

Intimacies of Sudirman: A Voice for Malaysian Inclusivity and Diversity

Adil Johan
National University of Malaysia (UKM)

Introduction: Sudirman Arshad, Malaysia's Pop Star Extraordinaire

In 2018, the electoral change of government – for the first time in Malaysia's history – raises questions about how new, inclusive conceptions of Malaysian-ness, as promised by the new ruling coalition, will feature in the development of the state's popular music industry and public recollections of the nation's musical past. In line with this political change and the title theme of the conference, this paper hopes to call for a conceptual 'turn' to understand the affective and culturally intimate expressions of Malaysian popular music. I also believe a turn to cultural intimacy will provide new insights into understanding how Malaysian multiculturalism and sexual identity is emotionally mediated by artistes of popular music.

My focus here is on the much loved, though surprisingly under-researched, Sudirman Haji Arshad. Sudirman, born in 1954 in Temerloh, Pahang, died tragically from pneumonia in 1992. In his relatively short life, Sudirman achieved dizzying heights of success as an artiste, singer, stage performer, songwriter, entrepreneur and national arts icon. By 1989 he had recorded 14 full-length albums, mostly in Malay, with two in English. He also starred in a feature film titled *Kami (Us)*, 1982, dir. Patrick Yeoh). Aside from being a prominent national icon that appealed widely to a multiethnic Malaysian audience, he also demonstrated an authentic, ethnic Malay credibility in his rendition of traditional styles of music. Towards the end of his life, his entrepreneurial endeavours in promoting a brand of soft drinks named after him, *Sudi*, dovetailed with a culturally inclusive approach to entertaining the masses. He would perform elaborate live concerts for his audience, but he also made a point to directly address specific audience members, often serenading young and old women of diverse ethnicities and children of all ages. This was coupled with a multilingual repertoire of songs in Malay, English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tamil and Hindi.

As an icon of national unity, he sang and recorded a range of hit songs appealing across ethnic and class divisions. This public appeal culminated in a free concert he organised in Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur, attended by 100,000 people in 1986. The height of his success is seen in his achievement on the international stage. In 1989 he became the most internationally-acclaimed Malaysian entertainer by winning the title of 'Asia's No. 1 Performer' in the Asian Popular Music Awards held in London.

However, the spectre of his mysterious death, suspiciously confirmed as 'pneumonia', during a period when HIV and AIDS were prevalent globally, piqued the interest of the mass media, hungry for a controversial story. Tied to that was the posthumous association of a speculated death by AIDS to his sexual orientation. Malay language media, journalists and biographers either deny or sidestep both speculations in official statements and publications. But informal and everyday interactions amongst Malaysians do reveal an opposing narrative.

Cultural Intimacy, Popular Culture and Negotiating Queerness

A study of Sudirman, then, as a much-adored, complex and controversial figure in the Malaysian public sphere, requires appropriate conceptual approaches to address difficult questions. What is the source of Sudirman's wide interethnic appeal across a diverse Malaysian public? What were the affective or emotional aspects of his music and performance that contributed to such mass appeal? How were the undertones of his sexual identity negotiated in a largely conservative, predominantly Muslim Malaysian public? How might a researcher negotiate the tricky terrain of sexual identity in a study of a Malaysian-Malay-Muslim popular music icon? How might a conceptual turn towards cultural intimacy assist in unravelling such a sensitive issue within acceptable ethical boundaries?

This study draws extensively from Martin Stokes' important book that examines the music and biographies of prominent Turkish artistes through "a sustained and consequential imagination of public life in affectionate terms" while highlighting "popular music as the vehicle to this imagination" (Stokes 193). Stokes' approach is deployed here to engage with biography as a means to "understand... musicians as complex wholes, however elusive their traces" in the Malaysian public sphere, while taking into consideration "the embarrassment they so often induce – an embarrassment that quickly gets written out of the 'official picture'" (190-191). Thus, Sudirman's 'unofficial' queer identity may be understood through the Malaysian public's sense of embarrassment or even shame over non-heteronormative sexuality.

