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# REVISITING *MERANTAU* WITH A SENSE OF MINANGNESS: CULTIVATING THE FIELD OF MALAY MEDIA STUDIES

*Ahmad Murad Merican*

International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia  
ahmadmurad@iium.edu.my

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## ABSTRACT

An appreciation of aurality and orality sees the extension of media and culture before the emergence of the Internet. For contemporary Minangkabau society then, attending public performances in the West Sumatran homeland are no longer the only way of enjoying and appreciating oral literature. Media genres available on commercial cassettes and video compact discs (VCD), Minangkabau *perantaus*, as well as those domiciled in West Sumatra, are able to appreciate their traditional verbal arts in the privacy of their own home. The same is observed of the kinds of recording in Malaysia. Minangkabau *perantaus* have been here for generations, embraced within the larger Malay society and the *Alam Melayu* (Malay World)—a geographical spread transcending the Archipelago. Minangkabau oral traditions and media extend through the *rantau* – not only in Kuala Lumpur, but also in Jakarta, Bogor, Bandung, Jambi, Medan, Pekanbaru, Palembang, Batam and Denpasar. A new audience is created. This is an empirical fragment in what can be called Malay Media Studies.

**Keywords:** *Merantau, Malay Media Studies, Minangkabau, technology; orality, aurality*

## MALAY MEDIA STUDIES: BY WAY OF AN INTRODUCTION

Media studies outside the Euro-American world has often taken the mainstream route. Its corpus sanitized, *sans* culture and context; only the culture of the objectivity – assumed to be universal and value free. Media studies has rarely considered the peculiarities of other cultures. It assumes the universality of modern societies and modern culture. Even when the empirical focus is outside that of the Euro-American world, it fails to segregate intrinsic assumptions on self and identity, assuming that Asian identities, for example, are measured and subsumed as globalized, advanced industrialised societies.

The work by Suryadi is welcoming, at least informing us that the use of media technology in the production of music is peculiar to that society. I would embrace his study as presenting a significant corpus to the construction of the academic theme of Malay Media Studies. There is certainly an intellectual and cultural lacuna in the study of media specific on Malay nations and society in the Archipelago. Media (and communication) studies began in the 1950s in

Indonesia and in the early 1970s in Malaysia. Nothing much has changed with regards to conceiving media, communication and society. The curriculum has not moved beyond the positivist paradigm. The scholarship is condescending toward indigenous and endogenous conditions, ignoring altogether the multiple and diverse meanings of literacy, nationhood, ethnicity, and identity. Suryadi's *Audible Locality: The Recording Industry in Indonesia and its Approach to Minangkabau Music and Oral Tradition* published in 2020 by the Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia should be seen as urgent in filling up the gap. According to the author, there is thus far no extensive study from a diachronic perspective on the subject. Even in the context of Malaysia, studies on Malay media institutions and expressions are glaringly absent. Over the decades, the perspective and subject are altogether ignored. The scholarship on media in Malaysia and Indonesia has been prejudiced of culture and traditions. This study reflects the author's curiosity about what happens in the collusion and intersection between customs and cultures with modern technologies of sound (re) production.

Students of media studies, anthropology, history and society of the Malay Archipelago, and specifically of Malay/Minangkabau culture and society, should immensely benefit on the discourse linking media to ethnicity. In fact, Suryadi's corpus embraces *merantau* as a critical feature in Minangkabau society and how that institution has structured the production and reproduction of sounds, expressing belonging and nationhood. The merging of the *rantau* with new technologies have forged the sense of Minangness to her *perantaus*. An example familiar to some of us are Oslan Husein and Elly Kassim, Minangkabau singers in the 1950s; and verbals art forms like *pidato adat* and *pasambahan* are within reach through the reproduction of sounds (and images) through the various social media Internet platforms.

Before digitization, it was the mechanical media—orality and aurality. The mediation and remediation of culture demonstrate the ongoing adaptation of cultures to media technologies. Dr. Suryadi (he goes by one name as book author) informs us that his book is a study of diachronic perspectives on the impact of recording technologies, specifically cassettes and VCDs, specifically on Minangkabau society, and generally with reference to Indonesian local cultures, and that of the Minangkabau *perantaus* in Malaysia.

He examines how modern reproduced sound, "which is constantly proliferating and multiplying up to today" through various (social) media, initially facilitated by recording media technology through the agency of regional industries, has influenced the contours of Indonesian local culture. Suryadi's work is a pioneering study. It is a largely untapped field looking at media and technology in ethnic terms with reference to the Minangkabaus. He delves on Indonesia's first encounter with recording technology among its ethnic groups. He describes it as a case study. His focus is on the meanings of mediated Minangkabau cultural expressions.

Suryadi's work is a rare contribution to the scholarship on what is referred to as Malay Media Studies. He teaches at the Department of South and Southeast Studies, Leiden Institute for Area Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands. His research explores the use, consumption and effects of the recording media in the West Sumatran Minangkabau context, seeing the Minangkabau recording industry as an agency for ethnic expression in the modern world.

Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs chronicle the Minangkabau past and contemporary cultural dynamics in the engagement with the outside world. His work does not

simply examine the effects of media on culture and society. Instead, he argues that regional recording industries have greatly increased the (re)production of local cultural sounds since the early twentieth century. Recording technology moulded traits and existence of ethnicities in the Minangkabau world. He argues that these continue to accumulate since the early twentieth century, shaping Minangkabau ethnicity in the contemporary world. In so doing, the book asks how and to what extent the recording media are used in regional cultural production in Indonesia, and how the technology interacts with Minangkabau ethnicity.

Suryadi formulates questions as a guide in collecting data. The questions should be intriguing to both media studies students and scholars alike. These are listed as (1) when Minangkabau culture and society first engage with recording media, and what were the cultural historical circumstances which engendered such technology contacts; (2) when did the regional recording industry connect to the emergence of Minangkabau ethnicity, and the political, economic and social forces that provided the stimulus; (3) What are the products of the local media industry, and their characteristics; (4) who are involved in the production, and who are the consumers; and finally, (5) the extent of media technology, as manifestation of cultural mediation, in bringing about transformation of Minangkabau culture and society.

