

Idealisation through the Conceptualisation of Traditopia Album: *Nukilan Etnografi*

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Abstract

Malaysian music has continuously evolved, flourishing locally and globally from both independent and mainstream labels, developing a positive transformation and serving as a platform for artist reflection and musical perspectives. It has become a well-known musical identity, showcasing musical nuances that blend the idea of modernisation and preserving culture. On the contrary, language and cultural practices may be a challenge for international listeners, making it daunting to connect or fully understand and appreciate the music. This disadvantage may interfere with the aptitude for cross-cultural recognition. The Traditopia album positions itself within this continuum, demonstrating how modernisation preserves and reshapes cultural identity through an insightful approach from the project director, shaping the direction of musical nuances in nine original tracks. Traditopia examines the conceptual framework of *Nukilan Etnografi*, an innovative Malaysian music project that combines traditional Malaysian, western classical, and jazz elements to highlight the country's cultural diversity, with the purpose of affirming the belief that modernisation need not erase tradition; instead, it can provide a platform for traditional sounds to resonate within a broader, contemporary context within the performing arts. This study reviews the objectives of the creative intentions behind the project, focusing on how the compositional works reflect the director's vision. Drawing on literature reviews and primary sources, the research reveals that Traditopia serves as both a tribute to traditional Malaysian sounds and a reinterpretation of these sounds through a modern lens, intended to bridge traditional and contemporary musical forms.

Keywords: cultural identity, innovation, modernisation

Introduction

As the globalisation of music has continuously evolved and developed over the years, so have the composers' and artists' eagerness for innovative expression. The concept album is a common medium for engaging in creative work. The concept album is a collection of tracks that exhibit musical coherence and concentrate on a single primary subject or narrative (Covach, 2017, as cited in Klein, 2019). Since its introduction in the 1950s, the concept album has been a part of the contemporary music scene. It has become an element for artists and composers to enhance their musical idealisation, expression, and views socially, politically, and culturally. Despite similarities and differences in the concept album, each defines and views the album differently. For example, the Malaysian traditional albums from the well-known Malaysian singer titled 'Belagu' by Dayang Nurfaizah and 'Cindai' by Dato' Sri Hajah Siti Nurhaliza are similar concepts based on Malaysian traditional music elements, compositional works and new music arrangements of Malaysian traditional folklore. However, there are differences between the two albums in terms of the album theme, such as instrumentation, musical arrangements, singing style, lyrics, melodies, and the soundscape of the album, making both unique forms of cultural expression. The lack of study constrains understanding of the idealisation of the concept album. By exploring these elements, the study seeks to understand the views and experiences that provide insight into the artistic idealisation of creative minds. Thus, a case study of the selected album Traditopia: *Nukilan Etnografi* is selected to obtain specific data. The objective is to review the

creative intentions of the album from a project director's perspective. The data collection includes personal journaling and self-reflective experiences, emphasising creative intentions through developing compositional works and idealising the concept album, instrumentation, and stylistic integrations that characterise the album.

The album *Traditopia* illustrates and critiques an ideal environment, society, and culture free from the present reality's constraints, oppressions, and threats. People strongly associate it with the traditional world, where, despite material privations and poverty, individuals felt life was better, simpler, more tranquil, and more satisfying than it is today. Researchers have long identified economic, social, and physical utopias that aim to realise ideal societies as attempts to conceptualise real societies in a manner quite distinct from what we call 'non-utopian' social theories.

Traditopia positions itself within this continuum, demonstrating how modernisation preserves and reshapes cultural identity. Modernisation is essential in a world where globalisation often threatens the unique sonic and cultural identities of ethnic communities. *Traditopia* affirms the belief that modernisation need not erase tradition; instead, it can provide a platform for traditional sounds to resonate within a broader, contemporary context. By synthesising these philosophical concepts, *Traditopia* does not merely present an auditory experience—it narrates an ongoing journey of cultural self-awareness, celebrating the resilience of Malaysian identity as it adapts to new realities. The album's compositions are, therefore, not only artistic expressions but also cultural artefacts, echoing Malaysia's story of adaptation, preservation, and transformation within a globalised world.

Background of Malaysian Music Globalisation

Malaysia is diverse and rich in syncretic traditions with local and global influences. The ethnic diversity of the Malay, Indian, Chinese and indigenous groups has influenced the Malaysian music industry and contributed to globalisation, representing Malaysia as a multicultural nation (Chopyak, 2007; Halid, 2022; (Doraisamy et al., 2008). Additionally, the influence of the colonial legacy, such as British, Portuguese, Japanese, and Dutch, has significantly contributed to the various musical traditions, resulting in a fusion musical style that shaped the syncretic music of the Malaysian (Ismail & Loo, 2023). The various cultural influences have inspired Malaysia's music composers, songwriters, and arrangers to produce masterpieces and creative work representing the identity of Malaysia to global audiences. This vibrant inter-ethnic dynamic has fostered an environment where multiple genres, from traditional Malay gamelan, the use of Kristang language, which is a contribution from the Portuguese community into the variation of joget rhythm patterns, Indian classical music to Chinese opera, and Western pop, not only coexist but also blend, producing new styles that reflect Malaysia's multicultural reality (Ismail & Loo, 2023).

As the majority ethnic group, Malay culture is a foundation upon which various cultural elements are layered, creating a unique and dynamic musical landscape. Malay music, traditionally characterised by forms such as *dikir barat*, *ghazal*, and *joget*, often emphasises storytelling, community participation, and spiritual or ceremonial expression, reflecting values deeply rooted in the society's historical narratives and cultural beliefs (McKeon, 2021).

