



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Malay singing in Pahang villages: identity and practice**  
Silahudin, S.

**Citation**

Silahudin, S. (2021, May 18). *Malay singing in Pahang villages: identity and practice*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3166306>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3166306>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/3166306> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Silahudin, S.

**Title:** Malay singing in Pahang villages: identity and practice

**Issue date:** 2021-05-18

## CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Introduction

The premise of this book was led by the author's curiosity about the cultural meanings (including historical resonances) of songs and music practices among Malays in Pahang villages. Following major changes over many decades, Pahang's villages have become increasingly multifaceted socio-cultural landscapes that embrace musical practices as diverse as traditional music (including *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*), regional pop, *kugiran*, punk rock and modern *irama Malaysia* pop music on karaoke systems. The musicians in Pahang villages support both aesthetic cosmopolitanism and a musical inheritance understood as distinctively Malay.

Throughout my musical journey in Pahang villages, the hybridizing of different musical styles and instruments resulting from social and cultural changes has been noted. The notion of musical hybridization here encompasses musical practices that utilize local and global musical instruments, repertoires and performance styles. The global sounds that are found in *kugiran* and *punk rock*, previously considered as signs of cultural imperialism, have been recovered as local forms of musical expression involving the assertion of local themes. The blending of exogenous musical ideas with Malay musical forms illustrates universalizing goals and a desire to bring Malay musical elements into the domain of contemporary popular music, as well as giving them a wider appeal.

In many ways, the changes have enhanced the discourse on cultural identity and difference. I argue that the combination of global ideas with Malay musical elements is related to anxieties about the survival of Malay culture and identity. In this sense, it is related with what has been described as 'the unsettling of Malayness' (Long, 2013: 246).

Benjamin (2019a and 2019b) was concerned with the different types of Malay music performed by Malay groups (including tribal Malays) on Riau Island, in several parts of Sumatra, in Peninsula Malaysia and in south-eastern Thailand and how they encode a cline of Malayness. I wish to conclude my present work by reflecting on Benjamin's work in light of my research

findings. But, before I discuss the notion of Malayness in Malay music, I will discuss the four topics that are crucial to answering the main research question. There are the social status of musicians, continuity and discontinuity in genres, gender-related songs and community formation.

## 6.2 Social status of musicians

The social status of musicians deserves attention in this study. Before discussing the social status of musicians in Pahang villages, let me begin by describing the position of musicians in the social spheres of the past. Historically, a musician's activities encompassed a wide range of social spheres. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, festivals, palace celebrations and gaming events incorporated a variety of musical performances. In the fourteenth century, audiences ranged from individuals, such as the music-loving lady mentioned in the *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* (Bayan 73: 22) and *sultans/kings*, as noted in the *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (Pasai 125: 10), to professional groups (warriors), as mentioned in the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (AHmz 671: 9).

The musician's tasks were varied: suspending reality, moving the audience into another realm, arousing feelings of sensual pleasure, ensuring emotional relaxation, rousing communal feelings, elevating spirits during banquets and feasts, and heightening religious fervour. Musicians occupied a respected position in the social structure, as illustrated in the fifteenth-century *Hikayat Indraputra* (Ind 186: 17). However, there was also an indication that the musician was a 'servant', as mentioned in the early-sixteenth-century *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* (PandL 27: 4). No matter their station, musicians were required to satisfy certain social needs.

Today, there is an internal, community-generated hierarchy or stratification of musicians in Pahang villages: professionals, semi-professionals and amateurs. Various factors are operative in this stratification. Professional musicians in Pahang villages are associated with traditional music and regional pop music (Chapter 3). The label 'professional' suggests a social status rather than just a financial evaluation, as it connotes a serious performance over amateur playing. Professionals make their living from music and regard music-related activities as their only real employment. They commute to music venues and perform with other professionals from outside the area. Professionals are regarded as locally based but prepared to travel through the region or beyond to perform for a fee.