In so doing, he introduces us to the history of sound reproduction in Minangkabau society. The Minangkabaus have adopted and adapted the new technology in their midst. Bringing us to West Sumatra as a site for the recording industry, Suryadi reflects on Appadurai's (1996:p.18) "global fact" taking on "local form." Taking the example of small-scale vernacular print media, he cites the sounds in late colonial times of Indonesia's song *Indonesia Raya* (Great Indonesia), and political speeches by Dr. Soetomo. These were made possible by gramophone disc and radio. It projected the spirit of nationalism. The sounds through microphones, gramophones, and radio resonate through the Archipelago, reflecting Benedict Anderson's (1991) imagined communities in the forging of the nation-state. However, Anderson's literacy as a prerequisite may not be entirely applicable to the Dutch East Indies or the Minangkabaus. Orality, and as Sweeney (1987) states, that aural was the dominant force. It was significantly described as "aural power." Reproduced sounds (and sights) could reach a wider audience than print media, "and directly influenced the emotions of illiterates as well as literate natives." In his observation, Suryadi sees the dynamics and interplay between national identity and regional and local cultures.

His study frames Minangkabau identity within the notion of the nation-state, and to some extent the region. And this is critical to students of Malay Media Studies, in not only against the background of Indonesia, but also Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei and the Philippines. This book opens up a field few have studied. In this regard, with reference to Indonesia, Suryadi calls for an understanding of two Indonesia concepts in the cultural and political contexts which weave itself throughout the book. These are, and this is peculiar to Indonesia and not to other Malay nation states: *budaya nasional* (national culture), and *budaya daerah* (regional culture). And the overlapping of *budaya daerah* with the concept of *budaya tradisional* (traditional culture), where tradition refers to persistent cultural patterns (including beliefs, customs, knowledge and values) that evoke or testify to continuity with the past. In this context, is better seen in the sense of how Hobsbawm puts it in which culture is continuously renewed with reference to the past. In his work, Suryadi does not make a distinction between "Great and Little traditions" because it "does not apply to (regional) cultural expressions in Indonesia" (Suryadi, p.6). Instead, he studies what is called "grassroot-based media," one of which is the VCD—decentralized in control and consumption.

He terms Minangkabau culture as *budaya daerah*, often associated with the tradition, while recording media are considered a product of modern technology. Hence the objective is to comprehend how ethnic groups acclimatize to the modern globalizing world and the influences of new technological interventions; and how the Minangkabau position themselves in the national contexts of the Indonesian nation-state; and the *rantau*.

What would be revealing for scholars and students is the position and consciousness of the researcher. Suryadi is conscious of himself as both subject and object. Being a Minangkabau and an Indonesian, he recalls that he had lived through a large part of the period under study, and

I personally experienced the transformation of Minangkabau culture and soundscape from a situation which was relatively noiseless and lacking in “modern” sound before the 1970s to today’s situation that is constantly noisy with the sounds of modern media like radio and audio cassette tapes. My involvement, both as actor and witness in the process of such change, has been one of the factors that stimulated me to carry out this study (Suryadi, pp.14-15).

Thus, Suryadi is also a participant in this cultural and societal change. The focus on the Minangkabau recording industry delved into the structure and socio-cultural landscape. The mechanical reproduction business had successfully generated and converted the cultural and social capital of Minangkabau ethnicity. The emergence of the West Sumatran recording industry in the 1970s has produced recordings of Minangkabau music genres, popular as well as traditional ones. In recent years, its products have shown significant diversification in terms of genre and musical style, and recordings has also greatly increased, and the changes over time.

Suryadi divides his book into eight chapters within three parts with an introduction and a conclusion. Part one is themed Recording Technologies Encounter Indonesian Local Cultures, comprising three chapters, namely “The early days of recording technology in Indonesia” (Chapter one), “The disc era: circulation, utilization, acceptance (Chapter two); and “Post-disc era and the emergence of the West Sumatran recording industry (Chapter three). The theme of part II is Insight into the Western Sumatran Recording Industry, divided into four chapters namely “Actors and ventures in the West Sumatran recording industry” (Chapter four); “*Pop Minang*: Its features and sociological aspects” (Chapter five); “Traditional Verbal arts meet recording industry” (Chapter six) and “A media-bound genre: Minangkabau children’s pop music” (Chapter 7). The theme for Part III is Modes of Reception of Minangkabau Recordings with two chapters, “Remediation of Minangkabau commercial recordings (Chapter eight) and “Beyond homeland borders: Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs outside West Sumatra,”

The book is supplemented by seven appendices providing data from Minangkabau commercial cassette producers to production houses in West Sumatra to Minangkabau children’s pop album. What would be useful is an extensive Bibliography divided into the following: Newspapers/Periodicals; Special collections at Leiden University Library; Internet sites/Facebook/YouTube; books/articles; and Discography.

The author outlines his research methods into three domains. The student of media studies must be intellectually engaged in how he gathered his data for the book. The first is necessarily bibliographic exploration. The literature at the libraries is vast. Not optimizing

this approach is a crime. I have to note my disappointment with post-graduate students in media studies in Malaysia. The mass of data stored in libraries and other similar institutions are just ignored. Supervision has not done justice to the corpus already produced. Suryadi has used libraries at Leiden, The Hague, London, Jakarta, and Padang. The second is participant observation. He interacted with practitioners of the West Sumatran recording industry. He was engaged with Minangkabau cassette traders and consumers. Third, he collected as many as possible Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs of various genres. He admits he has been collecting since he worked on the project Verbal Art in the Audio-Visual Media of Indonesia (VA/AVMI) from 1996 to 2001.

