The recording industry and 'regional' culture in Indonesia : the case of Minangkabau

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Conclusion

This book reflects its author's curiosity to find out what happens to a local community that still practises ancestral customs, far from Jakarta's modern hullabaloo, in a time when media technologies, especially the technologies of sound reproduction, have invaded almost the whole of every day throughout the life of a human being. What do the Minangkabau people do with modern recording media for articulating their identity and traditions in a rapidly changing, threatening, and homogenizing world? Far from any pretention to discuss grand narratives that dominate the lives of metropolitan residents strongly influenced by global media discourses and networks, this book aims simply to explore the manifold effects of the penetration of recording technology into local culture and society and to trace how and when this occurred.

Although the phenomenon of regional cultural representation on cassettes and VCDs has been encountered by many ethnic groups in Indonesia, there has not been any extensive study from a diachronic perspective. Close observation of the characteristics and surrounding elements involved in regional cultural media expressions is still overlooked, and for that reason such phenomena get considerable attention in this study. Building on observations by Bart Barendregt (2002) and Suzanne Naafs (2005, 2010), this book provides a more thorough examination of regional recording industries in the context of Minangkabau ethnicity. It is to be hoped that comparative studies will be carried out with other ethnic groups of Indonesia, which have so far been touched upon by scholars such as Andrew Toth (1980) dealing with the Balinese and the Sasak, Susan Rodgers (1986) dealing with the Batak, R. Anderson Sutton (1985) and Bernard Arps (2009) dealing with the Javanese, Edwin Jurriëns (2004) dealing with the Sundanese, I Nyoman Darma Putra (2004, 2005) dealing with the Balinese, Paula R. Bos (2005) dealing with the Nagi community of Flores, and Andy Hicken (2009) dealing with the Toraja of Central Sulawesi. Further extensive studies would contribute immensely to an overall understanding of the role played by recording media in the twentieth-century transformation of local culture and society in Indonesia.

Mediated modern sound, which has come into existence thanks to sound recording technologies, has extended our sense of hearing across time and space and brings our past memories to the present. Indonesian local culture has been involved in this process since the 1890s up to today, starting with a crude model of a cylinder phonograph with a limited capacity to store and play back the voices of the dead, to its sophisticated, more flexible, parasitic, 'glocal', and above all cheap successor, the VCD (Davis 2003:165). Due to the cumulative and varied effects of sound reproduction on a particular culture facilitated by such technologies, this book shows the impact on the Minangkabau ethnic group in particular, by tracing the historical course of mediation and representation of Minangkabau culture in a variety of recording media over a period of two centuries.

In the preceding chapters, I have recounted how the different recording media, the phonograph and its successors, penetrated Indonesian regional culture by discussing the

long-standing mediation of Indonesian regional music and verbal arts, especially those of the Minangkabau. To examine the socio-cultural significances of the technologizing of culture in an Indonesian local context, I have focused my investigation on the production of Minangkabau commercial recordings. Since the gramophone era in the 1930s, and above all following the emergence of the West Sumatran recording industry in the early 1970s, this technologizing of culture, which intersected with other media technologies like radio and social media, has facilitated the mediation and representation of Minangkabau cultural elements. Beyond this historical process of domestication of recording technology by Indonesians in the context of ethnic cultures, this book conjectures about the socio-cultural significance of reproduced sound, as manifested in Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs, in the context of Minangkabau ethnicity.

Retracing some of the central theoretical notions offered in the preceding pages, in this conclusion I track connections between the history of reproduced sound and the redefining features of locality, which alter the features and nature of ethnic cultures. There are three main points here that I want to scrutinize to capture the complex relations between sound, (recording) technology, culture, communication, and human nature. Firstly, the recorded sounds of a particular ethnic repertoire produced at different times correspond and interconnect with each other in complex ways. 'There are likely as many unexpected connections in the audible present as there were in the audible past' (Sterne 2003:338). I would like to change that to: there are likely many unexpected connections *between* the audible past and the audible present. Contributing to shaping the cultural production of sensory perception, the totality of modern ethnic sounds defines the modern auditory practices of the members of a given ethnic group. Secondly, as occurred in many other countries of the world (see Nettl 1972; Racy 1977), the recording industry, since its initial emergence during the gramophone era, promoted new musical expressions associated with a particular recording technology. Recording technology, being interconnected with other media, thus changed the contexts and practices of listening to cultural repertoires, and in the long run it promoted change in already existing expressions and styles and encouraged the adoption and creation of new forms, as manifested, for example, in the emergence of new *pop Minang* starting in the early 2000s. Thirdly, the connections between recordings and translocality in relation to ethnic diasporas. Recorded sounds of cultural repertoires function as a form of mapping, offering listeners identification of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves to their (imagined) homeland. When someone listens to such recorded sound, his aural sensibility instinctively aligns him with the cultural location he perceives in the world. Media technologies such as recording media thus 'helped to put space in the foreground' and erase or redraw 'traditional spatial or geographic limits' (Tally Jr. 2013:3). In this sense, cultural identifications are not necessarily bound to geographic location, but transcend place and space.

