

# Epilogue

## *Global Indian Ocean(s) and the Promise of a Decolonial World*

Julia Byl and Jim Sykes

In 2019, Jim traded in his “professor” hat for one labeled “concert booker and tour manager”: a musical group he’d worked with in Singapore asked him to book a US tour of a few East Coast universities. The group, Siva Sakthi Muniandy Urumi Melam (hereafter SSMUM), is composed of an ever-shifting roster of young Tamil males belonging to Singapore’s Indian minority (9 percent of the population).<sup>1</sup> The genre SSMUM plays, *urumi melam*, centers on the uniquely sonorous urumi drum, which is thought to generate and sustain trance in ritual contexts. Today, urumi groups are ubiquitous at Hindu festivals in Singapore and Malaysia (most notably Thaipusam, the largest Hindu festival in the region), where they accompany devotees undergoing penance.<sup>2</sup> Live performances of the top urumi ensembles garner many YouTube views, particularly in Malaysia, where the genre emerged in its modern configuration.<sup>3</sup> The group’s most well-known video, “Karuppu,” had 595,000 views at the time of writing—no small feat considering Singapore’s small size.<sup>4</sup> Before visiting the States, SSMUM had already toured Australia and Tamil Nadu.

Throughout their US trip, the group members wore matching red hoodies at all times with the group’s logo emblazoned on the front. Upon arrival in New York, they headed promptly to Times Square, where Jim found himself sheepish at the city’s infamous grubbiness—though the musicians seemed to enjoy themselves (figure 15.1). SSMUM’s first performance was at the City University of New York, where they shared a bill with New York-based Tamil Hindu musicians of Surinamese descent.<sup>5</sup> Both parties seemed excited to witness their Tamil diasporic identities reflected back on one another, and they approached each other with curiosity and camaraderie. In contrast to the Singapore group’s use of the urumi



FIGURE 15.1. Siva Shakthi Muniandy Urumi Melam in Times Square, New York City. Photo by Jim Sykes.

and *thavil* drums, the Suriname performance shifted from songs using harmonium to frame drumming (*thappu*).

After the performance, a lively discussion with the audience ensued and moved in a direction that Jim had not anticipated. Some in the crowd were local Hindus (non-Tamils), including many African American converts. One audience member asked why there were no women in the group, and the answer (women's impurity in ritual contexts) created a small uproar. SSMUM turned diplomatic and apologetic. Emerging in a rather confrontational, stereotypically American way, the gender criticism forced the group to question their beliefs about the exclusion of women from their practices. The packed auditorium was the site of multidirectional learning, with comparisons emerging between Caribbean and Southeast Asian diasporic experiences, and North American and Tamil Hindu religious perspectives.

This small example—SSMUM in NYC—provides a fresh perspective on the well-worn theme of Indian Ocean mobilities. Moving beyond ethnomusicology's land-centric area studies paradigm does not mean bounding the Indian Ocean between its coasts. On the contrary, Indian Ocean musics and musicians are global—and they have been for a long time. Writing about "waves" is a bit cliché, but the metaphor describes the differences that emerge through the (re)circulation of Indian Ocean cultures. Thus we conclude this epilogue by turning from Jim's anecdote, situated in the Indian Ocean's globally emergent twenty-first century, to an earlier time in which Indian Ocean musics washed up in New York City during the heady days of postcolonial independence movements.

In NYC in 1960, Miriam Makeba recorded an "Indonesian lullaby" called "Suliram" for her eponymous album on RCA Victor (Makeba 1960). Julia first heard it in college in the mid-1990s, but when she enrolled in Indonesian classes as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, she was surprised to find that she could understand Makeba's words.<sup>6</sup> This intelligibility remained a bit of serendipity, though, forgotten when the music was turned off. But just recently, as Julia was reading the chapter in this volume by Sylvia Bruinders and Valmont Layne on

Cape Malay music, she wondered: could “Suliram” have been inspired by Makeba’s own listening practices in her home country of South Africa?