The last two domains were brought together during his fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia. During that period, he also looked into “vernacular texts.” This includes banners, posters, stickers, graffiti, and decorations on public transportation vehicles. He tagged the public response to Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs represented to the local press, radio and television. He also attended seminars organized by universities and cultural centres (*taman budaya*) in Padang. There Suryadi had opportunities to talk to Minangkabau cultural observers and intellectuals, seeking their response on Minangkabau culture, its music and the recording industry.

He spent three periods doing fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia in 2003, 2004 and 2005. What the student of media studies should know is the interactive nature of the research mode as participant observer – obtrusive and unobtrusive. His visits to Padang and other coastal towns, and in the highlands, were to observe on site the cassette and VCD shops and stalls, and conducted interviews with their owners and with purchasers. Notably,

I visited producers, singers, and songwriters of Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs. I have a certain familiarity with the West Sumatran recording industry since I worked as a VA/AVMI research associate (1996-2001) before I commenced this dissertation project. I made visits to Jakarta to observe the business of Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs in the capital of the Republic of Indonesia. I also closely observed the wedding festivities of the family of Minangkabau migrants in this city to see the musical performances at such events. I also made journeys to Pekanbaru, Riau, one of Minangkabau people’s principal *rantau* destinations, which I used as a case study to look at the reception of Minangkabau commercial recordings outside West Sumatra (Suryadi, p. 14).

For the same purpose, Suryadi also did fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur (especially the Chow Kit area), Kuantan and Negeri Sembilan, where many “Minangkabau migrants”<sup>1</sup> he said; and I would term it instead as Minangkabau *perantaus*, have become permanent residents. There he studied the production, trade, and reception of Minangkabau commercial recordings, where “I surveyed Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs everywhere I travelled in Indonesia and Malaysia.”

Suryadi has the advantage of looking from inside, as a member of the community, as well as from outside, as an objective scholar. He finds himself in peculiar circumstances. These drive his desire to “write about Indonesian local cultures’ encounter with recording industry” (Suryadi, p.14). He is conscious of himself being a Minangkabau and an Indonesian at the same time. He lived his research: “...I have lived through a large part of the period under study...(Suryadi, p. 14). His narrative on how he carried out his study is valuable to

the researcher and scholar on the subject. One can also take the usual option of only being a “witness” in the process in the name of objectivity and impartiality. Suryadi was both -critically bringing in a useful paradigm for Malay Media Studies. The diverse methods used is the strength of the corpus.

In his Introduction Suryadi appropriates the Minangkabau as an ethnic group. The Minangkabau has been the subject of studies of many foreign scholars. Apart from the group’s patrilinearity, the author also highlights the Minangkabau political, economic and intellectual life. He cites M.G. Swift (1971: p.255) in the article on Minangkabau and modernization as saying that “anyone who has studied Indonesia could hardly fail to form the impression that the Minangkabau are the special people [because] in most fields of modern endeavour Minangkabau have been prominent, either as individuals or as a group.” In writing about the Minangkabau, Suryadi provides a brief and succinct account based on earlier studies. As one would note underlying the book’s argument in the production and reproduction of Minangkabau music and the oral tradition, is the practice of *merantau*. Without *merantau*, Minangkabau music would be inaudible throughout the *rantau*. I suppose that as an unintended consequence to his objectives, Suryadi has in effect, created another outcome. We find that his corpus displays a narrative interweaving the culture of *merantau* into the media discourse. *Merantau* unexpectedly becomes the basis for remediation. *Merantau* amplifies Malay Media Studies.

*Rantau* and *merantau* and the community of actors, the *perantau* are integral to the corpus in the book. The ideological and virtual impact of the *perantau* has been partly replaced by modern media such as television and the Internet. National and global cultures become the pull factor for younger generations. Suryadi nevertheless maintains that Minangkabau customs (*adat*) and Islamic values still negotiate through elements of global culture. He observes that

... conflicting cultural practices have characterized the lives of Indonesian people since the colonial era: local/national culture versus global culture,... Nowadays, the debates on mailing lists and Facebook groups, which involved both the Minangkabau diaspora and those living in the homeland, suggest that the contradictions between Islam and the Minangkabau *adat* (which is associated with traditional matrilineality) remain a hot topic (Suryadi, p.19).

He finds that some aspects of Minangkabau matrilineality have been eroded under the influence of foreign cultures and ideologies,

... its heart still functions, as manifested today in children’s alliance with their mother’s clan and the inheritance of *harta pusaka tinggi*, which is still passed down from mothers to daughters (Suryadi, p.19).

The book begins with the introduction of the recording technology in Indonesia. This is also the history of technology in the Malay Archipelago. It recalls the initial encounter by people in the Dutch East Indies to the phonograph and the replicated sound produced. Suryadi surveys the “early path of the representation of Indonesian local cultures” using media technology in Java, after which time such repertoires spread to ethnicities in the outer islands, including the Minangkabau in West Sumatra.

This happened in the nineteenth century. The phonograph was a new invention. Sound recording technology in Asia, applicable to other modern media invented during that period, went through three phases of adoption. Typical of the excitement in Europe to inventions and technologies in the aftermath of the industrial revolution, we initially see the phase of exhibitions. This was the period where a recording machine was demonstrated to the public in venues such as theatres and clubs, in the form of shows where people had to buy tickets.

In the second phase, we see the purchase of sound playback machines and records, which became objects of prestige and status. In the third phase, European and American recording companies appointed local agents in Asian cities, and established local recording facilities usually in collaboration with local entrepreneurs. Europe and later societies in the Malay Archipelago was to be impressed, allowing them “to store up and reproduce automatically at any future time the human voice perfectly (Edison, 1989: 444, in Suryadi, p. 24). Suryadi links the initial encounters with resistance. The “incessant [European] cultural invasions”, would a few decades later was to influence the lifestyles and beliefs of the “natives,” although the technological inventions were at that time only accessible to the colony’s white ruling class. Suryadi remarks that ultimately the belief systems of the indigenous peoples influenced their acceptance of the inventions. And especially on the reproduction of sound, there was this sentiment with magic and the supernatural rather than with rationality and science. Significantly, it was described that “acoustic technologies like phonography and telephony derived part of their meaning from nineteenth-century European spiritualism (Suryadi, p.61; citing Connor, 2000). There was amazement. Sound can be immortalized, as witnessed in Batavia, Cirebon and Surabaya.