Of particular "affective resonance" – to borrow from the idea presented in Guilbault's keynote for this conference (Guilbault 176, citing Mazzarella 21) – is the case of Turkish music icon, Zeki Muren, as intricately illustrated by Stokes. The case of Zeki Muren's position as an 'ideal citizen' and nationally-adored icon bears striking resemblances. More so, the public sphere's negotiation of his performative (but never officially outed) androgyny or queerness also mirrors the case of Sudirman in Malaysia. On Muren, Stokes observes the following:

Respect and a high measure of public affection for him prohibited public questions that would seem crass and disrespectful. This was instantly to change at his death, when questions about his queerness became a matter of public preoccupation. (Stokes 65)

Strikingly, the Turkish handling of Muren's sexuality, plays out similarly in the Malaysian (and Singaporean) public's discourse about Sudirman before and after his death. At the end of this paper, I observe Sudirman's seminal performance in Royal Albert Hall that expresses the performative aspect of this non-heteronormative fashioning of the bod, that is accepted by an otherwise conservative Malaysian public.

Print Media, Sensationalism, Headlines

Before turning to Sudirman's performance, I would like to turn to the pages of the Malay language print media. The research presented is currently at a preliminary stage and the print media sources I examine are from Malay and English Singaporean newspapers. Malay Singaporeans were avid consumers of Malaysian popular music and this history of cross-national exchange is intertwined with the two nations' shared history of British colonial rule, convergence and eventual separation in 1965. However, the sources presented are less restricted in their presentation of narratives about Malaysian politics and popular culture. I compare the headlines of Singaporean Malay paper, *Berita Harian*, against an English tabloid called the *New Paper*. The headlines presented here provide a narrative of sensationalism that followed Sudirman's death on 22 February 1992.

Table 1: Headlines from *Berita Harian* (Daily News) Newspaper, Singapore

Headlines from <i>Berita Harian</i>, Singapore	(translated to English)	Date (February 1992)
<i>Sudirman meninggal dunia</i>	Sudirman has passed away	23
<i>Berakhirnya satu perjuangan</i>	The end of a struggle	23
<i>Apa sebenarnya punca kematian Sudir? Persoalan in masih jadi perbualan ramai – "Bukan Aids"</i>	What is the source of Sudir's death? Many still ask this question – "It Wasn't AIDS" (quoted from Sudirman's brother)	24
<i>Tinggalkan nama harum dalam pelbagai bidang</i>	He left a distinguished mark in all fields	24
<i>Kehidupan Sudir penuh warna</i>	Sudir's life was colourful	24
<i>Banglo jadi tempat 'sembunyi'</i>	A Bungalow was his 'hiding' place	24
<i>(Apa Kata Peminat) Rayu dihenti kaitan Sudirman dengan AIDS</i>	(The Fans Speak) Pleading to stop associating Sudirman with AIDS	27

The narrative of Malay newspapers hints lightly at the ‘question’ of AIDS, but this is outweighed by generous praise and accolades (Table 1). The plead from fans (“Pleading to stop associating Sudirman with AIDS”) effectively end the paper’s engagement with the notion. Ultimately, the overarching narrative celebrates Sudirman’s contributions and achievements as a Malay and Malaysian artist.

The New Paper, however, focussed more on the mysterious and scandalous aspects of Sudirman’s life (Table 2). It released an investigative feature piece, much later in the year in the form of a ‘Special Probe’. However, many of the sources cited in this are dubious and unreliable. Note the ‘fortune teller’ that speaks up. However, this tabloid does put the issue to rest by late September. The New Paper may have been on the verge of facing a lawsuit by Sudirman’s family members. Further research is required regarding this.

Table 2: Headlines from The New Paper, Singapore

Headlines from the New Paper, Singapore	Date (1992)
Silence of Sudirman; He only blinked his eyes	24 February
Sudirman did not die of Aids	24 February
Did Sudirman buy M\$1m policy for boy?	29 February
The Sudirman Puzzle – Did Aids kill him? HIS SECRETS (Malaysian singing star’s former managers, staff, close friends and fortune teller speak up in our SPECIAL PROBE)	1 September
Was it Aids?	1 September
Sudirman’s spirit lives on	22 September

Intimacies of Inclusivity

I will now shift our gaze away from the mass media’s sensationalisation of Sudirman’s death and sexual identity toward how he engaged with multi-generational and multi-ethnic audiences in his live performances. During his national campaign to promote his new soft drink brand, Sudirman would perform free public concerts. However, an important aspect of his shows would be his interaction with audience members.