The history of (re)production of Indonesian sounds and its effects

This book has explored the historical course of (re)production of Indonesian cultural sounds in diverse recording technologies. It enriches our comprehension of the European colonization of Asia, which in many historical studies tends to focus on political, military and economic aspects. When technology is discussed, it is usually military technology or infrastructure. More than cannon shots, however, reproduced sound and the technologies that have recorded it, have fundamentally transformed the attitudes and behaviour of Indonesian people, changing the expression of their own cultures. As we have seen, Indonesians' encounter with recording technologies started in 1879, initially facilitated by European scholars and intercontinental entertainers who travelled to the Orient with phonograph and gramophone to seek fame and fortune. Public exhibitions of these machines by such individuals, especially in Java, up to the first decade of the twentieth century, marked Indonesia's introduction to reproduced sound. Its effect on Indonesian Natives might be perceived through the name they gave to the instrument: '*mesin bitjara*' ('the talking machine'), a name that reflects a sense of wonder and admiration. Their acceptance was expressed in a variety of reactions: ridicule and criticism as well as astonishment (Chapter 1). Though the recordings initially played on the machines were taken from a European cultural context, such as opera arias and speeches of leading European politicians and religious leaders, they were immediately expanded to include a Dutch East Indies local repertoire, which was pioneered by the recording of Sundanese *tembang* that appeared in 1892. Around this time the director of the National Botanical Garden (*Kebun Raya*) in Buitenzorg (present-day Bogor), Melchior Treub, purchased a phonograph, which was the first privately owned recording machine in Indonesia (Chapter 2).

Pioneered by the London-based gramophone expedition to the Orient led by Fred Geisberg (1902-1903) and the German-based Beka expedition headed by Heinrich Bumb (1905-1906), the reproduction of Dutch East Indies and Malay local repertoires for commercial purposes came into view and increased significantly in subsequent years. It put into motion the mechanical reproduction of Indonesian culture, to echo Walter Benjamin's phrase (1970). This phenomenon, accompanied by increased marketing of several brands of the 'talking machine' in Java and the outer islands in the 1910s, marked the following phase of recording technology penetration into Indonesia once the Natives began purchasing the machines and the discs, viewing them as a symbol of modernity (Chapter 2). This phenomenon accompanied the far-reaching modernization of the colony as a consequence of 1) the introduction of a variety of European technological inventions in the Netherlands East Indies, 2) the implementation of the Ethical Policy launched by the colonial regime in 1901, and 3) the logical effects of global economic capitalism driven by the significant development of modern industry in Europe (Moon 2005, 2007; Schulte Nordholt 2011).

Starting with the recording of the hybrid music genre *kroncong* and the music accompanying *komedie stamboel* and *bangsawan* theatre, commercial recordings then began to be made of local repertoires of other ethnic groups in the Netherlands Indies, including Minangkabau. Such recordings were facilitated by local middlemen who cooperated with

European and Japanese entrepreneurs. The first half of the twentieth century saw extensive use of the 'talking machine' and gramophone discs among Indies Natives, including the Minangkabau in West Sumatra. This had socio-cultural, political, and religious consequences as, for example, shown by reactions of local Muslim communities to Quran recordings (Chapter 2). Slowly but surely, modern reproduced sound changed local people's 'understandings of and relations to the nature and function of hearing' (Jonathan Sterne 2003:12). The reception of recorded sound by Natives was certainly influenced by their local cultures and beliefs, reminding us of Stephen Connor's (2000) remark that spiritualism contributed to the 'ghostliness' of European technologies. By the 1950s, Indonesians seem to have become well familiarized with the mediated sound of their own local repertoires as well as foreign repertoires, facilitated by gramophone technology, which transformed their listening habits and culture of hearing. At this stage, it can be said that the breeding ground of regional recording industries was already formed, and it matured in the subsequent decades.

