

Musik Lenso as the Antithesis of Western “ngak-ngik-ngok” Music: Popular Music as a Method of Decolonization

by Zikri Rahman

"And you, young men and women; you are of course anti-economic imperialism, you are also against political imperialism; why are there many among you who are not against cultural imperialism? Why are there so many of you who still (want to) rock n roll, cha-cha-cha style dance, ngak-ngik-ngok-style of music, (being) boisterously crazy, and so on" - Sukarno, 17th August 1959 during the commemoration of Indonesia's Independence Day

My entry points to this particular research fellowship have been multifaceted. It is mainly driven by my amateurish and intertwined curiosity in the form of music listening; not necessarily through the professional practice of archiving, as well as my inquisitiveness to Indonesian history during its tumultuous decolonization period.

Amidst the specter of the Cold War, the emergence of Non-Aligned movement and the broiling project of third world internationalism, the Sixties serves as an intriguing yet traumatizing long history that continues to shape Indonesia today. As a nation, it still grapples with the 1965 massacres of which, to several accounts, at least 500,000 to 1 million of progressive and leftist cadres, sympathizers to common people in the thousand scattered islands in Indonesia. Much has been said on how the chilling event configured Indonesia politically as well as how it formed, influenced and navigated the basis of its cultural politics for years to come. The archival fellowship project takes interest to explore what had transpired in the nation's vibrant music production and its socio-political context. Here, a specific music genre, Lenso provides an interesting foreground of cultural contestation within multiple ideological trajectories throughout the period of Swinging Sixties.

Archival Process and Strategies

By zooming into Lenso, a form of traditional social dance from the Maluku island, as a socio-historical product and interrogating the musical form via the discipline of historical ethnomusicology, it provides clarity to understand the genre as a social practice and how embedded the discourses (via song lyrics, governmental policy, socializations processes) are within Lenso music. Fundamental in the process here is to position the music itself as the primary data, as well as relying and expanding on secondary sources such as interviews, writings on newspaper, among others. Surprisingly, Lenso music itself can be deemed as under research which sees the need to utilize different archival strategies of which I will briefly explain.

In this three months fellowship project hosted by Irama Nusantara (Irnus), I draw principally from their existing archival materials which comprises mainly digitized music collaterals and productions, from vinyl to publications. Majority of Irnus's materials are available online and as the research fellow, I was given access to its server which contained yet-to-be published archival materials, ranging from music production, publications (newsletter, magazines, pamphlets, album covers, album sleeves), etc. Apart from that, Irnus also organizes a series of ongoing open call for materials, particularly to decenter and diversify its archival resources. This proves to be pertinent to my first month of archival research in establishing and identifying primary materials which are relevant to the project.

Apart from that, I also frequently visit different public libraries and museums; Perpustakaan Nasional, Lokananta and Jakarta Library & HB Jassin Literary Document Center which provide quite an extensive material collection in the form of microfilm as well as monographs. Other than that, it is also important to highlight another critical source of information: the private archives, either owned by the individuals or those affiliated with organizations and foundations. Here, the access can be rather limited as it mostly relies on personal connection. The archival resources itself is a labyrinth; it can be scattered with unorganized and limited information of its own resources. I faced challenges in my second phase of my research as a result of the grant's disbursement. The delay resulted in my inability to establish proper contacts and visit other personal archives outside Jakarta; particularly in Solo dan Yogyakarta, in accessing other archival materials.

Posited as a form of Soekarno-led state-based popular music, Lenso provides an interesting convergence of multiple discourse on nation-state and cultural formation (in the form of 'Guided Democracy' to 1959 Manipol USDEK Proclamation) as well as a more grounded history of its people via popular music production. In my attempt to capture the complexities of this phenomenon, I periodize the historical timeline from 1950 to 1965 which covers intertwined political events. Encompassing Indonesia's diplomacy and cultural missions, ideological conflicts between multiple cultural groups to various governmental policies, it resonates with the idea of state-based cultural formation which centers around the idea of 'national identity'. Central to the process is to identify relevant archival resources, production and recording related to the genre. Second, to highlight the involvement of multiple music and cultural actors and its entities in the process. And lastly, to understand the socialization process that informs the cultural production of such music genres. Such a timeline provides an apt visualization of how different entities negotiate, contest and assert multiple notions of cultural process (be it in the form of imperialistic, decolonizing and indigeneity process) during those volatile historical periods.

With the archival materials that I managed to encounter and gather throughout the three month period, it should be apparent that the observations in this ongoing research fellowship provide an incomplete history and a subjective reading of the socio-historical context of Lenso music production.