## **MEDIA ENCOUNTERS AND MUSICAL CULTURE**

The indigenous encounter with the “talking machine” was complex. Suryadi argues that increasing consumption of the “talking machine” in the Netherlands East Indies during the late colonial period gave a positive impulse to local music. The recording technology stimulated fusion, stylistic borrowing and localization in music. The penetration of records (and radio broadcasting) played an important role in the development of musical culture in the Indies, shaping the foundation of the formation of regional recording industries in Indonesia in the late 1960s.

In the language of change and acceptance, after 1895, the peoples of Java began to anticipate the next innovation. The “talking machine” was no longer something bizarre. We find that advertisements in the local newspapers played an important role in the promotion of the “talking machine.” According to Suryadi, they offer consumers the opportunity to purchase a gramophone for home entertainment from the Edison Company or competitors, namely Columbia, Pathe Freres, Odeon, and Gramophone Company. There was a market created by advertising. The support system was provided by the vernacular press. This began in the first decade of the 1900s. The technology had become a luxury good “that was affordable for European, Eurasian (Indo), Chinese, Arab, and Indonesia Native upper-class families” (Suryadi, p.67). The marketing of the novelty however remained concentrated in Java, where Surabaya was the first city to compete with Batavia in offering the phonograph for sale. By the first decade of the 1900s. the talking machines and records had spread into the Javanese countryside. Quran recordings were played.

Suryadi raises the phenomenon of the commodification of the “talking machines.” Their sounds gave rise to problems. The concern was on questions about culture, religious beliefs and identity. It led to new perceptions of their own culture; related to the extent of maintaining authenticity. Mediation of culture have recast attitudes, beliefs and values. Gramophone recordings were associated with the idea of modernity. The debate between those oriented toward “Western modern culture” and proponents of “indigenous culture” sharpened in the late 1930s and early 1940s

On a related note, the gramophone enables indigenous sounds to be produced and reproduced, another way to hear and appreciate local music. This led to new modes of distribution, dissemination, storage, and appreciation of local music in the Indies. Hence a musical culture based on recording media began to develop. The introduction of records and radio broadcasting increased the popularity of not only the indigenous genres but also the music of other Asian cultures such as the Chinese and Arabs. Geographically local music expanded to include the Minangkabau region in West Sumatra.

Java was the first Indonesian island to encounter cassette technology. The first two recording companies Lokanata and Irama Records were set up in the late 1950s. Music recordings in Indonesian as well as the local languages were produced. One of the local languages was Minangkabau. According to Suryadi, in 1956, Lokanata began to record songs by Gumarang, a Minangkabau orchestra based in Jakarta. In 1964, Gumarang’s first commercial disc was released by Irama. *Ayam den Lapeh* (Translated by Suryadi as, my hen has run away) became phenomenal both in the *ranah* Minangkabau, and in Malaysia.

The disc became a hit, and prompted Irama to release several more Gumarang albums. Based on the spread of the cassette encouraged by the emergence of other private recording companies, and the production of several albums by Minangkabau pop singers in the early 1970s, Suryadi suggests that Minangkabau music began to be seen as one of the most popular of regional music in Indonesia. He notes the year 1971 as the beginning of the West Sumatran recording industry. This was because of the

... improved political atmosphere in the region...Central Sumatra, the homeland of the Minangkabau people, was no longer suffering from the political turmoil of the PRRI [Pemerintahan Revolusioner Republik Indonesia] civil war (1958-1961) (Suryadi, p. 112).

The cassette was the product of a stable political atmosphere. The New Order under Soeharto was cited as making possible the exposure of the Minangkabaus to Western technological and cultural products. This in turn was affiliated to Manikebu (*Manifes Kebudayaan/Cultural Manifesto*) under the new order patronage. It is also significant to see how recording technology made the Minangkabau region the main hub of the industry in western Indonesia.

More and more local artists from neighbouring provinces, such as Riau, Jambi, and South Sumatra, produced their own albums by using rented studio facilities in West Sumatra. In cassette shops and sidewalks cassette stalls of neighbouring provincial and regency towns like Pekanbaru, Bangkinang, Palembang, Muara Enim, Jambi, and Lubuk Linggau one can easily find pop cassettes with the labels of West Sumatran recording company names on their covers..., the West Sumatran



regional recording industry influences regional cultural dynamics, especially in music (Suryadi, p. 113).

Suryadi gives the example of Malay communities in Kampar, and the Melayu Deli. One sees cultural expressions through the local pop album, where these “become new icons of cultural prestige and cultural distinction” (Suryadi, p.113). The local West Sumatra-based newspapers like *Singgalang*, *Haluan* and *Padang Ekspres* carried advertisements of new Minangkabau commercial recordings, suggesting the continued evolution of the industry stimulated by political decentralization in Indonesia’s cultural policies as a consequence of the Reformasi following the fall of Soeharto’s New Order in 1998.

The book *Audible Locality* also cites that the West Sumatran recording industry, and Indonesia’s regional industries more generally, as distinct, yet understudied. Although Barendgret (2002) has investigated some aspects of Minangkabau pop songs, other aspects such as recordings of Minangkabau oral literature, cassettes of VCDs of Minangkabau children’s pop music, the who and what involved in their production and circulation have yet to be appropriated. In so doing, Suryadi investigates into the local contexts – socio-cultural and political circumstances shaping the Minangkabau recording industry. He contends that the West Sumatran recording industry is rather different from other Indonesian regional recording industries. To answer the questions, he describes the structure and socio-cultural landscape of the industry. He demonstrates how the business has successfully generated and converted the cultural and social capital of Minangkabau ethnicity; and also the type of business involved and its location in the Indonesian media industry. In so doing, he describes the parties, and individuals involved, and the patterns of production, distribution and circulation, as well as examining royalties for local artists. The West Sumatran recording industry is mostly owned, managed and practiced by the Minangkabaus themselves. It mostly represents Minangkabau ethnicity although other ethnic groups in the proximity are also involved.