*Kugiran* and punk rock (in Chapter 4) musicians are semi-professionals. The semi-professional musicians' source of income, however, lies elsewhere. They earn only small fees from their music but perform in the hope of more and better bookings. Semi-professionals value music as enjoyable but serious recreational work, as well as considering it a part-time occupation that garners them a small additional income. Meanwhile, groups of women singers performing the Islamic art songs of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* (Chapter 5) are considered amateur musicians. The women's motivations are their love of music, enjoyment of singing and the music's role as voluntary work in their community.

In certain circumstances, amateur and professional/semi-professional musicians have interconnections. For instance, a *kugiran* band may include some amateur performers who want to have fun playing music. The involvement of an amateur musician, however, will not have much influence over the overall *kugiran* performance. Also, amateur players may accompany professional musical performances and receive a fee.

The musicians' status, among other factors, is related to the quality of the performance. The traditional music group Anak Kayan and the *kugiran* band Kugiran Muzik Asli are professionals and semi-professionals, respectively. Both groups would describe themselves as amateurs when they have to play songs they have never played or rehearsed before. It is apparent that being professional, semi-professional or amateur may enter into the perceptions and actions of those involved in music. There are observable interactions between audience members (amateurs) and professional/semi-professional musicians. This can be seen during the song-request segment at wedding receptions, during which audience members are encouraged to sing to the accompaniment of the *kugiran* band.

Interaction between amateurs and professionals also occurs at traditional music lectures/workshops, where amateurs showcase their talents in front of, or if lucky sing with, the professionals. Amateurs and their musical activities make an essential contribution to the continuance of traditional music, which is mainly performed by professionals.

Furthermore, a professional musician can only get started in his or her career through non-professional opportunities offered by peers, parents and schools. I could see this path being taken by a young, female amateur musician (Chapter 5), who had performed music at school events before going off to university to study music. I consider this apprenticeship to be necessary preparation for a would-be full-time musician.

Despite a clear divide between professional, semi-professional and amateur designations, individuals and groups in some circumstances could be described simply as ‘musicians’. The status of ‘musician’ grants them popularity.

### 6.3 Continuity and discontinuity in genres

Through my study of songs and musical practices in Pahang villages, I have identified the presence of a considerable number of historical vocal forms in present-day music genres. Some of the functions and meanings of the historical vocal forms/songs have continued to be present in today’s music genres, while others, based on my findings, have undergone changes so as to adapt the music for today’s performance outlets. The poetic forms of *pantun*, *syair*, *nazam*, *gurindam* and *seloka* in traditional music offer structures through which a person’s passion can be expressed. This concept can be traced back to a quotation in the *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* (Bayan 149: 15). *Pantun* has been popular for centuries among old people (quoted in the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (AHmz 127: 26)) and young people (quoted in the fifteenth-century *Hikayat Indraputra* (186: 18)) alike.

The traditional poetry song of *syair* is associated with competitions. *Syair* singing in competition is not a recent practice as people in Pahang today might think it would be. Singing *syair* (as well as *gurindam* and *nazam*) in competitions has long been a tradition, as noted in *Hikayat Indraputra* (Ind 97: 20) and in the early-seventeenth-century *Sejarah Melayu* (SM 144: 18). *Syair* has been for many centuries and continues today to be popular among young people, as mentioned in *Hikayat Indraputra* (Ind 186: 18). This can be seen in today’s *syair* singing competitions, which are largely contested by young people. There is also an indication that *syair* was historically performed to entertain royalty, as quoted in the late-eighteenth-century *Misa Melayu* (Misa 116: 26). Malays have long forgotten this tradition. However, in recent years (2017 and 2018) *syair* singing has begun to take place at several official events attended by *sultans*. I am lucky enough to have witnessed this long-forgotten tradition being practised once again by the Malays.

