on Pulau Tenggol; Vietnamese refugees who fled their camp on Galang and assimilated into villages throughout the surrounding area.

Hirata’s narrative presents us with a world where people are ‘mutually obsessed’ with musicality because – well, because they are Malay. It’s a part of them. But what is Malay music for these other people of whom I have been writing; arrivals from places with rich musical traditions of their own? What might be the motivations, energies and affects that compel them to create and perform ‘Malay music’? What is at stake in becoming a ‘Malay musician’ when one is quite evidently not from ‘along the coast’? When the parameters of Malay identity are as hotly contested as they are in the Riau Islands, these are crucial questions to explore. In this chapter I focus on the experience of one particular migrant music group as they attempted to make a contribution to the field of Malay music, using them as a lens through which to examine the broader ways in which Kepri’s musical arts have become politicised. With political considerations ever present in the funding decisions, support networks, and critical commentaries surrounding the region’s cultural life, my analysis has implications for how we should analyse contemporary performances of all the musical arts discussed in this volume.

### **Dark Sultans**

The camera looks out over the water as a speedboat tears across the screen, and the image quickly fades to a shot of a mountain, its peak hidden amongst the clouds. A keyboard plays a series of cheery, fairground-like chords and, after a brief shot of Tanjung Pinang’s ill-fated Raja Fisabillilah statue,<sup>2</sup> a synthesised violin picks up the

melody. The film cuts to a close-up of a violinist, before fading out, after a few bars, to a shot at the bottom of Penyengat's mosque. At the bottom of its stairs stand three middle-aged men, dressed in opulent 'palace clothes' (*baju istana*) rented from a premium Tanjung Pinang clothing salon. Emulating the robes once worn by the aristocratic viceroys and sultans of the Riau-Lingga polity, their costumes combine navy, green and orange velvet with an extensive gold trim. The 'violin' solo dies down, and a keyboard riff cues the singer standing in the centre to unleash a plaintive vocal:

*Gunung Bintan lekuk di tengah,  
Bintan Buyu penuh sejarah.  
Jangan berenung, jangan berlengah,  
Budaya Melayu penuh sejarah.*

Mount Bintan has a dent in the middle,  
Bintan Buyu is full of history.  
Don't daydream, don't dawdle,  
Malay culture is full of history.

Thus opens 'Gunung Bintan',<sup>3</sup> a soaring ode to Malay culture and the title track on the debut album by a Riau Islands music group. At first it feels like any other VCD of Malay music; the calypso-like lilt of the melody the only thing to, perhaps, differentiate it from the scores of similar videos that one can find in shops or online. But on a second viewing, one starts to realise things may not be quite as they seem. The singers do not look like typical Malays. They are dark and heavy-set, their faces square rather than heart-shaped. The incongruity of the calypso rhythms begins to gnaw. And then there's the name of the band: Trio Komodo. If you haven't realised yet, it's enough to make you sit up with a jolt.

'Have you heard of the komodo?' Mattius, the group's founder and producer had asked me when we first met in 2006.<sup>4</sup> 'It's a type of reptile only found in Flores, in East Nusa Tenggara. It's huge, possibly the biggest reptile in the world, and Flores is well-known for it. When people hear that we are Komodo, they'll know straight away that we are from Flores.' All of the vocalists came from Flores, as did Mattius – though some of the instrumentalists were Malay and Javanese – and together they

were crafting an eclectic mix of songs. The *Gunung Bintan* album ranges from love songs, ballads describing the experience of homesickness, songs in Florinese languages that describe the pain of migrants turning upon each other as they compete to eke out a living in their host communities, and Kepri Manise (Sweet Kepri), a joyful, sunny number that enumerates the strategic potential of each of the Riau Islands' regencies with an uplifting chorus of 'Oh... o-oh, Sweet Kepri!'