### **POP MINANG: REDEFINING MINANGNESS**

In his study, Suryadi categorises the products of the Minangkabau recording industry into three types. First is the Minangkabau pop music – called *pop Minang*. Second, traditional genres are associated with Minangkabau oral literature or traditional verbal arts. Third, how the genres are shaped by the use of recording technology itself, depends on the media for their existence. These are called media-bound genres. The *pop Minang* is a distinct genre that has emerged out of the interplay between technology and culture.

He looks into three aspects beneath the story of *pop Minang* – its linguistic and aesthetic elements, the history of its emergence, and the surrounding discourse. It can be argued that *Pop Minang*, like pop culture in general, is an arena of cultural struggle; borrowing from Stuart Hall (1981: 239) “the area of consent and resistance,” through which the contestation between modernity and authenticity continually draws attention to ethnic identity (Suryadi, p. 169). *Pop Minang* informs us of contested cultural space, struggle, consent and resistance. It is a collusion and collision with modernity. *Pop Minang* presents powerful Minangkabau encodings of the problematics and complexity of the modern world. *Pop Minang* has been described as “the sound of longing for home.”

Those who have toured the Minangkabau heartlands before would encounter *pop Minang* the moment their tour bus moves out of Bandara Minangkabau - one of two airports in the world named after an ethnic group. In a way, *pop Minang* relays the Minangness of Minangkabau from there up to the heartlands in Bukittinggi some two to three hours later, depending on traffic conditions among others.

Suryadi, born in Pariaman, now West Sumatra in 1965, and a familiar face in Malaysian academic circles and the Minangkabau *perantaus* here, has been following the aesthetics of *pop Minang* from the 1950's up to 2006, and the Minangkabau community responses through local media and other platforms. Among other things, he examines the influences that has shaped *pop Minang*.

In the Indonesian music landscape, *pop Minang* is categorized as *pop daerah* (regional pop), while *pop daerah* in turn, is classified as a type of regional music (*musik daerah*), a catch-all phrase that includes every type of music sung in regional languages, from the most "Westernized pop to the most indigenous performance tradition." *Pop Minang* did not originate in the heartlands. It appeared from the *rantau*, specifically Jakarta by Minangkabau *perantaus*. According to Suryadi, it was associated with the Orkes Gumarang, founded in 1953 in Jakarta.

It came out from a distinctly Minangkabau-speaking community. *Pop Minang* is a mixture of traditional Minangkabau music, or verbal arts, with national or foreign musical influences. The lyrics are by definition in the Minangkabau language. Nevertheless its aesthetics, including syntax, rhythm, melody, tempo and formal structure differ from Minangkabau music genres. Another difference is the composers. Those *pop Minang* songs are certainly known. Composers of traditional genres are anonymous.

The recording industry also has implications on language. It is Minangkabau dialects versus *Bahasa Minangkabau Umum* (General Minangkabau). The latter is used for communication among speakers across dialects in major Minangkabau towns such as Padang and Bukittinggi. The *rantau* becomes a place for innovation and improvisation. This was what happened to the Orkes. They transcended the issue of dialect and genre.

In Gumarang, Suryadi identifies the synthesis between Latin American with Minangkabau music. Strongly influenced by rumba, mambo and cha-cha-cha, Gumarang's music was the Minangkabau *lagu Melayu* – using the maracas, piano, guitar, bass with idiophones *talempong*, aerophones *saluang* and *bansi*, chordophones *rabab*, and membranophones *gandang*. The *rantau* was a good place to experiment.

The name Gumarang was drawn from the Minangkabau oral story, (*kaba*) *Cindua Mato*. The *Orkes* is credited in introducing Minangkabau songs throughout Indonesia and Malaysia. Some of us grew up in the 1960s with *Kampung Nan Djauh di Mato* (translated by Suryadi as "My distant Village") by *Orkes* Gumarang. Listen to it again. Produced by Irama Record, it hit the Malayan/Malaysian airwaves entering the hearths and homes in the Peninsula. And in 1958, Gumarang's female singer Nurseha shot to fame with the release of the unforgettable *Ayam den Lapeh* (literally by Suryadi "My hen has run away"). Echoes of Minangness do not stop at national borders.

At the end of Chapter five, Suryadi highlights *pop Minang*, leading to a definition of Minangness. He queries on the cultural significance underlying debates about *Pop Minang* – the representation of symbols, modern and traditional in audio and visual elements of Minangkabau cassettes and VCDs. He explains:

If we view this in the context of ethnicity as an imagined community, then it could be said that it is no other than a reflection of the sharing of a sense of collectiveness: the sense of Minangness...a feeling of togetherness within an ethnicity (Suryadi, p, 214).

*Pop Minang* challenges and deconstructs rigid notions of ethnic particularity. It encapsulates world views, peculiarly Minangkabau. Now also through the Internet, and social media, it not only appeals to the Minangkabau community in West Sumatra or Indonesia, but also to the Malay community in the Kelang Valley, and in Malaysia. It is the *ranah* artefact in the *rantau*. There is a *rasa keminangan* (feeling of Minangness), not only among the Minangkabau people but also among other Malays who are descended from the Minangkabaus; or who have developed a collective affinity to the Minangkabau in the life of the nation. Subconsciously perhaps a marker of Minangkabau identity and ethnicity. Without the *rantau*, there may not be a *Pop Minang*.

### **TRADITIONAL AND ORAL LITERATURE: NIGHT MUSIC OF WEST SUMATRA**

A redefinition of media viz Malay Media studies is in order. Media, since it study began to be established as an academic subject in Malaysian and Indonesia has largely be located in the conventional media school—modelled along concepts, theories, assumptions, and paradigms of the Euro-American world view of communication and mass communication. It takes on a post-World War II definition, denying the existence of media in indigenous societies; arguing that media and communication are introduced together with structures of development and modernization. The mainstream corpus is mainly silent on colonialism and imperialism. It assumes that non-Western societies have no media before the coming of the West.