In regional pop music, I was able to identify *pantun*, *seloka*, *madah* and *bait* song forms in the sung lyrics. These poetic forms have long been acclaimed as the media used to tease people, as quoted in two works: *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* (Bayan 73: 22) and *Hikayat Indraputra* (Ind 60: 9). Some of these poetic forms feature witty lyrics. *Bait*, as quoted in *Hikayat Amir*

*Hamzah* (AHmz 671: 9), is regarded as a poem with two lines. This song form continues to be used in regional pop music, with several *bait* phrases being present (for instance, *sikit-sikit, lama-lama jadi bukit* (little by little, at the end it becomes a hill)). I argue that there are many traditional Malay proverbs in songs but they are not viewed as *bait* in contemporary practice. There is an element of *bait* quoted in *Sejarah Melayu* (SM 144: 18) that relates to a specific game competition. However, use of this particular phrase does not appear in present-day lyrics. *Madah* forms are regarded as polite sayings, as quoted in *Bayan Budiman* (Bayan 6: 29). This use of *madah* continues in regional pop songs that contain life advice and instructions (for instance, being a hardworking person, as mentioned in the song ‘Ngape Bio Semok’).

In *kugiran*, the poetic forms of *pantun*, *madah* and *bait* can be identified. Most *kugiran* songs centre on the topics of women and love. The use of *pantun* in *kugiran* music has prolonged its function as a way to praise the beauty and attractiveness of a woman. This function for *pantun* can be traced to a quotation in the early-sixteenth-century *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* (PandL 27: 4). *Madah* forms in *kugiran* music can be viewed as poetic sayings that are intended to relax the listeners. This use can be traced from a quotation in *Hikayat Indraputra* (Ind 79: 22). In a similar way, the function of *bait* continues until the present as a way to coax/seduce a woman, as noted in *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* (Bayan 73: 22). Another function of *bait* has been prolonged in *kugiran* music, where it functions as a way to entertain people during a meal. This use can be traced back to a quotation revealed in *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (AHmz 671:9). This supports the present-day practice of *kugiran* music being performed at wedding receptions.

In punk rock, there is an indication that the lyrics in Malay are written in verse forms (stanzas) that are similar to the stylistic features of *syair*. Each stanza consists of four or five words per line, employing the rhyming scheme a-a-a-a. However, the *syair*-like lyrics in punk rock do not deal with past events. Yet, despite this, I argue that the adoption of the structural element of *syair* is the basic component of the lyrics of punk rock songs in the Malay language. Furthermore, the *syair*-like lyrics created in punk rock inevitably come from the musicians’ knowledge of Malay music history.

*Zikir* contains *lagham* (chains of words), as mentioned in the late-nineteenth-century *Syair Seratus Siti* (SSiti 83:1c), which are uttered with a melodious voice. In the past, *zikir* was recited by men from different classes and backgrounds, as mentioned in *Misa Melayu* (Misa 95: 6). This has now changed as, in the present, *zikir* is also chanted by women too. *Zikir* is constituted of the Islamic art songs of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*. The

women's singing groups prefer to perform *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* at rituals and religious occasions mainly on Friday nights. It seems that this is a centuries-long tradition, which was noted in the seventeenth-century *Hikayat Aceh* (Aceh 74: 8).

The execution of *zikir* alongside the reading from *Kitab Barzanji* to celebrate the Prophet's birthday was noted in a quotation in *Misa Melayu* (Misa 94: 33), which shows that the Malays in Pahang villages established the tradition of celebrating the Prophet's birthday as early as the late eighteenth century. Also noted in a quotation in *Misa Melayu* (Misa 58: 33), *zikir* was chanted during the recitation of the Qur'an from its beginning to its end (*Khatm al-Qur'an*). The women's singing groups continue this tradition. They recite *zikir* (by singing/uttering *Asma'ul Husna*, the ninety-nine names of Allah) before the reading of the *Kitab Barzanji*. In the eighteenth-century *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Tuah 491: 10), there is an indication that the reciters performed *zikir* with body movements. This is not true in the case of the women in Pahang villages, who usually perform *zikir* sitting cross-legged in a semi-circle.