Released in the final months of 2006, the album was a hit, and the group have since started working on a second album that they described to journalists contributing to 'the development of Malay culture' by instigating a 'collaboration' between Malay and Florinese musical forms (Tanjungpinang Pos, 2012). Their sophomore effort promises to combine the distinctive sounds of eastern Indonesian music (which they describe as a form of 'reggae') with the *gambus*, a lute-like instrument that they specifically chose to appeal to Muslim listeners, and lyrics in Bahasa Melayu (not, note, Bahasa Indonesia) that will be 'easy listening and easily understood'. However, while the new album may involve some innovations in form, the vision of radical cultural fusion that underpins it has animated the Trio Komodo's work from the beginning. One need look no further than 'Kepri Manise', a song explicitly modelled by its authors on the Eastern Indonesian favourite 'Ambon Manise': it combines eastern Indonesian rhythms with lyrics adapted to fit the Riau Islands and, like 'Gunung Bintan', has a video set primarily on Penyengat Island in which the vocalists are dressed as Malay Sultans. Though drawing heavily on non-Malay musical traditions—including, significantly, the 'vocal trio' format itself—all of the Trio Komodo's records have been conceived as celebrations of and contributions to Malay culture.<sup>5</sup>

And yet in the popular imagination of the Riau Islands' citizens, there are few groups more abjectly non-Malay than the Florinese. Present in the province since the first waves of migrants arrived in the mid-1950s, initially settling in the eastern reaches of Bintan, the Florinese community is demographically small (the 2010 census recorded 1,463 in Tanjung Pinang, though Mattius estimated the number as closer to 15,000). However, their presence is felt disproportionately due to their capacity to inspire racial fear. When talking of the Florinese, Riau Islanders of Sumatran or Javanese heritage often suck their teeth sharply, as if they've just eaten something bitter, and whisper how 'dark' (*hitam*) they are; how 'horrible' (*ngeri*). Such reactions only encourage local bosses to recruit newly arrived Florinese

migrants as thugs and mercenaries, sent to intimidate enemies or extract overdue debts – a practice which then cements their ghoulish reputations and pits Florinese against Florinese when their bosses’ interests clash. They are said to be coarse, brutal, unrefined – anathema to the elegance and restraint of ideal-type Malayness. Most are Catholic, whereas it is widely considered that ‘Malayness is identical with Islam’; as in Hirata’s epigram above, it is taken for granted that mosques and mahgrib will form the backdrop of Malay lives. For Florinese people to be contributing to – indeed, developing – Malay culture strains at the limits of Malayness.

So what led the Trio Komodo, their producers, and their songwriters to direct their creative energies in this way, and what is at stake in claiming that the eventual product is indeed a ‘Malay’ musical form: a contention that is far from uncontroversial? My goal here is not just to provide a bounded ‘case study’ of the Trio Komodo, but rather to use their music to tease out some of the broader anthropological and political issues that surround cultural performance in the Riau Islands. For the Trio Komodo most certainly care about Malay music – so much so that they want to contribute to and ‘develop’ it, whilst others, who would disparage their work (or at least suggest it was not ‘Malay’), also cite their love for ‘Malay arts and culture’ as a grounds for their opposition. Such a situation places two demands upon us: to understand what exactly is at stake in the dispute but also, and more challengingly, to account for why the participants should care so much about Malay music and the policing of its boundaries.

### **Political Malayness**

It was only a few months into my fieldwork that I realised that Mattius worshipped at the same Catholic church as my Chinese friend Veronica.<sup>6</sup> It turned out that she knew him quite well, but wondered what I – an anthropologist of the Riau Islands – would find of interest in the activities of a middle-aged Florinese factory driver. Perhaps she had caught me in a particularly volatile mood, but I found myself leaping to his defence. ‘Culture’ should not be the preserve of elites, or aristocrats, I explained. Everyone had a story to tell, and the anthropologist’s job was to collect them all. Besides, Mattius was involved in all sorts of fascinating things: he was creating new and seemingly ‘hybridised’ forms of Malay culture. If that weren’t interesting enough, he was hoping to use the profits to provide educational resources to impoverished

local children. Working with him offered a window not just into music and the performing arts but philanthropy and the world of local NGOs.