The advent of cassette technology in the mid 1960s, which became worldwide in the following decade, caused gramophone disc technology to become defunct. The cassette had a significant impact in Indonesia and gave birth to its pop music industry. The sound of local repertoires on disc extended their existence, as most of them were transferred onto cassettes. At that time the culture of pirating sound recordings in Indonesia began. Almost immediately the effects of cassette technology reached all the regions throughout the country, including West Sumatra, the homeland of the Minangkabau ethnic group, where regional recording companies began to emerge in the mid 1970s, along with the province's economic recovery after the PRRI civil war. In the early 1990s the CD entered Indonesia, followed by the VCD in the year 2000 (Chapter 3). As a typical Asian recording technology (Hu 2005), the VCD and VCD player offer low-cost consumption that is cheaper than similar technologies (CD and DVD). This corresponds with the economic circumstances of the majority of people of Asian countries, and renders the medium accessible to lower-income groups in urban as well as rural areas. Therefore, the VCD, which is more durable and lower-priced than the DVD, soon became very popular in Indonesia, a country where the majority of citizens still have a low income. The early 2000s have witnessed the extraordinary spread of VCD technology in Indonesia and decidedly influenced its regional entertainment industries. Indonesian regional cassettes and VCDs, which are used for a variety of local genres, have became the main products of modern recording media in Indonesia and they meet the aesthetic needs of the majority of lower-class people throughout the country. From the early 2000s onward, VCDs flooded the Indonesian national as well as regional recording industries, strongly competing with cassettes.

Emergence and growth of the West Sumatran recording industry

The West Sumatran recording industry is a good example of a local culture engaging with recording technologies. The industry emerged in West Sumatra in the early 1970s, along with the spread of cassette technology in Indonesia, which then flourished with the rapid spread of VCDs starting in the early 2000s. But Minangkabau migrants' encounter in *rantau* with recording technology during the gramophone era had preconditioned the emergence of the

West Sumatran recording industry. Some early *pop Minang standar* songs produced by the first Minangkabau producers were taken from albums on gramophone discs by Minangkabau migrant musical groups that had been released in Jakarta in the 1950s (Chapter 3). Not less Minang than their post-1970s Minangkabau recording products, these Minangkabau gramophone discs produced in *rantau* contributed to the initial redefining of the sense of Minangness and helped mediate an initial translocality among Minangkabau migrants. Cassette and VCD technologies facilitated a considerable development of the West Sumatran recording industry and West Sumatra became the principal hub of regional recording industries in western Indonesia, inspiring the surrounding Malay subgroups to create their own regional pop musics.

The significant development of the West Sumatran recording industry is indicated by the rising number of producers who spread to other West Sumatran towns beyond Padang (Chapter 4). Strong competition among producers encouraged diversification in Minangkabau commercial recordings. In this situation Minangkabau pop music was generated which was enriched by contemporary themes and a new musical flavour. Regional hybrid styles emerged and flourished, supported by new singers who transformed the aesthetics of Minangkabau pop music. In addition, cultural repertoires other than pop music, most particularly Minangkabau verbal arts, increasingly appeared on commercial cassettes and VCDs.

