P. Ramlee’s Music: An Expression of Local Identity in Malaya During The Mid-Twentieth Century

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Abstract
Tan Sri P. Ramlee’s (1929-1973) music dominated the popular music scene in Malaya (prior to 1957 when Malaysia became independent) during the mid-twentieth century. The local communities during his time were captivated by his velvety crooning voice and musical style. P. Ramlee’s music featured strong influences from Western tonality, yet exuded the musical aesthetics of the cultures inherent in Malaya. His music was influenced by the demands and aesthetics of urban entertainment, the rich multi-cultural society and the socio-political atmosphere. Many of P. Ramlee’s songs were influenced by the background of its directors who suited his songs to the themes and storyline of their films. The interplay between these various power structures were important in shaping P. Ramlee’s music. In this article, I argue that although P. Ramlee’s music mainly utilised Western musical instruments, tonality, and harmonies, his music was also localised to the flavour of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Arabic communities through the utilisation of rhythmic patterns and melodic modes associated with these communities. I examine the unique ways in which these culture related rhythms and modes were infused into a Western tonality and temperament. In this article, I argue that P. Ramlee’s music embodies and manifests the local identities that were already eclectic in nature.

Keywords: eclectic music, colonialism, localisation, multi-culturalism, syncreticism,