Veronica initially appeared sympathetic to these arguments, but as I continued her smile got ever tighter. I hoped I had not been too forthright in my disagreement. She hesitated, as if she were deliberating whether to betray a confidence and then spoke in a hushed voice, even though there was no chance of anyone overhearing; we were in her kitchen. There was something, she said, that she thought I ought to know. ‘Mattius...’ One more hesitation, and then she took the plunge. ‘Mattius wants to be a mayor. He said in the last newspaper interview he did that many of his friends have told him they think he should be mayor, and he would quite like to be’. She gave me a knowing look. I had seen it many times before. All his activities, she was implying, including the songs and the school to which they were a means were in fact just stepping stones on the pathway of a self-serving political ambition. I would be a fool to engage with them at face value.

Had Veronica got it right about Mattius? She’d known him much longer than I had, and yet I found it hard to believe that everything I had seen him do was reducible to political strategising. The *Trio Komodo* was a substantial venture. Mattius’s wife had contributed lyrics. So had the singers. Musicians had been sourced from around the island of Bintan. And they all seemed genuinely excited about the project, about creating something unique – not just about the pay Mattius was able to offer them or the prospect of self-advancement. But let’s dwell for a moment in Veronica’s world, a world in which one can readily assume that displaying a sensibility and care for ‘Malay culture’ is a means of pursuing political ambition. This perception has not come out of nowhere; it reflects the very prominent role that Malay culture has in Kepri’s provincial politics. Scrutinising it more closely helps us better understand the stakes of musical performance in the Riau Islands, but also throws into sharp relief those features of the Trio Komodo’s work that cannot be readily accounted for by dominant anthropological models of how music and the performing arts have been politicised in contemporary Indonesia.

Ever since the publication of influential essays by anthropologists such as Greg Acciaioli (1985) and Patrick Guinness (1994), Indonesian discourses of ‘regional culture’ have been interpreted as symptoms of what James Scott (1998) terms ‘state simplification’. Faced with an archipelagic state of tremendous cultural diversity, the argument goes, the New Order sought to systematise and simplify that

difference by delineating distinct ‘regional cultures’, the boundaries of which were roughly coterminous with those of Indonesia’s provinces. Particular styles of dress, cuisine, architecture and even weaponry were identified as distinctly ‘regional’, their specificities enumerated in a range of compendia – from children’s picture books to the much-maligned *Taman Mini* (see Pemberton, 1994). Anthropologists critiqued this strategy for its erasure of local diversity, its banalisation of often sophisticated and mystical ritual forms, and for encouraging a disposition of conformity to official styles within musical and artistic practice, exemplified in the low regard given to creativity and innovation in the popular ‘cultural contests’ that were inaugurated under the New Order and which continue to this day (e.g. Bakan, 1999; Sutton, 1991).

Yet in 1980s and 1990s Riau, as citizens became increasingly outraged at Jakarta’s interference in local affairs, ‘Malay culture’ became a site of protest, even as its contours were shaped by New Order discourse. As Derks (1995, 1997) has argued with particular reference to poetry, cultural creations during the final years of the Suharto regime served as ‘hidden transcripts’ that articulated Riau Malay separateness from national, Indonesian, concerns. When Suharto finally stepped down, inhabitants of the Riau Archipelago similarly used the language and image of ‘heartlandic Malayness’, free of the Minangkabau cultural influences that inflected Malayness in Mainland Riau (see Barnard, 2003), as a means of claiming their separateness from Pekanbaru, the provincial capital on the Sumatran mainland from which Kepri had been ‘colonially’ administered since 1958. Huzrin Hood, then Bupati of the Riau Islands, staged a demonstration in Jakarta demanding the creation of a new province ‘in the name of the Malay people’ (Thung and Leolita Masnun, 2002: 20), although my more cynical informants were convinced Hood was using this as a pretext behind which lay his own thirst for power. President Megawati, who approved the request, was probably also motivated less by her sympathies for ethnonationalism than by political considerations: creating an administrative split between Mainland and Archipelagic Riau would deal a fatal blow to the troublesome ‘Free Riau’ movement that was suggesting the region break away from Indonesia and become its own federal republic (Kimura, 2010: 439-40). Yet with this rationale unable to be articulated openly, the language of Malay identity and Malay culture once again provided a convenient basis on which to justify the decision.