The products of West Sumatran recording companies can be put into three categories: recordings of *pop Minang* (Chapter 5), traditional Minangkabau verbal arts genres (Chapter 6), and media-bound genres (Chapter 7). *Pop Minang* is essentially the local pop music genre whose existence is linked inextricably with the gramophone disc and its successors. As the most prominent product of the West Sumatran recording industry, encompassing various genres and subgenres, *pop Minang* is a cultural site that hybridizes elements of Minangkabau traditional verbal arts with elements of foreign music. The seed of *pop Minang* was planted in close connection with gramophone discs, and it continued to thrive on cassettes and VCDs. Because *pop Minang* was initially a hybrid kind of music, it continued to undergo aesthetical innovation as reflected in the appearance of what Minangkabau audiences call *pop Minang standar* and *pop Minang baru* (standard vs. new *pop Minang*). Absorbing the power of pop culture in the modern world, and blending it with elements of Minangkabau local musical and verbal arts, *pop Minang* resonated with the dynamics of local culture facing a changing world. Representing the important role of the West Sumatran recording industry in western Indonesia, *pop Minang* has definitely affected the world of live music performances in West Sumatra as well as in *rantau*, and plays an important role in maintaining a sense of Minangness in the global era. The images on cassette and VCD covers of *pop Minang* albums suggest the significance of the genre as a cultural site that reflects Minangkabau people's encounters with alien cultures and the accompanying tension between modernity and tradition in Minangkabau society. If we view the essence of popular music as a battleground (Hall 1981), *pop Minang* has become a site of debate through which the Minangkabau people discuss ethnic identity and cultural authenticity.

The West Sumatran recording industry has also been responsible for the mediation of Minangkabau verbal arts genres (Chapter 6). Though some genres of Minangkabau verbal arts had been recorded on gramophone discs, the quantity of this significantly increased in cassette and VCD formats. One of the consequences is that these anonymous Minangkabau verbal arts repertoires have been brought onto a commercial track and have been commodified. This has irrefutably changed the structure and aesthetics of these verbal arts genres as well as their consumption and dissemination patterns. The recorded oral texts tend to be condensed and therefore become shorter than their counterparts presented in live public performances. In addition, these mediated texts contain what I call 'media-specific formulaic verses', which indicate performers' adaptation to the recording medium. Minangkabau people in *rantau* and the homeland enjoy these oral genres privately via cassette and VCD players. Nevertheless, 'star performers' – those most frequently recorded by local recording companies – are often requested by Minangkabau migrants in *rantau* to hold performances, suggesting that the mediation of ethnic oral genres on electronic media has not necessarily eroded the demand for live public performances (Chapter 6).

The widespread use of recording media in West Sumatra has transformed Minangkabau tradition in certain fundamental respects. One of them is the spawning of 'media-bound genres' – genres that exist due to and only in an electronic medium. One such genre in the West Sumatran recording industry is Minangkabau children's pop music. Inspired by the popularity of the new genre of children's pop music at the national level, thanks to the national television and recording industries, since the early 2000s West Sumatran recording companies have produced children's pop music cassettes and VCDs in the Minangkabau language (Chapter 7). In contrast to earlier (non-recorded) Minangkabau village games and songs that emphasize joy and excitement, modern Minangkabau children's pop songs have many resemblances to Minangkabau pop songs for adults. Their lyrics are dominated by lamentation and misery. Their song lyrics as well as their visual images (on cassette and VCD covers and VCD clips) suggest Minangkabau children's encounter with modern technologies and globalization.

Considering the distinctive local influences, Minangkabau children's pop music has its own characteristics that seem to have been moulded by aesthetic concepts of standard *pop Minang* in which *ratok* (melancholy, lament) constitutes the most important element (Chapter 7). It is indeed as a consequence of the domestication of media technologies by local people, that media-bound genres have enhanced local cultural repertoires. Nevertheless, as has occurred in other parts of the world, Indonesian children, including Minangkabau children in West Sumatra, are sucked in to the media industry, which has given rise to a lot of debate in Indonesian society. To become an *artis cilik*, (child artist), which is associated with fame and financial prosperity, is the dream of more and more parents and children, not only of the middle and upper classes but also the lower classes. At the same time, however, public discourse often views such child artists as being exploited by the media industry and sometimes also by their mad-money parents.

