

A hybrid popular culture



Indonesian pop music and television still have a significant influence in East Timor

Annie Sloman



Galaxy performing at a beachside hut in Dili

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As I walk home from the market one afternoon in the southern Timorese border town of Suai, my ears pick up the sound of the famous dangdut song 'Pacaran lagi' (Dating again). A group of Timorese children are putting on an impromptu concert in a tree overhanging an old burnt-out building from Indonesian times. The tree sways dangerously as 20 pairs of hips gyrate, defying gravity. The volume increases as they realise that a foreigner is watching. The children are singing their hearts out, full blast, in Indonesian. This surprises me, given that these

children must all be under the age of eight, which means they have been born in independent, Tetum- and Portuguese-speaking East Timor. None of them could keep up a conversation in Indonesian, yet each word of the song comes out loud and clear.

On the other side of the country in Los Palos, I enter a home one night to see an extended family glued to the TV. They are watching an episode of Indonesian soap opera featuring Jakarta slang, characters in Muslim garb, Ramadan jokes and young funky Indonesian actors. The images on the screen seem so distant from life in this poor rural village at the edge of East Timor, but for the people watching there is a sense of connection.

The sights and sounds of Indonesian pop

At times, the prevalence of popular Indonesian music and images in East Timor makes it easy to think that you are in Indonesia. Indonesian music blares out of loud-speakers, satellite dishes streaming Indonesian TV are spread across the country, and posters with pictures of Indonesian pop stars line walls and microlet minibuses.

The odd Indonesian rock concert in Dili, often sponsored by leading Indonesian cigarette brands, is one of the highlights of the year. These concerts, such as Peter Pan in 2005 or Slank in 2008, can bring the city to a standstill. The streets are lined from the airport to the stadium with people waiting to get a glimpse of the rock stars. It takes hours of dangerous pushing to get a place inside the jam-packed Dili stadium to see the band or, some would argue, just to see what all the commotion is about. These concerts attract not only youth, but everybody from young children to old women; even Xanana Gusmão, the current Prime Minister, has attended.

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The easy access to popular culture affects the way young people in East Timor speak Indonesian. Despite the use of formal Indonesian in the high school and university curricula, young people tend to speak the cool slang of Jakarta that they have learnt from Indo-pop. Words like 'gue' and 'lu', slang for 'I' and 'you', and phrases like 'capek deh' ('I'm over it'), and 'kasihan da lu' (a sarcastic 'you poor thing' with matching hand gestures) have entered daily Tetum street vernacular.

Escapism

Why is Indonesian pop culture so popular with people, young and old, who fought hard for independence from Indonesia? Aziby and Xisto, emerging artists from the Arte Moris Free Art School in Dili, explained to me that Indonesian popular culture is something everybody can relate to, 'even old women with no teeth'. They see Indonesian pop as telling stories that are very close to their own lives. Small village or neighbourhood life, the influence of conservative religion on relationships, issues of gender and cultural hierarchy, arranged marriages and issues of poverty are key themes of the shows and the pop-songs. Indonesian pop culture also gives people room to see and to dream about the completely 'other' world of big cities and the upper class elite of Jakarta.

Timorese can understand the words of Indonesian music and television, which is less often the case with similar Portuguese pop. For these reasons Indonesian popular culture provides a form of entertainment and escapism.

It is not surprising that pop culture provides an escape from the hardship of daily subsistence and high unemployment in East Timor. There is little access to reading material, particularly in Tetum, and illiteracy is widespread. Television and most local radio stations air Timorese or Portuguese based content, but they have only limited broadcasting hours and a limited range of low-quality local radio and television productions. All of this means that there is little to keep people's attention. It makes sense that, with the increasing accessibility and affordability of 'parabola' satellite TV and the sale of cheap Indonesian VCDs and cassettes, Indonesian pop culture has remained popular over the last ten years. There is also a common fear that Indonesian language skills will be lost, and many parents are actively encouraging their young children to watch Indonesian TV and learn Indonesian songs, in the hope that by doing so they will learn Indonesian. Maintaining Indonesian language skills is seen as important for future education and work opportunities in Indonesia.