Performing *zikir* was intended to show thankfulness to Allah for His blessings (as indicated in *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (AHmz 608: 16)) as well as to increase one's strength (as indicated in the seventeenth-century *Bustan as-Salatin* (Bs.S 20)). These continue to be the reasons for the performance of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*, but fewer people participate today. This differs from the situation in the past, when the performance of *zikir* was carried out as a festive event attended by plenty of people (SSiti 234:10). In relation to *zikir*, *dana* is mentioned in *Syair Seratus Siti* (SSiti 243: 10a) and is regarded as a spiritual composition. In the present context, *dana* signifies the singing of Arabic compositions from the *Kitab Barzanji*. In this way *dana* penetrates the performance of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*. *Nazam* was mentioned alongside *dana* in the same work.

Less information about *nazam* can be found in Malay literary works except in the *Syair Seratus Siti*. As noted in a quotation in *Syair Seratus Siti*, *nazam* was performed on religious occasions (SSiti 234: 10d). This tradition continues in present practice; *nazam* is rooted in the song *nazam berendoi*, which uses a vernacular text and is performed at tonsure rituals alongside the reading of the *Kitab Barzanji*.

*Pantun* is an important element in *dikir rebana*. In contrast to being sung by a group of women (as described in *Hikayat Indraputra* (Ind 71: 13)), *pantun* in *dikir rebana* is used to signal the singer's ideas indirectly. This

element from the past, as mentioned in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Tuah 210: 4), continues to be used in the same way in the present. Also, in the same work it is noted that the *pantun* reciter is the equivalent of those who recite the Qur'an (Tuah 210: 10). This is in line with the status of the women performing *dikir rebana*, who have backgrounds as Qur'an reciters.

During my field research in Pahang villages, I did not witness the performance of *nasyid*, a popular musical style across Muslim South-East Asia. *Nasyid* is 'produced and consumed in cities and towns with a large student population and a strong Muslim activist tradition' (Barendregt, 2012: 315). Three other poetic forms: *kidung*, *kakawin* and *mandora* are also apparently absent from music practices in Pahang villages today.

#### 6.4 Gender-specific songs

The performance of traditional music and regional pop in Chapter 3, and *kugiran* and punk rock in Chapter 4 is heavily weighted towards men. However, an increasing number of female singers are performing traditional music due to the existence of *syair* singing competitions. In regional pop, the participation of men and women is equal. No women are involved in *kugiran* or punk rock music. From my perspective, it is partly due to gender stereotypes that *kugiran* and punk rock are the domains of men. Women in bands are seen as unusual. They are not supposed to master modern/Western musical instruments, for instance, electric guitar, bass guitars or drums, which are associated with men. Furthermore, women in general are linked to the ideal of womanhood and behaviours that are not perceived as provocative.

There has been a significant change in the musical practice of *dikir rebana* and *nazam berendoi* in Pahang villages. Prior to the 1970s, there were male and female singing groups still practising the traditions. However, this situation had changed by the beginning of the twenty-first century, and *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* have now become performance genres for women only. The bold appearance of women in *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* performances is, in my view, driven by the fact that there are more *qari'ah* (female Qur'an reciters) in Pahang villages. *Qari'ah* have not only shed their domestic role, but also offer an alternative form of piety in the male-dominated society. In many conversations with me, older performers mentioned the importance of the songs and the fact that these Islamic art songs have been performed for generations. The audience endorses women's singing

groups as women are taking on more roles in public spaces and are now the transmitters of these musical traditions.

The performances of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* by women's singing groups that I witnessed piqued my curiosity regarding the power of songs for these women. Women have been composing and singing *nazam berendoi* (Appendix VII) for a long time. There are gendered dialogues in *nazam berendoi* that reflect and shape the women's status. The significance of a child appears in the song, for instance, 'the mother was nine months pregnant, she cannot taste what she eats, gives birth to a baby with pain, as life is forced from the body' (stanza 4). One can also learn about the women's hopes for the new-born baby, as in the lyric 'dear Allah (God), please give this child sustenance, a higher rank, a noble character in the world and the hereafter' (stanza 9). *Nazam berendoi* also allows the women to express their concerns about the difficult aspects of life, as in 'dear Allah, please accept our request, day and night for all time, keep us from slander and crime' (stanza 10). Above all, *nazam berendoi* offers a valued medium for women's collective expression in a society in which men dominate the musical space. In the songs, they not only express their concerns but the virtues of women too. Through the music, women create models for future generations.

