Adrian McNeil

Introduction:
Asian modernities, musical traditions and strategies of engagement

The long-term cultural and social consequences of the rapid economic transformation experienced by many Asian countries over the last twenty years or so are yet to be realized. Indeed there is still no certainty as to where they are heading and what they will eventually give rise to. When thinking about this transformation, it is easy to subsume it under either of the ubiquitous rubrics of Western scholarship: 'the clash of tradition and modernity' or 'the cultural consequences of economic globalization'. However, to do so would fail to take into account the increasingly problematic issue of globalization, both as a Western driven economic imperative, and as an intellectual construct.1 Secondly, it would overlook that the experience of modernity and economic globalization have had a different traction in, and relevance to, post-colonial, developing Asian countries than it has had in developed Western nations.2

1. For example, see Chris Brown, 'A World Gone Wrong', in David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds), The Global Transformations Reader (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

2. Partha Chatterjee has been one of the key thinkers and prolific writers on this issue; see, for example, Empire and Nation: Essential Writings, 1985–2005 (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010); 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', Economic and Political Weekly, April 19, 2008; Our Modernity, The South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Rotterdam/Dakar, 1997 (a pdf of this text is available at http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/files/partha1.pdf); and also The Nation and its Fragments (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2011, Kelham House, 3 Lancaster Street, Sheffield, S3 8AF..
Breakthroughs in digital technologies, and the impact of economic globalization, have given rise to a myriad of complex and potent cultural consequences over the last twenty years or so. Such leaps in technological advancement have enabled some of the effects of modernity to be ratcheted up several notches across the world. These effects have perhaps been most evident in the increased momentum and sophistication in the circulation of information, as well as in the ever-expanding reach of that circulation. The mechanisms of economic globalization have played a significant role in this process by determining the types of conduits through which much of that information flows, just as they have also influenced the way that information is organized and who benefits from such flows. Taken together this intensification of modernity has been identified by some as a ‘hypermodernity’.4

It is worth noting that these transformative changes in Asia have coincided chronologically with the advent of hypermodernity. While there is certainly some form of causal connection between these two events, and also with general rise in religious fundamentalism and political nationalism in South and South East Asia, it is very difficult to articulate exactly what this might be. An added complication to apprehending the full picture of this emerging situation is, as Giddens points out, that so much of Western scholarship has been devoted to the phenomenon of modernity itself, yet in comparison the study of traditions and the long-term impact that modernity, and now hypermodernity, has had on them has been largely neglected.5 Despite impressions of any such scholarly neglect it is not uncommon in recent times for cultural traditions in one form or another to be exposed to, and in some cases, appropriated by, religious fundamentalism and extreme nationalist agendas. A notable case in this regard was the experience of Hindustani music in the late twentieth century in India. During this period, the federal government was under the control of the right-wing nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and its ideological wing known collectively as the Sangh Parivar. Over several years the government pursued a cultural nationalist agenda which set about to purge eight hundred years of Muslim involvement in the development of Hindustani music in the desire to propagate a re-imagined, essentialist reduction of culture through an appropriation and reworking of the historical past.6 From the onset

6. The violent effects of this agenda was witnessed through the renaming of music institutions that carried Muslim names, the destruction of heritage sites of Muslim musicians, and the
this was an impossible goal, but it soon became clearly apparent that the pursuit of cultural chauvinism wasn’t so much aimed at challenging representations of the past on any intellectual level, as it was an ideological fight for control over the power structures of contemporary politics in India. This secular-communal divide continues to remain the most fundamental fault-line of Indian polity. Indeed, it is difficult to study traditional music in India without encountering and/or negotiating this divide.

The intertwining of the wider forces of modernity, hypermodernity, economic globalization, political nationalism and cultural chauvinism have played out in different configurations, and to different effect, across Asia. Through considering how traditional and contemporary musicians, cultural institutions, governments and so on, try to engage with, or seek to mediate, this complex dynamic, it emerges that strategies are perhaps as numerous as those involved in doing so. Indeed, the four articles in this special issue on Asian music explore four very different responses to this highly complex situation. Each of these articles approaches these issues from different perspectives. This difference is not only due to them being concerned with contemporary change in the music cultures of different countries in Asia (Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and Malaysia) but also because each paper is concerned with a completely different type of response. Taken together, they bring attention both to the complexities of the situation, but also to the many layers of activity on which those responses take place, covering the entire gamut from long-term governmental policy to short-term individual aesthetic choices of musicians.

