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

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SUMMARY

This study deals with the arrival of diverse types of recording technology in Indonesia and the socio-cultural significances they brought about as the consequence of their use to (re)present Indonesia's local cultures. As a case study, it examines the encounter of these technologies with the Minangkabau culture. Having its homeland in West Sumatra, the Minangkabau ethnic group is known for its voluntary practice of migration (*merantau*). As recording technologies, mainly cassette and video compact disc (VCD), have become strongly incorporated in Indonesian ethnic cultural life, this study explores the role of the local recording industry in contemporary ethnic cultural production and how it impacts on local societies, the Minangkabau in this context. Considering the Indonesian people's extreme enthusiasm in embracing diverse modern foreign technologies, including sound recording technologies, it is plausible to assume that these recording technologies have had significant effects in transforming Indonesian ethnic communities and their cultures. For that reason, this study extensively investigates such effects in an Indonesian regional context by tracing ethnic groups' encounter with recording technologies, from the nineteenth-century gramophone era to the current VCD era. This study, thus, investigates how reproduced sound, thanks to the invention of recording technologies, has affected the life of humans and, in turn, has brought about a transformation of local cultures and societies.

As the book covers the history of recording technology's encounter with Indonesia's local cultures, which is then examined more in depth through the case study of the Minangkabau ethnic group, it is organized into three sections. Part I (Chapters 1-3) outlines the encounter of recording technologies with Indonesian local cultures and more specifically with the Minangkabau culture. Part II (Chapters 4-7) examines the Minangkabau culture's encounter with recording technologies through an in-depth investigation of the features, products, cultural and historical contexts of the West Sumatran recording industry. Part III (Chapters 8 and 9) surveys the distribution and reception of West Sumatran recording industry products (Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs) through the extensive remediation of such products on other social media in addition to conventional ways of purchasing them or listening to radio programs that broadcast them.

The first chapter recounts the earliest experiences of Dutch East Indies society with the phonograph or gramophone. It was called *mesin bitjara* ('talking machine') in Malay, which reflected the Natives' admiration of the machine. The country had encountered the first type of Edison's phonograph in 1879 through demonstrations of the machine in Java by a Dutchman named A. de Greef. After De Greef, other European travellers arrived in Java with the 'talking machine'. Prominent figures among them were Douglas Archibald, Giovanni Tesséro, J. Calabressini, and Miss Meranda. Their exhibitions of the phonograph in Java and elsewhere in the Indies are recounted, along with the public's responses. I call this the 'period of exhibition', when recording machines were demonstrated to the public in venues such as theatres and clubs in the form of shows for which people had to buy tickets, which took place in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century. This was the first phase of the adoption of sound recording technology in Asia. The second phase was the trading of gramophones and discs, first in Java, then in the outer islands, enabling people to purchase such playback recording machines and the early commercial gramophone records that soon became objects of prestige and status. The third phase was the period when European and US recording companies appointed local agents in Asian cities and established local recording facilities, and collaborated with local entrepreneurs and middlemen (Chapter 2). The vast expansion of the consumption of the gramophone and gramophone records in the Dutch East Indies throughout the first half of the twentieth century saw the first commercial recordings of indigenous repertoires produced locally.

As reproduced sound and the mediation of their own cultural repertoires on commercial gramophone records increased significantly, it changed the ways the Dutch East Indies colonial society received their own culture. Native reactions to the gramophone and gramophone records suggest how recording technology affected their self-identity in the context of colonial society in the early twentieth century.

Gramophone technology was largely obsolete by the late 1960s, replaced by cassette technology. The arrival in Indonesia of the cassette and successive types of recording technology like the compact disc (CD) and video compact disc (VCD) is described chronologically in Chapter 3. The vast spread of the cassette in Indonesia during the 1970s was a significant factor in the formation of the West Sumatran recording industry.