Commitment to Malayness, especially the distinctive Malayness of the Riau Islands, has thus become part of the charter myth of the province’s inception, and



thereby something to which any aspiring politician must be seen to do homage. Public commitment to the preservation of Malay culture and, better still, an apparent personal commitment to its beauty, its practice, and the values that it can communicate in the face of a rapacious globalisation are stylings of a Riau Islands politician that would be conspicuous by their absence. This argument holds particularly true for the town of Tanjung Pinang, whose longstanding mayor, Suryatati A Manan (in power from 1996 to 2013) placed considerable emphasis on developing Malay culture within the population as both a civilising project through which the islands' children might come to learn good values and as a strategy for boosting the economic revenue of the province (Tribun Batam, 2007).

This interest in the economic potential of Malay culture, widespread in Kepri, where the Malay arts and the prestigious and expensive 'festivals of Malay culture' in which they are performed are both considered potent tourist attractions, epitomises what John Urry (2003) has called the process of 'glocalisation', a phenomenon in which the desire to attract a global audience and, more specifically, global investment leads to the deliberate cultivation of locality. Indeed, we might well understand this as being the reason for the widespread proliferation of Malay song contests, Malay dance contests, and other occasions that encourage standardised performance of the 'traditional' arts, imbuing participation with the excitement and thrill of acquiring a CV peppered with achievement, and thereby boosting one's employability and future life chances (Long, 2007: 96-98). While that in itself is enough for citizens (Malay and non-Malay alike) to care about Malay music, there are also plenty in the Riau Islands who fell in love with the art forms having initially encountered them through state-sponsored competitions. The politicisation of culture may not therefore account in its entirety for who cares about Malay music and why, but it does play an integral role in making Malay music an object of interest, reflection, and subjective investment.

These are likely to have been some of the concerns that were running through Veronica's mind as she linked Mattius' interest in Malay music to his political ambitions. Trio Komodo, for her, was a source of political capital that would show he was serious about the Riau Islands' political mandate and indeed active in recognising and developing the notion of Malay culture as a resource for both entertainment and business. *Gunung Bintan* was, after all, a commodity.

But while this reading of the situation may be partly true, it fails to do full justice to the complexities that surround the Trio Komodo case. If Mattius and his band were simply looking to tap into an extant register of Malay culture for political purposes – or indeed had fallen in love with Malay cultural forms through their exposure to them in state-sponsored programs – it is not clear why the music that they chose to produce should be so self-consciously ‘hybridised’, a fusion of Malay and Eastern Indonesian musical and lyrical tropes that were bound to be controversial as instances of ‘Malay culture’. Why not simply perform the standardised versions of music and dance that are in wide circulation? My answer is that we might better read the Trio Komodo not as pandering to the dominant trope of Malayness, but rather as a manoeuvre in an ongoing struggle to define workable notions of locality and culture; a point that becomes clear as soon as we supplement musicological critiques of standardisation and convention with a focus on the motivations and experiences of the musicians themselves.

### **Instruments of struggle**

In his study of Mocca, an indie pop band from West Java, Brent Luvaas (2009: 246) draws attention to the distinctly transnational character of their songs: listening to ‘their sugary, English-language songs, which combine elements of crooner jazz, swing, and folk with lo-fi indie rock,’ he writes, ‘there is little to identify them as Indonesian at all.... [They] could have been written nearly anywhere by nearly anyone’. Rejecting analyses that would see this as an instance of cultural imperialism on the part of ‘Western’ indie styles, Luvaas (2009: 248) explains that the musicians are reacting against the ‘trap’ of locality, which they feel acts as a barrier between Indonesia and the rest of the world. Rather than deliberately seeking to ‘localise’ transnational musical tropes in order to produce something that is uniquely their own, they instead deliberately draw on these transnational tropes in order to contest the idea that they need to be bound by locality, and to assert their own ‘chosen, empowering positionality grounded in a dialectical relationship with the global’ (Luvaas, 2009: 249). This analysis opens up some helpful ways of thinking about the cultural labour that is being effected in the Trio Komodo’s translocal engagement with ‘Malay culture’, even as the case exhibits important differences from Luvaas’s Mocca. In particular, the Trio Komodo’s work should be seen as an attempt to mediate the ambivalence they feel about being pigeon-holed as Florinese *and* as being subsumed

by the musical tropes of Malay performance traditions, a point that emerges most clearly when one steps back and appreciates the variety of styles that characterises their oeuvre.