In his public concerts, Sudirman would approach specific audience members and have an extended chat with them, often eliciting much laughter from the crowd. He would then invite them up on stage and serenade them. An elderly Chinese woman named Lim Ah Yoke was invited on stage, and before singing a popular 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 are able to 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. (<https://youtu.be/BMak4TenOvw>, accessed 12 November 2020)

At the same concert, Sudirman invites a young Indian-Muslim woman named Mazkiah and proceeds to serenade her with a Tamil song, “Puthiya Vanaam” from a film that starred the famous actor MG Ramachandran. 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. (<https://youtu.be/DgNNSxpcneM>, accessed 12 November 2020)

Here it is useful to think about these examples as moments in which ‘music might valuably enhance... (human) interactions, and our ability to live with and towards others, to recognize them and to show concern for them’ (Hesmondhalgh 20). Hesmondhalgh further emphasises that ‘music’s seemingly special link to emotions and feelings makes it an especially powerful site for the bringing together of private and public experience (2).

Conclusion: Ethnic Diversity as a Strategy to (Not) Talk About Sexual Diversity

I would like to suggest that Sudirman's emphasis on inclusivity and diversity within a nationally-bounded public sphere allows for a subtextual reading of other forms of diversity that exist in more intimate contexts of interaction. A culturally-intimate understanding of Malaysians' outward embarrassment of queerness reveals that queerness does indeed exist in experiential, everyday life. And, I argue here, in this preliminary exploration of Sudirman that studying his impact over time on the Malaysian public must be understood in intimate terms, allowing for an unravelling of the hidden layers of suppressed emotions and expressions.

This paper would never claim that Sudirman was gay, bisexual, or asexual. Because, in truth, Sudirman had never publically outed himself. Thus, as a researcher, I am bound to honour that silence. However, in the Malaysian context of the late 1980s, it would have been impossible if not extremely inconvenient for him to speak on this or out himself, in the first place. What remains are the artefacts of his performance. And perhaps, through experiencing these with affective and intimate sensitivities, one might discern the necessarily deceptive layers at the core of Sudirman's artistry and music. More so, what are the (actual) layers (of clothing) that are being stripped away in his highly embodied performance? Finally, this paper asks, what are the metaphorical boundaries of difference that Sudirman is asking us to dissolve, as we "join our hands together, to bind the colours of our skin"?

The text quoted above is drawn from Sudirman's performance of "One Thousand Million Smiles" (composed by Michael Veerapen dan written by Paul Ponnudurai) that won him the title of 'Asia's No. 1 Performer' in the Asian Popular Music Awards that was broadcast globally from Royal Albert Hall, London (<https://youtu.be/OWqKultdufo>, accessed 12 November 2020). The performance starts with Sudirman clad in an all-black suit jacket attire, serenading the crowd with the following lines:

Let us join our hands together
To bind the colours of our skin
A rainbow under God's great heaven
A sign that love will always win

Following this ballad-like section, the song transitions abruptly to an uptempo disco-rock beat. Sudirman strips off his black suit jacket to reveal a silver tube top bearing his midriff. An energetic solo dance ensues, culminating in a 'split' on the floor. He jumps back up, grabs the microphone off the stand and continues to sing the chorus:

One thousand million smiles
I bring to you across the miles
In my land of sunshine
Or in your land of snow
Makes no difference where you are
If you let your feelings show

The crowd at Royal Albert Hall erupts in raucous applause, and the Malaysians watching the broadcast from home are filled with pride with their nation's first international achievement of this kind. Sudirman remains an enduring popular culture icon in Malaysia, but deeper and retrospective examination into his musical persona invites scholars of popular culture to consider the sexual subtexts of media narratives and the intimately obscured identities of cultural icons.

Works Cited

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ADIL JOHAN is a research fellow at the Institute for Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. His research analyses aspects of popular music in mass media that intersects with issues of interculturalism, cosmopolitanism, intimacy, affect and gender. Such research has been published in articles in the *Journal of Intercultural Studies* and *Kajian Malaysia*. His book on independence era Malay film music, titled *Cosmopolitan Intimacies*, was published by NUS Press in 2018. He is also co-editor for a forthcoming volume on popular music studies in the Nusantara to be published by Routledge. He also performs and records as a saxophonist for Azmyl Yunor Orkes Padu and Nadir.