The *pantun* verses are a complement to the sung texts from the *Kitab Barzanji*. The musical practice of *dikir rebana* is a source of women's spontaneous expression or expectation in the public setting of a community event. This can be seen when the women form the lyrics to four quatrains of *pantun* (Appendix VII) spontaneously as a way to change their song. This is remarkable not simply because of the spontaneous character of the performance, but because of the way the women choose their subjects in *pantun*.

In the first stanza, the singer asked the audience to provide drinking water to heal her sore throat. This is followed by the second stanza, in which the singer stressed their empty stomachs, and the feelings of being dizzy and drowsy. The third stanza expressed the same topics as the second. In the fourth, the singer mentioned traditional dishes and warm rice as a sign of her desire to eat. These four quatrains of *pantun* are regarded as women's oral literature. Unlike their counterparts performing *nazam berendoi*, who use the same sung text for every performance, the women performing *dikir rebana* are more flexible in producing unique quatrains of *pantun* on different topics at every performance.

Female performers, however, have not gained the same popularity and attention in everyday discourse on music as their male counterparts. They appear to be only partly visible and less favoured in popular discourse. Even though men dominate the musical practices in Pahang villages, it is important to mention here that women play a social role as specialized singers in ‘traditional’ set-ups, such as at child naming parties and tonsure rituals.

My impression is that the Islamic genres of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* are ‘safer’ female genres. The presence of female performers in musical contexts has created the promise of a receptive climate for female musical arts within the villages.

## 6.5 Community formation in genres

My research on songs and music practices among Malays in Pahang villages has made it possible for me to address the topic of community and how it is formed. I have made observations on the ways in which a community is formed through each genre. I suggest that there are two kinds of community formed through music: short term and long term. A short-term community is formed during a performance event, over a short period of time. Meanwhile, a long-term community is the result of a longer involvement by its members, beyond the performance event.

In the domain of *kugiran* (in Chapter 4), a short-term community is shaped before and during a wedding event. Before the wedding, the host has to consider whether to hire a *kugiran* band or a DJ to entertain the guests. This involves a selection and communication process between the host and the prospective musicians. This process might take place several weeks before the actual wedding. A short-term community in *kugiran* is developed during the reception, which usually has a segment for song requests. The guests come to the musicians, requesting that their favourite songs are played. In this segment, it is possible for the guests to sing their chosen songs to the accompaniment of the *kugiran* band. The situation that occurs at weddings provides an interesting lens through which to view how this short-term community, formed for the duration of the song-request segment of a wedding, plays an important role in ensuring a lively occasion.

A short-term digital community is forged around the Islamic art songs of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* (in Chapter 5). Practically speaking performance of both songs is participated in less by young people. However, young people do participate in the community via their observation and

contributions to online recordings of the songs. Individuals have uploaded videos of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* performances to YouTube and Facebook.

The availability of these songs online provides an official public space in which young people can hold debates and participate in some kind of commenting-activism. Online users add their points of view to the published performances. I focused on the users' points of view to gain an insight into the role of these Islamic art songs within the media landscape. The online users exchange ideas and information, and establish opinions in common. Based on my research, I divided the reasons for commenting on the videos into three categories: gratitude for the rare attention paid to this sort of music, regret that the traditions are facing a decline and comments about similar traditions surrounding indigenous (*orang asli*) songs. This virtual community almost certainly appeared within a short space of time.