However, Malay culture is not insular; it has historically embraced and absorbed influences from Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups, including Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities. This inclusivity, guided by mutual respect and shared identity, has fostered a unique musical synergy. In Malaysia, music enthusiasts will find a significant blend of Malay rhythms combined with Indian tabla, using Chinese pentatonic scales infused with Western harmonic structures. Individual cultural identities with interweaving sounds are celebrated in unity, embracing the multicultural interweaving of sound concerning temporal continuity.

It is the contributions of melody, textures and rhythms created by the Indigenous and colonial soundscapes. The melodies, textures, and rhythms map the auditory elements, a framework for temporal continuity (Doraisamy et al., 2008). Furthermore, temporal continuity is considered a philosophical view that adapts historical influences to contemporary Malaysian music. This framework emphasises a dynamic role in shaping, adapting, reinterpreting, and harmonising new influences, which seeks to highlight Malaysia's music as a living continuum. Through this perspective, the study will review how the *Traditopia Nukilan Etnografi* album is shaped by

modernisation and ethnic diversity. This research aims to provide insights into the soundscape synthesis of historical and cultural influences through a temporal bridge between tradition and innovation.

Definition and Origin of Traditopia

Traditopia combines two words, 'tradi' from the word 'traditional' and 'topia' from the word 'utopia' that align with the album, whose concept is traditional contemporary Malaysian music. Traditopia thus draws upon cultural hybridisation using compositions as narratives to express a particular aspect of Malaysia's sociocultural evolution. In this case, Traditopia functions as an aural archive, illustrating the coexistence of past and present. Traditopia is expected to recontextualise traditional sounds within modern frameworks and becomes a means of investigating how Malaysian cultural identity persists through integration, revealing these musical traditions within contemporary contexts.

Relevance of Traditional Elements in Modern Music

Traditopia provides a reflective space to consider broader idealisation questions: How can the soundscapes of past heritage be retained in the present? How can music act as a medium to sustain cultural continuity while embracing modernisation? The album suggests openness from composers and musicians to reimagination and not rely on cultural isolation, a process by which the music's core values are preserved through dynamic, evolving expressions from composers and musicians (Stein & Spillman, 1996).

While globalisation may overshadow local traditions and has raised concerns about cultural homogenisation, this tension highlights the need to balance embracing global influences and preserving unique cultural identities. Building on this foundation, Traditopia navigates a careful balance between reverence for tradition and openness to imaginative reinterpretation (Maestri, 2020). There is always a need to allow freedom to evolve while maintaining balance and preserving the essence of Malaysian heritage. Rather than rigidly adhering to historical forms, this album idealises a dynamic approach where traditional music is honoured as a breathing art form capable of growth (Geiser et al., 2010).

An Overview of Traditopia: Nukilan Etnografi Album

Traditopia is a diversified soundscape combining modern music elements with nine compositions that layer the preservation of traditional melodies and rhythms within the constructive harmonic and rhythmic structure of modern contemporary music. Integrating harmonic and rhythmic structures of modernisation and the sonic timbres of traditional musical instruments rooted in the diversified culture of the Malaysian identity serve a dual purpose. Both concur with the objectives of hybridising the surrounding community rituals, known as *adat*, using instruments like *rebab*, *serunai*, *gendang* and *gambus* with the rhythm section and keyboard synthesisers, representing the colonisation of Western culture. This integration is a vital configuration that ignites this album's conceptualisation process and inspirations.

Conceptualisation Process and Inspirations

Album conceptualisation is an essential process in the music industry, serving as a vital bridge between the artist's creative musical directions and the listener's experience. Concept albums, particularly those crafted with a central idea or story, allow artists to dive deep into themes that resonate with audiences, such as identity, cultural heritage, or social issues. From an industry perspective, albums with a strong concept combined with temporal continuity enhance an artist's brand, creating lasting associations with specific themes or sounds. In essence, album conceptualisation transforms music from a mere auditory experience to a multisensory one that resonates deeply, obtained from the mindset of the project director, producers, composers, performers,

recording engineers and listeners. Traditional musicians often have a deeply intuitive understanding of their music, relying on oral transmission and established cultural practices.

In contrast, modern musicians' thought processes are more theoretical or improvisational. These differences require careful negotiation, ensuring the ensemble works cohesively despite these contrasting approaches. In creating Traditopia, the collaboration between traditional and modern musicians introduces an additional layer of exploration, with possibilities that the original essence could be overshadowed, oversimplified, or even over-amplified.

Conclusion

In a world where cultural exchange is instantaneous, idealising Traditopia has been an incredibly challenging yet rewarding journey to preserving tradition and embracing innovation. This paradox has been central to the creation of Traditopia, passing down and enduring heritage while allowing the music to bridge with the present in a harmonious dialogue.

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Biography

Dr. Siti Nur Hajarul Aswad Shakeeb Arsalaan Bajunid, also known as Hajarul Bajunid, is a pianist and educator at Universiti Teknologi MARA. Her expertise spans classical, ethnic fusion, and popular music, showcased in performances and compositions for solo piano, orchestras, and ensembles. Dr. Hajarul is dedicated to promoting Malaysian musical heritage and is currently showcasing her latest albums, Traditopia and Lurajahaysah.

Rizal Ezuan Zulkifly Tony, or Rizaltony, is a jazz guitarist, composer, and educator at Universiti Teknologi MARA. With over two decades of experience, he has collaborated with international artists like Henk Kraaijeveld, Jens Bunge, and Nial Djuliarso, as well as Malaysian icons such as Anuar Zain and Adibah Noor. His artistry is currently represented in his solo album, Talk to Me.