When we met to celebrate Christmas in 2006, Mattius took great pleasure in furnishing me with a festive gift – my very own copy of *Gunung Bintan*. At the time, he described it as ‘a record that showcases the province of Kepri and its Malay heritage, but with Florinese performances’. But after giving a brief synopsis of the various songs, and explaining how excited he had been that the lyrics for ‘Gunung Bintan’ (which he had commissioned from a Malay colleague at his workplace) were in traditional Malay verse forms, the conversation quickly moved on to the difficulties that he was having in attracting support for his bigger aim: a school for the poor.

‘There is a lot of hostility towards me and my colleagues because we are Catholic,’ Mattius explained. ‘Anything a Christian does, they [the Muslim majority] suspect it is an attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity, especially if the program is free or very cheap, or helping people in need. Always!’ He went on to bemoan the levels of opposition that had faced Bobby Jayanto, a Catholic Chinese, after his election to a seat in the municipal House of Representatives – a reflection, as he saw it, less of anti-Chinese sentiment than of the increasing Islamisation of Indonesian political and public life since the early 1990s (see e.g. Hasan 2009). Even living in an Islamic state might be better than the present state of affairs, he conjectured, provided that non-Muslims such as himself were treated more equally once Islam had become constitutional.

‘The Muslims in this province are too fanatical,’ he complained, ‘to the point where they don’t want any help from Catholics or Christians. Sometimes they don’t even want to know us. And the worst of all are the Malays. They like to say that “this is Malay land” and “Malayness is identical with Islam, so this is also Islamic land.” But how can a land have an identity in that kind of way, ha?’ He went on to explain what he thought was motivating such claims: a sense of selfishness and ‘*egoisme*’ in which Malays wanted to be the very best, and could not stand the fact that they were losing out to members of other religions. Jealousy and petty self-interest, in his view, was driving the Malay mindset: a trope that is in wide circulation in the Riau islands and subscribed to by a large number of Malays themselves (Long, 2013: 98-126). I had this kind of conversation with Mattius quite frequently. His affection for ‘Malay culture’ was evidently rather more selective than it might initially appear.

Of most interest for the present discussion is the extent to which Mattias was contesting the very geoethnic logic that pervades contemporary Malay culture discourse: the idea that land can be imbued with a cultural (and indeed religious) identity). This means that we need to move beyond any simplistic understanding of the Trio Komodo as kowtowing or subscribing to Malay culture's elevated status in the province and instead think about how Mattias and his colleagues might be engaging with the notion of Malay culture in more complex and subversive ways.

Christians in the Riau Islands, regardless of denomination, often expressed similar sentiments. No only did they feel discriminated against by Muslims and Malays, their well-intentioned gestures at contributing to social and economic development misperceived as missionisation attempts, they frequently described the way in which they were obliged to interact with 'Malay culture' as a form of oppression. Joining a Protestant church group on a trip to Kawal, for example, I barely paid any attention when the daughter of a pastor we were visiting returned home dressed in lilac *baju kurung*. These clothes, a traditional Malay outfit that hangs loosely over the contours of the body, are compulsory dress for both pupils and staff on certain weekdays, and generally accepted as something that one simply has to wear as part of the process of attending an Indonesian school, whether one likes it or not. So I was surprised to hear several participants on the trip tell me how awful they thought it was that the daughter of a pastor should be 'forced to wear clothes like that' – traditional 'Malay' outfits that carried a hint of Islam, as if more than just the girl's modesty was being covered by their folds.