Long-term communities have formed around the genres of traditional, regional pop and punk rock music. In certain circumstances, a long-term community can be part of the global community. The foundation of the *Syair* Academy (in Chapter 3) has brought about the formation of a community of *syair* fans. The weekly programmes (singing workshops and lectures) organized by the foundation have attracted young people to participate in this community. The state government has set up a *syair* singing competition, which is fiercely contested by young people. Their ability to sing *syair* is evaluated at three levels: district, state and national. The community grows through the holding of a yearly *syair* concert, which is attended by both citizens and people from neighbouring countries. The concert takes place in a formal setting (an auditorium) owned by the government. At this event, the audience members share the same emotions and perspectives of the performance.

The growing community around *syair* also exchanges information across online spaces. I engaged in online research on Facebook where communications took place among the *syair* concertgoers. Videos of *syair* performances as well as photos from the concert were shared. These elements have created space for *syair* singing to achieve its potential in terms of audience. Through this online site, the virtual community has a space in which to reminisce over the events. The lively Facebook commenting system provides a platform for personal opinions. Based on my analysis, I could discern four topics expressed/debated by *syair* fans within the online media landscape: inspiration to sing *syair*, the grandeur of *syair*'s tunes and themes,

improvements to an individual's music practice, and how it enriches understanding of the traditional poetry taught in schools and universities.

Regional pop (in Chapter 3) fans have formed a community through state-sponsored music concerts and digital environments. The regional pop group, Anok Semantan featured at a concert along with other popular singers. Because this concert was held at an informal open venue in Kuantan, Pahang, it enabled several forms of public display by fans of regional pop music. They responded to the songs with gestures (for instance, raised hands and dancing), and by singing along with the performance. The fans' response created a joyous and friendly atmosphere. They felt that they were part of the performance. My impression is that the inclusion of regional pop music in the concert provided a supportive environment for the fan community.

Regional pop music sustains its community through digital environments that emphasize user-generated content, contributions and self-presentation. On YouTube, individuals upload videos of regional pop songs to show their enthusiasm for the genre. Fans can easily access the videos on their devices. In the commenting system on YouTube, they get involved by exchanging ideas and information concerning the Pahang dialect in the songs and offering emotional responses about their homeland. Their interest in regional pop music is high and this is indicated by the numbers of views of the videos being in the thousands to hundreds of thousands.

Punk rock music (in Chapter 4) is a musical genre that has links to the Pahang skinhead community. The DIY ethos influences their musical activities and they do not receive assistance from larger organizations or the government. Like their international counterparts, the punk rock community in Pahang is strengthened through its Pahang skinhead orientation. In contrast to the original skinheads, those in Pahang have moulded new behaviours and attitudes. They wear specific fashions when attending musical events (gigs). They also show similar physical responses to the music.

However, their skinhead identity established through fashion is not permanent, as they will adjust their appearance to fit in with the wider public. The punk rock community is concerned with the current issues pertaining to political and social circumstances. Through a punk forum, they hold debates and exchange ideas with the panellists, who are well educated and have long experience of the punk subculture. My impression is that regardless of their 'noisy' music, the punk community plays an inclusive role in the wider community, whether punk or not. The social awareness of the punk community

is stimulating but has been less noticed by many. This is due to the public's principal perception of punk musical activity as being the music of the devil.

## 6.6 Final remarks

In the final part of this book, I want to reflect on my research findings in terms of the concept of Malayness expounded in Benjamin's two works (2019a and 2019b). In his studies, Benjamin is concerned with the different varieties of Malay music performed by Malay groups (including tribal Malays), mainly in Riau Island and Sumatra, and how they encode a cline of Malayness. He also compares these with a limited number of songs from the southern part of Peninsula Malaysia and southern Thailand. Benjamin chose a selection of Malay songs that took the forms of *joget*, *dangdut*-style, *dondang sayang*, *ghazal* and *gurindam*, all of which were written between the 1960s and the 1990s.