In chapter six, Suryadi discusses on the meeting of the traditional verbal arts with the recording industry, in that Minangkabau oral literature colludes with industry. The emergence of print as a vehicle of oral literature genres have been argued as degrading the tradition. In the chapter, Suryadi examines how the Minangkabau verbal arts in engaging with the recording media, shifted the cultural and musical conventions of the genres. He shows how the mediation of such genres has expended their reception, both geographically and in terms of audience.

As a background to this essay's dominant theme - Malay Media Studies, it would be instructive to recall the terminology of *kesenian tradisi* (traditional arts). He focusses on Indonesia; but the cultural discourse is common throughout the Malay Archipelago. And this covers the diversity of arts presentations—or what we can call oral traditions or the oral and performing arts. These include story-telling or non-storytelling with specific rhythms and tunes, accompanied by musical instruments or otherwise; those not involving verbal elements (like dance); those that incorporate verbal elements (singing or chanting), music, and traditional theatre. Suryadi surveys the major genres of Minangkabau oral literature which have been recorded by the West Sumatra recording companies on commercial cassettes and VCDs. These included the *Rabab Pariaman*, *raba pesisir Selatan* (or *rabab Pasisia*), *dendang Pauah*, and *sijobang*. These are storytelling genres (*kaba*), sung by professional singers, using specific rhythms and tunes, and accompanies by musical instruments. The genres are performed by one singer, accompanying himself on an instrument, or one singer accompanied by an instrumentalist.

Then there are genres comprising traditional *pantun* verse, sometimes interspersed with narrative verse, and chanted by professional singers, using specific rhythms and tunes, accompanied by particular musical instruments. The third major genre is *randai*. This is a traditional open-air theatre, which incorporates chanting, music, and physical acting. The genres are found in specific parts of the west Sumatra region, strongly influenced by a particular dialect of Minangkabau. Suryadi also mentions other genres – the *saluang* (*bagurau*), *salawat dulang*, and *pidato adat* dan *pasambahan*, found in many parts of West Sumatra but carrying local names. In Pariaman for example, *salawat dulang* is called *salawat talam* or *batalam*, and in the Tiku district of Pariaman, the local name for *randai* is *simarantang*.

Suryadi explains that the *bagurau* (literal jollity) involves humorous *pantun* singing, performed by a troupe, usually comprising one *saluang* (flute) player (male) and one or two singers (female). The lyrics of the songs, evoking the atmosphere of village life, serve as a vehicle for teaching morals, stirring emotions, and generating nostalgic mood. Of note is the *Salawat dulang*, a religious art form for “remembering God.” It is performed by two pairs of male singers, who accompany themselves by rhythmic beating on round brass trays (*dulang* or *talam*), as opposed to frame drums. The text, recited to the beat of a round brass tray, comprises teachings from Islam.

Minangkabau oral literature genres are traditionally performed on public occasions of celebrations, such as marriage festivals, the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (at the *surau*), *nagari* festivals (*alek nagari*), and festivities celebrating the installation of a new *penghulu*. According to Suryadi, these are usually performed at night, after Isya prayers (around 9 pm) continuing to daybreak. For that reason, the Minangkabau verbal arts are called the ‘night music of West Sumatra’ – to borrow the phrase from Philip Yampolsky (1995), a scholar of Minangkabau culture and music.

These genres are one of the earliest regional oral repertoires of Sumatra recorded on gramophone disc. In 1939, the Minangkabau *saluang jo dendang* (flute and chant) was available on the Odean Gajah label, produced by Toko Minangkabau at Fort de Kock in Bukittinggi. Referred to as “Njanjian Minangkabau Asli” (authentic Minangkabau songs), the *saluang jo dendang* appeared on two discs: the first disc has “Lagoe Simarantang” (Simarantang song), and “Lagoe Moenah Kajo” (Rich Moenah Song) on one side and “Lagoe tangisan oerang Batoe Sangka” (Cryng song of the Batusangkar people) on the other side. According to Suryadi, the songs were part of a *randai* play taken from classical Minangkabau literature.

Recordings of Minangkabau oral literature, whether in cassette or VCD format, and whether containing *kaba* or non-*kaba* stories, often come out in a multi-volume set, for example, a set of 20, 60-minute cassettes. Some recordings of Minangkabau oral literature are released on both cassette and VCD. One sees VCD covers carrying “Milik juga kasetnya!!!” (Own the cassettes too!!!) (Suryadi, p. 241). In his study, Suryadi interviewed the producers and practitioners of the recording industry. Most master recordings of Minangkabau oral literature genres in cassette format were made in studios. He discovers that established producers as in Tanama Record, Sinar Padang Record, and Talao Record have their own recording studios which are sometimes rented by other producers who do not own a recording studio, or producers of regional pop recordings from neighbouring Jambi and Riau. It is important to note that when the master recordings are produced in a studio setting, the performances are carried out without the participatory audience, which would otherwise be present at a public performance, where audience reactions “affect the nature and purpose of performances of oral poetry in various ways, and “often have an effect on the form and

delivery of a poem” (Suryadi, p.242; citing Finnegan, 1977: p. 231). Based on the interviews also, Suryadi discovers that after the master recordings of the performances, the competing troupes performed again in public in several locations

... to shoot video clips which were then integrated into the VCDs. During public performances, the master recording was played in order to keep it corresponding with the performers’ body movements (p. 243).

In what would generally evoke the notion of media/technological determinism, Suryadi explains the effects of recording on oral texts. His investigation on the narrative of *kaba* stories for example finds that storytellers take the medium into account when they compose texts for commercial recordings.

I mean that certain characteristics can be identified in the texts of oral literature genres that are performed for commercial recordings. For example, certain lines and formulaic expressions found in the recorded texts suggest that storytellers are aware of the limited space available on media like cassette and VCD. Consequently, this influences some features of the recorded texts, which differ from the texts used for live public performances (Suryadi, p. 246).