While not all Christians felt so hostile towards the government's imposition of Malay cultural forms, such feelings were sufficiently widespread for the decision to clothe three Florinese singers in the outfits of a sultan to be imbued with considerable symbolic charge. But just as Mocca were not simple victims of cultural hegemony in their attempt to recast themselves as 'global citizens', instead deliberately positioning themselves in a direct relation with the global order, so we must be cautious of any reading of the Trio Komodo that sees them as succumbing to the dictates of Malay hegemony – even if for their own self-interested purposes. It does not fit with the ambivalence they expressed in interview, and it does not fit with the experimental character of their music. Rather, their embrace of Malay performance styles in a work of their own creation can be seen as a bold statement that they are not only able and entitled to perform Malay music, but also to create it and contribute to its

development, despite their Christian heritage and Nusa Tenggara ancestry. The creation of a song like 'Gunung Bintan', an explicit if idiosyncratic contribution to the Malay musical repertoire, is just as much an expression of a 'chosen, empowering positionality' as the jazz riffs and swing grooves of the band Luvaas (2009: 249) describes. Indeed, the chosen-ness of that positionality is underscored even further by this song's juxtaposition on the album with a track ('Si Limau Manis') that draws far more on Florinese musical motifs and dresses the singers in red 'cabaret' jackets. Such an interruption highlights that the earlier conformity to Malay styles of performance was not simply obeying the prerogatives of cultural imperialism, but an active and temporary choice which has subsequently been suspended. The very structure of the record, as much as my conversations with Mattius and his collaborators, reveals that what motivates the production is neither self-interest nor co-optation into a particular form of cultural imperialism, but their feelings of incomplete acceptance as Florinese migrants in Kepri, and a desire to show that Malay culture is something that everyone can participate in and contribute to, without one's existence in the islands being reducible to it.

Mattius's alleged mayoral ambitions should also be seen in this light. Rather than assuming, as Veronica did, and as a previous generation of transactionalist anthropologists might have done, that naked self-interest was the prime motivator of cultural behaviour, we might instead reconfigure his declarations of self-interest as the very cultural behaviour that requires deeper explanation. Mattius knew very well that as a factory driver he stood little chance of ever being elected, or even of being a good mayor. This did not matter: what was important was that in entertaining and sharing the pipedream of becoming mayor he asserted his own right as a Catholic migrant but Indonesian citizen to be able to imagine having sovereignty over Kepri, and to make a Florinese candidacy thinkable. Pipedreams and talk of becoming mayor became a form of indulgent 'spreading-out activity' (Berlant, 2011: 98), a defiant fantasy through which to weather the ravages of racial and religious disregard.

### **Competing Visions**

Mattius's approach to Malay cultural production is far from uncontroversial, reflecting deep divides over the correct way in which Malayness should operate as a cultural principle. For some thinkers, such as the Pekanbaru-based Malay 'cultural leader' (*budayawan*) Tenas Effendy and his archipelagic supporters, Malayness

should reflect the character it had in the precolonial period: where it was not associated with a deep and immutable sense of ‘self’ but rather was a repertoire of surfaces and styles that could be adopted and discarded as one moved around the Southeast Asian maritime world and switched allegiance between different sultans (see e.g. Vickers, 1997). Moreover, according to Effendy, Malay culture was itself appropriative of the styles and behaviours of those who entered into the Malay world, adopting a principle of ‘sift and filter’ in which it sifted out and retained the best bits of incoming cultures whilst discarding the bad (Kompas, 2010). From this perspective, the Trio Komodo, switching styles and registers between different songs, not only add to the content of Malay culture through their creations, but rearticulate its true, inclusive and flexible character. Yet this model of Malayness, which I have elsewhere labelled an ‘integrationist’ vision (Long, 2013: 55), is met by staunch opposition from others who subscribe to a ‘multicultural’ model (Long, 2013: 59), which seeks to draw and defend tight boundaries around both what counts as Malay culture and, in the most extreme version, who has a right to perform it.

This multicultural model can be impelled by two forms of reasoning. The first follows from the static and strictly bounded ‘regional cultures’ model advanced by the New Order, and involves a concern that cultural forms such as the Trio Komodo are inauthentic and/or do not deserve an elevated place in Kepri’s public culture. Examples of such a stance can be seen quite widely, from protests by Malay groups against provincial research centres staging seminars on the culture of non-Muslim *orang laut* (Long, 2013: 57-58), through to local budayawans’ disparagement of work by the local choreographer Peppy Chandra, whose creations have been dubbed ‘inauthentic’ because they do not reflect long-standing dance traditions but rather her own imaginative responses to Malay history and culture.