In the first example, he measures the Malayness of the *joget*-beat song 'Serampang Laut' in terms of the differing deliveries from tribal Malay, 'proper' Malay and professional/modern urban Malay groups. In his view, the tribal Malay group performed the song with a lack of any elaboration of the transition between the notes. Meanwhile, the 'proper' Malay group displayed a moderate but noticeable degree of melismatic elaboration. Benjamin then compared these with the performance of a professional singer who exhibited obvious melismatic elaboration in the same song but used a *dangdut*-style rhythm and different words. In his second example, Benjamin compared professional performances of two more song types: *dondang sayang* and *ghazal*. The performance of the latter (historically linked with aristocrats) was much more serious and included a high degree of melismatic elaboration compared to the former. In the third example, he measured Malayness in the *joget* song 'Tanjung Katung', which was performed separately by tribal Malays in Riau Island and a Malay singer in north Sumatra. The result was comparable with the one mentioned in the first example.

These were then compared with a performance of *gurindam* by a singer from the *Gurindam* City of urban Tanjungpinang, which offered the most highly elaborate example of melismatic style. This is not surprising, as in Tanjungpinang, many professionals of innovative *kreasi* music can be found, as discussed in another work by Benjamin (2019b). Malayness is also reflected in some other features of music. 'Malay music intentionally takes in elements from all over the world, especially in its instrumentation' (Benjamin, 2019b:

284). Modern urban Malays are keen to incorporate elements from a wide range of sources, merging them into a style that remains distinctively Malay.

Benjamin also discussed, without concrete evidence, the two reasons for the failure of Malayness in songs. First, from the closely scored electronic instrumentation he judged that the performers aimed to be ‘modern’. This pre-arranged scoring, along with choral interjection, limited room for improvisation. Second, the performers (in this case, from north Sumatra) were not ‘proper’ Malays compared to the performers in *ghazal* from Tanjungpinang, even though the Malays in the city are now a minority. ‘The vitality and creativeness of their activities serve to remind the population that Tanjungpinang is historically a Malay place’ (Benjamin, 2019b: 281). Benjamin concluded, ‘a heightened degree of melismatic elaboration corresponds to a higher degree of cultural Malayness’ (Benjamin, 2019a: 103). At the modern urban and royal ends of the cline, the orientation is outwards and hierarchical. This is in contrast to the tribal end of the cline, where the orientation is inwards, away from the outer world.

Creating a sense of Malayness as discussed in Benjamin’s work (2019a), I argue, is an achievement. In the late twentieth century, Malay culture, especially in Riau (the land of Malays), was a site of protest (Long, 2019). Benjamin’s attempt to evaluate Malayness in songs relies on several generalizations. Let me now relate this evaluation to the music genres in Pahang. Traditional music, among other music genres, exhibits the highest degree of embellishment of the melodic line. It is true that some Malay performers acknowledge that a higher degree of melodic ornamentation corresponds to increased Malayness. Chanting verses is understood to be a graceful and noble expressive art. However, this association between ornamentation and Malayness is insufficient without adjusting for the performer’s competence (singing technique). It would be narrow-minded to presume that an unadorned performance that lacks any elaboration of the transitions corresponds to a lesser degree of Malayness. I contend that singing technique does not influence the degree of Malayness.

The distinctive sounds of Western music are combined with traditional songs and some other genres to produce modern-sounding music. In traditional songs, keyboard effects are added. Pahang musicians employ a combination of modern and traditional elements. The songs are still recognizable as ‘Malay’ in their rhythms, melodic style and ornamentation, but are more modern in their approach. This fusion is a general feature of Malay culture that has been noted by European commentators for at least two centuries (Irving, 2014). The implementation of exogenous ideas in Malay

music, I argue, does not bring weakness to Malay culture, but instead revitalizes its Malayness. Malay music can be fused with exogenous musical sounds. Malay songs have porous boundaries which are applied broadly across geographical distances that remain open and assimilatory.

Last but not least, I reflect on Benjamin's judgement of musicians' names to measure the degree of Malayness in their music practices. To judge a performer to be a 'proper' Malay or not by simply considering his/her name is, I argue, irrelevant in the Malay music discourse. Malay identity in the plurality of musical styles is codified through transcription and melodies. The performers' names, thus, do not define their musicality.