Aziby and Xisto do not see their appreciation of Indonesian television or music as making them any less Timorese. For them, it is no different from watching or listening to media from elsewhere in the world. They choose to watch Timorese programs when they are on, but among the international shows on offer, the Indonesian programs have the advantage because they do not need to be subtitled. Like other Timorese, they prefer Indonesian TV to the Portuguese shows that are broadcast on the national television station, TVTL. This may be the result of a lack of comprehension, differences in culture or the ambiguous position of the Portuguese language in East Timor.

Aziby and Xisto also touch on the sense of nostalgia for the former friendships between the colonisers and the colonised that can be found in most post-colonial societies. They recall that Indonesians were often happy to enter the kitchens of Timorese people and eat with them, while Portuguese were never interested in doing so. For some Timorese, Indonesian television and music can evoke bad memories. For others, it may remind them of good times and of their cultural and physical closeness to their neighbour. It may also give them a sense of being part of a region, something that they do not get from western pop culture.

Timorese pop culture

The presence and popularity of Indonesian music and television in East Timor has not weakened the development or the popularity of Timorese popular culture.

Local bands such as Galaxy, Cedalia, Gembel, Cinco De Oriente and Rai Nain regularly attract big crowds and enjoy a

high profile on local radio. Television shows such as *Istoria ba Futuru* (History for the Future) and *Estrella* – East Timor’s version of the ‘*Idol*’ phenomenon - are popular viewing. East Timor’s first ever soap opera, *Roza*, caused a storm the first time it was screened in 2005. The show was put together using funding from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The funding was enough for one 8 episode season. The actors were from the well known Bibi-Bulak performance troupe. *Roza* explored issues of domestic violence and gender, and, though it was short lived and did not match the standards of Indonesian cinetron, it became a ‘must watch’. For the first time Timorese stories in Tetum, at times cutting edge and controversial, were being shown on TV.

Unfortunately since 2005, similar Timorese TV shows have been few and far between. Support and standards for local artists are limited. The ability of artists to create an album or TV production, let alone one that matches the standards of the Indonesian pop-industry juggernaut, is limited by a lack of skills and infrastructure to support a

popular entertainment industry in East Timor. The lack of production and distribution outlets mean that it is difficult for artists to create or release work publicly. TVTL is still only broadcasting a few hours of Timorese content a day, with the majority being focused on government or public education. On top of this, when TVTL has been approached by local production houses offering to create work free of charge, TVTL has clearly stated that they will only screen something if the production house can pay for screening or find independent funding to cover screening costs, and that such productions must fit into public education agendas. This means that production houses and artists are limited to creating productions that suit development donors and government.

The limited legal framework for artists is another barrier to the development of the Timorese pop industry. East Timor does not have copyright laws or the means to protect artists’ rights. Members of the Timorese band



People climb high to watch Peter Pan perform at a concert in Dili

Thushara Dibley

Galaxy independently recorded their new album, *Perecua*, in Bandung, using money they had saved from years of performing. They are, however, concerned about releasing their album in East Timor, out of fear that they will lose all rights to their work due to mass copying, the common practice of people re-recording other people's songs, and the lack of protection for artistic licences. Furthermore they will struggle to sell their album at a price that will cover production costs because of the prevalence of cheap Indonesian pirated CDs for sale in East Timor.

Pop culture provides an escape from the hardship of daily subsistence and high unemployment in East Timor

The continued presence of Indonesian popular culture in East Timor after independence demonstrates a reality that is often ignored by Timorese politicians. There are strong cultural links with Indonesia that continue to grow. There are increasing Indonesia/East Timor collaborations and exchanges through art. One such collaboration was 'Recovering Lives Across Borders', a print-making work-shop and exhibition in Dili in September 2008 that brought together people from art collectives in Yogyakarta, East Timor and Australia. Furthermore numerous Timorese writers have attended the Ubud Readers and Writers festival over the years and many Timorese students are currently studying art and culture in Indonesia. There are also signs that the local popular culture is beginning to spread its wings. Recently the local band Galaxy were invited to tour to Kupang in West Timor and to Flores in the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara, which is linked culturally as well as geographically with East Timor. The continuing growth of home-grown Timorese popular culture could eventually result in the flow of cultural products into Indonesia, particularly to regions with long cultural ties to the island of Timor. But for this to happen the industry will need more support. ii

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