The second form of reasoning couples a similarly rigid sense of boundary with a desire to deny full access to Malay culture to non-Malays. Proponents of this view are typically influenced by a Malaysian-style model of Malayness, and feel that Malays should be entitled to special rights and privileges in the province, over and above those of migrants. For such parties, the idea that someone like Mattius might be actively contributing to Malay culture is both objectionable and in fact illogical, since his ethnicity (and religion) makes it impossible that he could be doing anything other than creating a new form of ‘Florinese culture’. Even non-Malay performance of Malay culture can be a source of ambivalence, as seen in the 2006 *bujang dara*

competition, where the Lembaga Adat Melayu disputed the decision to select a Chinese schoolgirl as the victor (Long, 2007). For them, even though this entrant had mastered Malay dance to a greater extent than the other participants, she was not a worthy winner, because Kepri was a Malay province and she was not – and could not readily ‘pass’ as – Malay. The position sounds chauvinistic, but it reflects vulnerability as well. Malays often fear that they are at risk of losing ground to the steady encroachment of migrants, even in the spheres of their own cultural production. Many of them have probably overheard conversations like the ones that I had with Mattius many times, where he would curse and demean the habits of his Malay neighbours, branding them lazy, half-hearted in everything they do, explaining how their cultural values make them unable to commit to the rigour of a state education, asserting that the Florinese will storm ahead of them. This sort of talk makes Malays worry about their future. Inevitably, some of them batten down the hatches.

The sharp ideological differences that divide integrationists from multiculturalists, and the deeply felt values and vulnerabilities that lock people into these positions thus serve to generate a passionate caring about Malay music that extends beyond a love of the form into the realm of what is signified by the conditions of its performance. Consequently, many instances of musical creativity and performance are, like the Trio Komodo’s albums, underpinned not only by joyful appreciation of Malay musical forms and a desire to participate in provincial culture, but also embattled defiance against those who would have it otherwise and determination that Malay music be performed on one’s own terms. Such determination is no less present in efforts by the Lembaga Adat Melayu and others to ensure that ‘Malay culture’ continues to be done correctly and is not ‘attenuated’ by undue intrusion. These debates matter just as much as – if not more than – the economic and political elaboration of local Malayness for inspiring Riau Islanders’ commitments to particular musical projects.

There is a certain sadness to this situation, but it is not necessarily something that we need to lament. This questioning, these debates: this *is* Malay culture in the Riau Islands today. It is hard to see how there could not be any such contestation as the paradigm of bounded regional cultures gives way to the reality of an increasingly mobile, cosmopolitan and globalising Indonesia. And as the traditional and historical forms described in this book are rediscovered and re-enacted, it is this political charge

they carry that helps keep them at the forefront of people's minds. It renders them taut with significance as they hurtle into the future, like a tambourine upon which rhythms both peninsular and archipelagic will continue to drum.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Watch the attempt at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEFR8vockek> [accessed 3 August 2015].

<sup>2</sup> This was destroyed in a storm and revealed to have been made not of bronze, as claimed, but of fibreglass. Many people now consider the empty plinth a potent symbol of regional corruption.

<sup>3</sup> Full video available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Kg5KK9oWS4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Kg5KK9oWS4)

<sup>4</sup> All personal names are pseudonyms, except those of public figures.

<sup>5</sup> Although there are a few examples of Malay vocal trios (see e.g. Aveling, 2014: 90), they are quite unusual. Trios are far more commonly found in Christian Indonesia, reflecting the influence of church music on local musical traditions. Certainly, vocal trios have been present in Flores since at least the 1940s (see Kunst, 1942: 80, 146), and are currently popular across East Nusa Tenggara. Yet, as migrants to Sumatra, the ways in which the Trio Komodo perform as a trio, and the ways in which their videos are shot and edited, may also have been influenced by exposure to the Toba Batak pop industry, in which the all-male vocal trio has been the primary medium of performance since the 1970s (Hodges, 2006: 289). I thank Julia Byl for drawing these issues to my attention.



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<sup>6</sup> This paper draws on over 30 months of fieldwork in the Riau Islands province, conducted between 2005 and 2016.

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