I argue that the recovery of Central Sumatra's politics after being destroyed by the PRRI civil war also contributed to the emergence of the regional recording industry in West Sumatra. Businesses, including the local recording industry, grew as many Minangkabau migrants returned home after the civil war. Describing the introduction of these new recording media in Indonesia and the use of these technologies beyond the music industry, Chapter 3 provides a historical overview of the expansion of new recording technologies after the 'talking machine' era into Indonesia's national and regional cultural territories, especially in Minangkabau, and the distinctive domestication of these technologies by Indonesian society. Along with the extensive use of such new media technologies in Indonesia, the mediation of Indonesia's local cultures also grew extensively. The spread of the VCD in Indonesia since the early 2000s has brought the country into a 'VCD culture', and brought changes to regional recording industries like that of West Sumatra.

The second and third parts of the book look closely at the surrounding elements that support the existence of the West Sumatran recording industry to comprehend how far Indonesian local cultures and societies have engaged with recording technologies.

Chapter 4 discusses the elements involved in the West Sumatran recording industry, which is classified as a small-scale industry (*industri kecil*) by authorities because a recording company usually has between five and nineteen employees. Based on the assumption that a regional recording industry is related to a particular ethnicity and has its own features

influenced by local cultural circumstances, this chapter looks at state authorities and other parties involved in the recording media business, like producers, singers, and songwriters, and the cultural-based relations between them. The chapter also describes the West Sumatran recording industry's products, grouped into three categories: Minangkabau pop music (*pop Minang*), Minangkabau verbal arts, and the media-bound genre of Minangkabau children's pop music (each is examined in one of the next three chapters), and the distribution and marketing patterns of such products amid strong competition and rampant piracy of commercial recordings in Indonesia.

The prime category of products of the West Sumatran recording industry is *pop Minang* cassettes and VCDs. Chapter 5 describes the characteristics of *pop Minang* and its socio-cultural significances in Minangkabau society. Germinating in the migration destinations (*rantau*) in the mid 1950s where Minangkabau musical groups were formed like Orkes Gumarang in Jakarta, *pop Minang* then developed in West Sumatra.

As the main product of the West Sumatran recording industry, which stockpiles many genres and subgenres that blend elements of local music and foreign music, *pop Minang* has influenced not only the direction of the development of Minangkabau music but also the musical tastes of Minangkabau society. This can be recognized from the aesthetic diversification of *pop Minang*, which now distinguishes *standard pop Minang* and *new pop Minang*. There has been much debate surrounding this aesthetical transformation of *pop Minang*. The chapter then examines the cassette and VCD covers of *pop Minang* to see how they reflect the contestation of modernity and authenticity in Minangkabau society, and the role of *pop Minang* in redefining the sense of Minangness.

The second category of products of the West Sumatran recording industry is Minangkabau oral literature or verbal arts, which is highlighted in Chapter 6. The historical mediation of Minangkabau traditional verbal arts genres is discussed, and the ongoing process of this mediation in the electronic communications era. Coming into view since the gramophone era, the production of commercial recordings of Minangkabau oral literature genres increased during the period of cassette and VCD consumption since the 1980s onwards. The production, circulation, and consumption of these mediated oral genres and their representation in recording media have brought about changes in their narrative, storyline, language, and artistic style.

The vast mediation of human culture today has increasingly shaped what I call media-bound genres. Existing in particular media, a media-bound genre is a newly generated genre whose production and consumption is highly dependent on electronic media. The West Sumatran recording industry has also generated media-bound genres, which I list as the third category of its products. One such genre is Minangkabau children's pop music. Chapter 7 recounts the emergence of Minangkabau children's pop music and its relationship to the national and global music industries. It sketches the complex nature and characteristics

of the genre and its socio-cultural significances, and maps its position in the domain of Minangkabau pop music.

Altered by the phenomenon of media convergence, as a consequence of the invention of Internet and newer social media, the products of the West Sumatran recording industry have now been remediated not only on conventional media (radio) but also on Internet radio, mobile phone, blogs, YouTube, and Facebook. The link between the West Sumatran recording industry and other media, and the extensive dissemination of its products by these new media are delineated in Chapter 8. The intersection between the West Sumatran recording industry and these new media has spread the content of Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs widely, reaching a global audience.