Writing on the theme of an emergent Japanese cultural nationalism and its role in shaping the significant policy shift in the compulsory music education curriculum, Henry Johnson notes that there has been a distinct transformation of tradition intended ‘...to refute the perceived threat of cultural loss to which the processes of modernization and Westernization have subjected modern Japan’ (p. 25). Whether or not any such threat is real, this cause is nevertheless championed by proponents of the country’s political nationalist agenda. The subsequent fundamental changes in educational policy that have occurred over the last few years in response to this agenda have resulted in a significant change in the reimagining of the traditional past, the resignification of traditional instruments to raising of the spectre of dividing Hindustani music along Hindu/Muslim lines. See Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, The Crisis of Secularism in India (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Adrian McNeil, ‘Politicing a Musical Tradition: Religious Fundamentalism and Musicians in North India’, Context 11 (1996): 52–54. The establishment of the organization ‘Artists Against Communalism’ (http://www.sahmat.org/111991.html) was a direct response to the consequences of this agenda which was experienced across the arts.
serve contemporary political objectives, and a diverse range of responses of the musical community to this emerging situation.

Jonas Baes writes on the intermingling of identity politics, cultural nationalism and musical tradition in Malaysia. As a composer of Western classical music in the Philippines he approaches this issue from an intriguing and completely different perspective from the other articles. In discussing the condition of Malaysian avant garde composers, he argues the case of the Western classical music tradition in Malaysia from the position of a marginalized cultural form. Given that this music has been one of the historical and cultural emblems of the West, circulated through coloniality and modernity, Baes outlines a rather unique ‘geo-political’ situation for this tradition in Malaysia. Its uneasy place in the Malaysian’s government cultural and social agenda for the construction of a modern nation state provides an interesting insight into the political management of a multicultural society through a Malay nationalist ideology.

Manolete Mora’s article focuses on the experiences of a well-established, traditionally trained, musician in Bali, Alit Adi Putra. The article documents and analyses the engagement of an individual with the expanding fluid spaces in which he works, the artistic choices he makes in playing with his tradition in new contexts, and the creative strategies he has subsequently devised and developed for doing so. ‘For his music shows how Balinese artistic productions may be shaped by processes of cultural negotiation that occur at the conceptual borders of the familiar and the foreign, the inside and outside, the traditional and the modern, and the cultivated and the popular’ (p. 65). Departing from the tendency to position traditionality and modernity in opposition to each other, Mora’s article argues that in Bali they are both interleaved and it is this dynamic which creates the ambiguity and fluidity that talented artists, like Alit, are able to explore in the pursuit of artistic development and, just as importantly, in being able to make a living.

James Mitchell writes on Thai cultural nationalism, identity politics and how the popular music genre lukthung has played a part in the ongoing class-based political turmoil that has taken place in Thailand since 2005. He notes, rather paradoxically, that ‘[l]ukthung fan clubs exemplify the Thai discourse of community which is opposed to modernity, globalization and market-driven capitalism—the very conditions that have led to the development of modern lukthung’ (p. 76). His line of reasoning follows the idea that ‘...the lukthung audience provides a snapshot of non-elite Thai society formulating and engaging in responses to the modern mediated world’ (p. 87). In fact it could be suggested that the performance of lukthung makes this process of mediation audible while the grand spectacle of major lukthung performances, with its emphasis on informal community building, becomes a site of resistance against these larger global forces.
Taken together these articles suggest that the advent of modernity, and any rise in nationalism, by no means spelt the disappearance of traditions in Asia. While certainly marginalized, and in some cases deracinated by modernity, it is certainly not the case that musical traditions just simply disappeared. It is how they have been adapted, modified or marginalized in response to the wider change that becomes interesting and some times alarming. Outside of the polarising domains of fundamentalism and nationalism, some cultural traditions have also been re-imagined and recast by practitioners through strategies and activities that can take advantage of some of the fluid and ambiguous spaces unintentionally created by modernity and flamed by hypermodernity. As the outcomes of these strategies unfold, they are gradually coming to the attention of wider activist and intellectual endeavours. In so doing this issue attempts to add to a small body of studies devoted to investigating this geographical and cultural area of study, and to exploring the compelling idea that such musical studies can be sites of investigation through which power structures can be made audible.