The performers would say they could not talk at length, thus limiting the narration of some couplets. This was because “time does not allow” (*dek wakatu induk maizinan*), indicating a consciousness of the limited space on a VCD. In other couplets, performers remind audience that “they are just performing for fun in the studio, implying that the performance they make for the recording is not a competitive tussle as it would be in a public performance. Suryadi hypothesizes that

a storyteller who has often recorded in studios has his own biological clock to make his narrative match the available space of the recording medium being used. Consequently, the texts of oral literature on commercial recordings may have their own specific characteristics depending on medium being used. In fact, the oral literature texts recorded on cassette or VCD tend to be condensed, ... (Suryadi, p. 247).

We can assume that a dictum in the theory of oral literature says that circumstances (including audience responses) influence the oral form. It is argued that in public performances, the singer interacts with a participatory audience: they make comments, whistle and clap in response to the singer. Suryadi gives the example of the *sipatuang sirah* (literally “red dragonfly”), present in the *indang* and *dendang pauah* performance. The *sipatuang sirah*’s appearance is associated with the appearance of a red dragonfly, which contrasts strongly with the “surrounding environment dominated by the colour green. The *sipatuang sirah* has a duty to provoke the spectators in order to keep them always enthusiastic about the performance. This is done by injecting comments, clapping and exclamations during the performance.

It must be reminded that traditions also evolve. Every performance is in some respects a new creation by the singer, “every oral literature performance potentially results in a new

text. There are some specific adaptations in response to the circumstances of studio recording and the singer's awareness of the circumstances. New media configure on the text of old/traditional media. Traditional texts become mediated text.

### THE MINANGKABAU IMAGE: MEDIA IN THE MERANTAU NARRATIVE

Suryadi also touches on Minangkabau children's pop music. Their emergence was strongly facilitated by the West Sumatran recording industry itself. The main characteristic of Minangkabau children's pop songs is the conspicuous tone of misery in their lyrics. According to Suryadi, this can be explained from the Minangkabau cultural perspective. He states that the Minangkabau pop music record the life stories of the Minangkabau male "migrants."<sup>2</sup> A more appropriate word would be "perantau." In the *perantau*s, "feelings of resentment, sadness, and longing for families and homelands are mixed" (Suryadi, p. 286).

All of these feelings come into existence as a consequence of the *merantau* custom of men leaving their homeland to find work elsewhere, which is driven by the cultural paradox or contradiction between the Minangkabau matrilineal system and Islam...An analysis of lyrics of Minangkabau children's pop songs show that they are intensely colored by laments (*ratok*), the salient characteristics of the lyrics of standard *pop Minang* for adults (Suryadi, pp.286-287).

Nevertheless the textual and visual elements of the covers and clips of Minangkabau children's pop indicate the influence of globalization and modern technologies on Minangkabau children. Suryadi significantly argues that similar to the phenomenon of child singers who sing adult songs on Indonesian national television, "the melancholy lyrics of Minangkabau children's pop songs betray an unconscious adult interference in the world of Indonesian children through the power of the modern media industry" (Suryadi, p.287).

Towards the final chapters of the book, Suryadi speculates on what he terms as remediation. This is in light of the emergence of the social media such as blogs, You Tube and Facebook. He places the early "talking machines" and radio in perspective. In so doing, he brings forth the notion of "media convergence." This explains the term *remediation*—"the representation of one medium in another" (Suryadi, p. 292; citing Bolter and Grusin 1999, p.45). According to Suryadi, the remediation of the West Sumatran recording industry products occurred long before the social use of the Internet in the 1990s. He chronicles this beginning with radio.

Minangkabau *perantau*s have used radio technology to express their sentiments in the *rantau*. Such radio station, operated by the *perantau*s, are called *radio urang awak* ("our people's radio"). The broadcasts are specifically intended for Minangkabau audiences. The *radio urang awak* stations can be found in several major cities across Indonesia where the *perantau*s reside, and they play a key role in forming and spreading an image of Minangkabau ethnicity to the larger national and inter-ethnic audience. Most are in Jakarta and the outskirts (Bogor, Tangerang and Bekasi/Jabodetabek). *Urang awak* radio stations mostly produce Minangkabau-language programs, use Minangkabau pop music and verbal arts from commercial recordings produced by West Sumatran recording companies.

To further explain, the digital innovations have produced “double remediation” of Minangkabau cassette and VCD content—from cassettes and VCDs to MP3 format, and from MP3 to radio broadcast. There is also the use of such platforms as Facebook or Twitter via mobile phone. At the time of writing, Suryadi approximates some 63 online radio services operated by the Minangkabau ethnicity, some initiated in the Minangkabau region, which he terms as the homeland, and some in the *rantau*. This includes what is called Radio Online Minang (Minangkabau Online Radio). The service established in Jakarta in 2004, by the organization called Cimbuak, is part of the *cimbuak.net*, a website on Minangkabau culture which provides articles and a chat facility—called *palanta* in Minangkabau.<sup>3</sup>

The site *cimbuak.net* was established by the *perantaus* from Sungai Puar, a *nagari* in the Agam regency, West Sumatra, who were living in Jakarta. It was initially intended as a medium of communication for people originating from the village. Gradually it offered articles appealing to the larger Minangkabau ethnicity and identity. The site seems to have inspired Minangkabau *perantau* communities from other *nagari* to set up similar radio services. Eventually we find such online radio services as the Radio Minang Saiyo, Radio Online Sulita, Radio Ranah Minang, Radio PKDP, and Radio Urang Minang Sedunia.

The recordings are then disseminated online and through social media. Hence, we find a multifaceted and multilayered representation of the Minangkabau cultural repertoire recorded on commercial cassettes and VCDs on radio and the various social media. With that we find Minangkabau culture itself transformed, and the Minangkabau’s reception of their own culture altered, both in the *ranah* and in the *rantau*. From the outside, images of Minangkabau ethnicity and identity began to shift.