Archival Findings

Centering on multiple manifestations of Lenso music, primarily on its music production and cultural events associated with the genre, I observed the need to thoroughly contextualize and identify different categorizations and terminologies in the various publications pertaining to the notion of music in Indonesia. Ranging from the usage of different phrases such as 'senisuar', 'vokal', 'musik', 'irama', 'persembahan suara', 'hiburan (daerah / umum)', 'musik daerah', 'chorak' (pattern / genre), it is strategic to broaden my archival findings, particularly in identifying multiple musical production in the the 1960s and how it related to its dissemination process. Several prominent publications, particularly on Indonesian popular music, such as Diskorina, Irama Nada, Pop Melodies and Diskoria provides an insight to how intertwined the state policy in censoring what is deemed as 'Western music' and the highly contested sociopolitical space for the newly independent Indonesia.

In relation to Lenso music production, I have identified multiple albums which directly contain the 'essence' of Lenso from Irama Nusantara's archive. Central to these would be the lyrical content (which explicitly mentioned the word 'Lenso' in its lyrics or title), affiliations of the musical groups and personnels (most notably the assembled group such as The Lensoist, Orkes Irama, the band Arulan and various individual singers such as Oslan Husein and Lilis Surjani, among others), cultural missions entourage and particular historical moments (The Games of the New Emerging Forces 1963, 10th Years Anniversary of Asia-Africa Conference in 1965). It is within these aspects, I attempt

to map various constellations of how Lenso music is being envisioned by incorporating influences of the traditional music, yet modern sensibilities thriving in postcolonial Indonesia in that period. Apart from that, it is also pertinent to note that I have identified, with the assistance of Irnus' counterparts and networks, multiple albums, particularly of 'irama / musik daerah' (provincial musics) which possibly influence the sound formation of Lenso music. Deriving from vast geographical locations, from the eastern part of Indonesia through the rhythmic beats of Lenso dance and the confluence of different genre arrangements such as Hawaiian music, chacha to keroncong, for example.

Also worth noting, Irnus through its extensive and established network, is also in the process of collecting photo archives. One main initiative which directly related to my research is a series of unpublished photographs archives by the family of Darmono, one of the key personnels of Orkes Irama / The Lensoist. The photographs primarily document the band performances as part of Sukarno's entourage to promote cultural diplomacy in multiple countries, such as the United States of America, Thailand, India, Japan, Spain, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Algeria, among others.

Although the archival finding provides an interesting trajectory in positioning Indonesia's attempt to explore different forms of musical articulation during such a historical period, it also provides another way for us on how to further develop the project in the future. One such practical recommendation, coming from a novice working on archival material, would be to approach the project in phases. This is to ensure that all archival resources are strategically utilized and further analyzed.

Archival Challenges and Possibilities

Within the three months period of my research, I faced challenges in navigating different forms of archival resources and institutions, ranging from music production, publications and photography based materials. Apart from that, having access to multiple archival institutions, be it public or private, also highlights different archival systems in practice. Irnus's personnel also shared the similar sentiment where they are also in the midst of finding and developing proper archival systems as they expand to accommodate different archival paraphernalia.

Coming back to the idea of approaching the archival project in phases, as Lenso music itself is academically under research, it might be of my interest to focus on its ethnomusicological and music composition dimension. Apart from that, I do believe that comparative studies of how (if there are any) other sorts of regional-based state-led popular music initiatives also might provide an interesting insight to the critical period of Indonesian history and its decolonizing potential. This is particularly pertinent to understand the transition to Suharto's New Order where different dynamics emerged. Multiple socio-cultural and historical narratives during the Soekarno-led Old Order were either suppressed, contained and contested afterwards. Here, there is a need to trace Lenso music roles and how it was perceived during and after the Soekarno's era. This would be fundamental to further diversify the knowledge production, particularly by accessing other archival materials from the Arsip Nasional Indonesia.

In facing such challenges, it is also one of my archival strategies to further develop the project by undertaking oral history documentation. To date, interviews have been conducted with Guruh Soekarno, the son of Soekarno and prominent singer to provide an insight to his father's cultural legacy. Apart from this, informal discussions with Irnus's counterparts, private archivist as well as academicians like Dr. Jack Arthur Simanjuntak, an ethnomusicologist with experience in conducting multiple research and community based projects in the eastern part of Indonesia, is indeed

illuminating. Last but not least, the upcoming exhibition in September also provides the strategic opportunity for the public to be in direct conversation with the archival materials and be involved in the process of expanding it further.