However, the conventional modes of consumption of these regional commercial recordings continue today: consumers purchase Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs for their own use. Other consumers listen to radio broadcasting stations that broadcast the recordings in their music programs. Most of those consumers are Minangkabau ethnic fellows, whether living in the homeland or in the *rantau*.

The final chapter looks at such conventional distribution and reception of Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs among Minangkabau migrants outside their homeland, looking at the function of commercial recordings for members of an ethnic group who move everywhere beyond their homeland. Two case studies are taken to understand this phenomenon: the (re)production, distribution, and consumption of Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs in neighbouring Malaysia, and the reception of Minangkabau music broadcast by local private radio stations in Pekanbaru, the capital of Indonesia's Riau province which borders on West Sumatra province and neighbours with Malaysia. The acceptance of Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs by the Minangkabau diaspora functions to retain as well as redefine local identities beyond geographical ethnic boundaries. Moreover, by taking these two regions as case studies, one located in Indonesia and the other located abroad (in Malaysia), this chapter outlines how the reception of commercial recordings of their own ethnic music among Minangkabau migrants affects their feelings of ethnicity and nationalism.

This book has three major focuses. First, the history of recording in Indonesia. The recording of Indonesian repertoires occurred almost as soon as the phonograph was first introduced in Java, pioneered by the recording experiment of Sundanese *tembang* by the phonograph exhibitor G. Tesséro on August 1892, which was the first Indonesian local repertoire to be mediated by recording technology. The recordings were expanded to Indonesian urban entertainment genres like *stambul* and *kroncong* and to regional genres of the outer islands, including those of Minangkabau.

The production and marketing of such commercial gramophone discs of Indonesian local repertoires expanded from solely European entrepreneurs during the late nineteenth century to Indonesian-based ethnic Chinese and Native competitors during the twentieth

century. Performers of local genres became acquainted with recording media through national and international agents and producers, and people experienced a new mode of reception of their cultural products in which performers were not physically present.

The European colonization of Asia has been extensively studied from political, economic and military perspectives. Technology has been studied mostly only in relation to these perspectives. However, I propose that, more than cannon shots, reproduced sound and recording technologies have had a significant impact, and are deserving of study. Recording technologies have fundamentally transformed the mental and behavioural attitudes of Indonesian people, and changed the manifestation of their own local cultures.

As its second focus, the emergence and growth of the West Sumatran recording industry is used as an example of how Indonesian local cultures are influenced by recording technology and how a local society makes use of the technology to translate its culture in order to maintain its existence. The West Sumatran recording industry initiated the mediation of Minangkabau verbal arts, and at the same time encouraged the development of Minangkabau pop music and stimulated the creation of media-bound genres. The recording industry has changed the way Minangkabau people engage with their culture, and has made Minangkabau cultural genres accessible to Minangkabau migrants, no longer dependent on geographical borders.

Pop Minang, as the main category of products of the West Sumatran recording industry, now serves as a musical language of togetherness for Minangkabau people everywhere, and within Indonesia has become a marker of Minangkabau culture and ethnicity. *Pop Minang*, furthermore, is a cultural site which represents how Minangkabau people adapt to ongoing changes in the world. These are examples of how recording media have influenced Minangkabau local culture and transformed Minangkabau culture and identity.

The third focus concerns how the West Sumatran recording industry is associated with Minangkabau ethnicity. I have shown that the West Sumatran recording industry is actually an economic business strongly coloured by ethnic sentiment. Taking a road different to the mainstream and international big media industries like television, cinema, and the recording of Western pop music, hundreds of regional small-scale recording companies in West Sumatra have produced enormous numbers of commercial cassettes and VCDs containing local repertoires, and the process of their creation, production, distribution, and consumption for the most part has involved Minangkabau practitioners. Despite the Indonesian government's attempts to develop a national culture, ethnic cultures such as that of Minangkabau are continually transforming – driven in part by regional recording industries – and these changing regional cultures influence Indonesia's socio-political environment. Considered in the light of communications technology, the relationship between regional cultures and national culture is not a one-way street; each influences the other.