## CONSUMING MINANGNESS IN MALAYSIA

A pertinent exploration highlighted by Suryadi, and relevant to the theme of this essay, is Malaysia and the Indonesia national province of Riau, the latter often overlooked by Malay scholarship in Malaysia as the cradle of modern Malay civilization, and Malay enlightenment. He discusses the distinction between the (re)production, dissemination, and reception of Minangkabau pop music in the *ranah* Minangkabau and in the *rantau*. The reception of Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs outside their place of origin “goes far beyond the main audiences among Minangkabau *perantau* communities.”

I argue that commercial recordings of regional music are an important means for the ethnic diaspora, Minangkabau, in this case, to keep up their emotional ties and satisfy their nostalgia for their homeland. I believe that the conception of the nation-state influences the perceptions of regional music of a given ethnicity (Suryadi, pp. 321-322).

Suryadi’s finding on Malaysia was the outcome of several fieldtrips to Kuala Lumpur, Kuantan and Seremban between 2004 and 2009. Minangkabau *perantaus* and their descendants have been living in Malaysia for centuries – we can say since time immemorial. This essay would not delve on the history of Minangkabau *perantaus* in Malaysia. Suffice to say that the Malay peninsular has been integral to the *rantau* for centuries. And their descendants, assimilated into Malay ethnicity and identity and integral to Malaysian national society, continue to play a significant role in the nation’s intellectual, social and political life.

The *pop Minang* songs are certainly popular in Malaysia. The recordings are (re) produced independently by Malaysian recording companies. Some are copies of original versions, while others are recompilations featuring a selection of songs from various albums and compiled into a whole new album with a newly created cover. According to Suryadi, there are at least a dozen Malaysian producers and distributors who produce and distribute *pop Minang* albums in the country. In his encounters with some West Sumatran producers, they and likewise “some singers I interviewed in Padang and Bukittinggi said they also did not know that their albums have been reproduced and marketed in Malaysia” (Suryadi, pp.325-326).

In his fieldwork in Malaysia, Suryadi did not find cassette shops and stalls selling recordings of Minangkabau verbal/performing arts. He suggests that from a marketing perspective, their production and sales of recordings in Malaysia are not considered to have the potential to be profitable. However, it is known to him that some residents in the Chow Kit area of Kuala Lumpur have brought back recordings of Minangkabau oral culture on visits to West Sumatra. He gets the impression the *perantaus* still use the Minangkabau language in communicating with each other.

Suryadi’s knowledge, similar to his Minangkabau kinsmen, of the extent of Minangkabau presence in the peninsula is flawed. The whole of the peninsula is populated with *perantaus*, and the descendants of the Minangkabaus. In fact, the Malay demographics, culture and society throughout the Archipelago from Aceh to the Philippines are configured by the Minangkabaus. Areas known to have a high concentration of the *perantaus* and Minangkabau descendants are not only in Kuala Lumpur, but also in Kelang, Gombak, Branang in Selangor, and Kuala Kangsar in Perak. In Gombak, Branang and in Alor Star, Kedah, there are still families who speak the Minangkabau dialect. There is also an error on the perception of Negeri Sembilan in terms of culture and dialect. One would argue that the “language” spoken in Negeri Sembilan is a dialect itself, distinct from Minangkabau.

According to Suryadi, in Malaysia, the reception of *pop Minang* music is related to the social status of Minangkabau *perantaus*, most of these are of the lower-middle class. Strong ethnic sentiments are manifested through various organizations such as the Persatuan Ikatan Minang-Malaysia (Association of Minang Society in Malaysia). The largest Minangkabau organization in Malaysia is the Pertubuhan Ikatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Minangkabau (The Minangkabau Community Welfare Association). There is also the Koperasi Minang Kuala Lumpur Berhad (The Minang Kuala Lumpur Cooperatives Berhad).

On Riau, Suryadi takes us to the Minangkabau *perantaus* residing in Pekanbaru. He examines radio programs that broadcasts Minangkabau music, and focuses on a private radio station called Radio Soreram Indah (RSI) which specializes in local programming, in particular *pop Minang*. Two prominent RSI programs aimed at Minangkabau listeners are “Gendang Acu” and “Ranah Minang Maimbau.” The musical content is taken from commercial cassettes. The playing of *pop Minang* music on radio broadcasts in Pekanbaru shows the importance of music as a communication tool and as a way to maintain a sense of togetherness and belonging among Minangkabau *perantaus*. Suryadi explains:

This form of remediation is one way the products of the West Sumatran recording industry have been used in *rantau*. Another way of reception is the conventional one: purchasing Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs from music shops. And the most sophisticated form of remediation is through the social media... The different ways that Minangkabau commercial cassettes and VCDs are used outside



West Sumatra suggest that the West Sumatran recording industry has hooked into other (social) media, enabling Minangkabau music and verbal arts to acquire a new image and new audiences (Suryadi, p. 341).

The case of Minangkabau society is of reconfiguring identity. It is about sharing the sense of Minangness virtually beyond geography (and ethnic boundaries). It is about “longing for the Minangkabau homeland.” It is time that the study of the communication media in Malaysia (and Indonesia) undertake an endogenous cultural (rather, a cosmological) turn, of un-sanitizing itself in the milieu and context, history and origins framed by the geography of the Archipelago. In this case, the (re)mediation of sounds and images, in turn requires a (re)understanding of *rantau*, *merantau* and *perantau* as a practice, cultural institution; and as a social category to be reconceptualized.

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## NOTES

- 1 With regard to his reference to Negeri Sembilan, it is not clear on whom Suryadi meant—the recent labour forces coming to Malaysia, or the Minangkabau settlers (perantaus) who have been travelling to the peninsula (and Negeri Sembilan) for centuries. The description of them as “permanent residents” may accurately refer to the former. But the demographics and the layering of Minangkabau consciousness outside the ranah (the heartland) is a complex one. Suryadi has instead used the term “homeland.”
- 2 Throughout this essay I have replaced the term “migrant” with perantau.
- 3 The same meaning as the bahasa Melayu “Pelantar.”