The West Sumatran recording industry and Minangkabau ethnic sensibility

Having the status of small-scale industry (*industri kecil*), the West Sumatran recording industry is actually an economic business characterized by ethnic sentiment. The production, distribution, and consumption of its products are mostly in the hands of Minangkabau. Unlike huge mainstream and international media industries like television, cinema, and the recording of Western pop music, in West Sumatra hundreds of regional small-scale cassette companies produce enormous numbers of commercial cassettes and VCDs containing local repertoires. Their creation, production, distribution, and consumption for the most part involve Minangkabau practitioners. Such companies developed vigorously, far from the nation's capital, and were 'characterized by democratic, participatory, grassroots control, a lack of social distance between producers and consumers, and a decentralized structure affording a responsiveness to community values and aesthetics' (Peter Manuel 1993:xv). Nevertheless, both singer and audience/consumer have expanded beyond the Minangkabau ethnic group (Chapter 5). And for the diaspora of the Minangkabau ethnic community, the production, circulation, and consumption of West Sumatran recording industry products provide a way of ethnic bonding. In *rantau*, however, for instance in Malaysia, production and distribution have involved ethnicities other than Minangkabau (Chapters 6 and 9). The consumers of Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs are mostly Minangkabau people or those of Minangkabau descent, both in the homeland and in *rantau*. Nevertheless, *pop Minang* is also sung by non-Minangkabau artists outside West Sumatra (Chapter 6), while some ethnic groups in eastern Indonesia are so fond of this kind of songs that they have adopted its musical rhythms in their own local pop music. In this way, the West Sumatran recording industry has contributed to the incorporation of Minangkabau musical elements in the pop music of other ethnic groups in Indonesia (Chapter 9).

Migrating to various places in Indonesia and foreign countries, Minangkabau migrants have become the main consumers of commercial cassettes and VCDs produced by recording companies in their homeland. Unlike Internet, which is customarily used mainly by upper-class people, commercial cassettes and VCDs are consumed by middle and lower-class Minangkabau migrants, most of whom work as merchants in urban areas. Examining these Minangkabau migrants' reception by doing case studies in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Pekanbaru (Indonesia), I found that they purchase Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs or listen to radio programs of Minangkabau pop music derived from such cassettes and VCDs (Chapter 9). But since the early 2000s the distribution and consumption patterns of West Sumatran recording industry products have changed following the ongoing innovation of communications media, especially new social media. Adjusting to the convergent media environment has become a necessity in the world today, and inevitably the content of Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs has been remediated in other 'conventional media' and in new social media (Chapter 8). With the advent of new social media like Internet radio, blogs, YouTube, and Facebook, the Minangkabau diaspora, like other diasporic ethnic communities around the world, can enjoy their recorded ethnic repertoires wherever they live. The contexts and practices of listening to regional music have significantly changed due to

distribution via Internet. On Internet one can easily find Minangkabau songs sung by Oslan Husein in the 1950s as well as the most recent ones sung by Edi Cotok and Buset, thus putting Minangkabau reproduced sound from the past and from today in the same basket. Such remediation demonstrates the ongoing adaptation of the Minangkabau ethnic group to media technologies through which they continually rearticulate their local culture and identity in the face of a changing world. They 'have not been mere victims or products of globalization' (Jurriëns 2004:back cover text).

The intersection and remediation of new communications media has been used by the Minangkabau to reconfigure their identity and to share the sense of Minangness virtually, beyond geographical ethnic boundaries. The various modes of virtual communications have enabled Minangkabau people, both in *rantau* and in the homeland, to celebrate their identity in translocal places. Getting pleasure from *pop Minang* songs or verbal arts recordings in *rantau* is one way by which Minangkabau migrants continue to articulate and reproduce their ethnic identity in overseas urban environments, to keep alive 'the sound of "longing for home"' (Barendregt 2002) in their hearts and minds. In this regard, we are reminded of John B. Thompson's remark that communications media provide a way of sustaining cultural continuity despite spatial dislocation and therefore they can play an important role in the maintenance and renewal of tradition among migrant or dislocated groups (Thompson 1995:203).

This book suggests that the West Sumatran recording industry represents a strategy of Indonesian local cultures for coping with globalization. Recording media are among the means by which Minangkabau people cope with modernity while maintaining their culture to keep pace with changing times. The complex features of the West Sumatran recording industry and the content of Minangkabau commercial recordings yield information about how the Minangkabau ethnic group has translated elements of local, regional, national, and global cultures in a continual process of updating its culture over the course of time. The various modes of sound recording technology adopted by the Minangkabau ethnic group have facilitated new creative cultural expressions, generating more and more media-bound local repertoires. Such cultural significance of the domestication of recording technology in the West Sumatran recording industry captures the theme of regionalism running through this book. The representations of Minangkabau culture in regional commercial recordings explored in this book demonstrate the use of recording media technology by a local society to contextualize and maintain the viability and existence of their culture and identity, whose features are changing, adaptive, and fluid. It can be taken to represent current cultural phenomena in Indonesian local culture in general.