The song itself is a folk tradition that is known across the Malay world. “Suliram” is popular among Western choral arrangers, and Cape Town is referenced in *Rise Again*, a songbook printed by the storied Sing Out! organization: “Miriam Makeba recorded ‘Suliram’ after hearing it from Malay/Indonesian descendants of slaves brought to Africa by the Dutch several hundred years ago” (Blood and Patterson 2015, 162). Here, reader, your age may be revealed as surely as Julia’s was above, for if you are of a certain generation, you might associate “Suliram” not with Miriam Makeba but with the folk-music group The Weavers, whose most famous member, Pete Seeger, recorded it in 1953 and performed it in concerts for decades.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Sing Out! songbook asserts, “Pete Seeger learned the same song in 1949 from a young Indonesian who was passing through New York,” whose name (we find out from the liner notes of a Pete Seeger concert at Bowdoin College) was Mas Daroesman (Place 2011, 16). (Who was Mas Daroesman, and what was he was doing in New York City in the very year of Indonesian independence? This remains a mystery—at least, to us.)<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these NYC “Suliram” stories demonstrate the mobility and global relevance of a song from an Indian Ocean island, infused with the hope of the postwar period—one whose waves stretch beyond these incidents, both chronologically and geographically.

This story, too, has a Caribbean connection. Miriam Makeba transformed from South African musician to activist (Mama Africa) under the mentorship of Harry Belafonte, who himself had helped ignite pan-African activism with the music of his parents’ native Jamaica and the political discourse of Trinidadian Calypsonians. Belafonte recorded “Suliram” in 1959, and the vocal harmonization and tempo of the song (but most especially its second verse, sung *a cappella* with awkward syllabic accents that could only come from a non-Indonesian speaker) are consistent from Seeger to Belafonte to Makeba.

Now, contrast this with a Malaysian film clip of the song from 1962, “Suliram,” featuring singers playing with Malay literary conventions.<sup>9</sup> The song also alternates between solo and chorus, but the words of the soloist are infused with literary tropes taken from the courtly tradition. The lyrics also contain *pantun* phrasing—a genre, folk and elite, in which a singer or poet pairs a formulaic couplet (of no connection to song) with corresponding rhymes that provide the true meaning of the quatrain. This element was missed by the liner note writers, who translated the lyrics to “Suliram” literally, leading to incongruous words about water buffalo sacrifice in a “lullaby.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the 1962 “Suliram” is set within Malay village life—with its bucolic images of women weaving bamboo—it also references multiple Indian Ocean histories. The namesake of the film it is part of, *Tun Fatimah* (Ghani 1962), was the powerful consort of the Sultan of Malacca who was instrumental in defending the kingdom from Portuguese attacks in the early 1500s. The prophet Muhammad’s

daughter is referenced in her very name; her father, Tun Mutahir, was of Tamil Muslim descent (Windstedt 1938, 12); and their ancestors figure in the Malay epic *Sejarah Melayu/Sulalatus Salatin* (circa AH 1021; 1612 CE). By spinning this history into a musical number, featuring cosmopolitan violins and vocal harmonies along with village handicrafts, “Suriram” participates in what Adil Johan [2018, 20] calls “the intertextual articulation of nation-making that reflected the contestations, aspirations, and paradoxes of the independence era in the Malay peninsula.” It is worth noting that the Malay film industry, too, is a broader Indian Ocean story: consider that *Tun Fatimah*’s director, Salleh Ghani, was discovered and mentored by the formidable film producer B. S. (Balbir Singh) Rajhans, a man from a Punjabi Sikh family, raised in Calcutta, who grew up in Singapore, and claims as his first film the Islamicate classic *Laila Majnun* (Noh and Mohammad 2021, 28).

In 1965, the same year as the Asia-Africa Conference discussed by Anne Rasmussen (whose chapter begins this volume’s concluding section), Makeba and Belafonte collaborated on “Malaika” (RCA Victor LSP-3420), a Swahili-language song whose composition is contested within Kenya and Tanzania—but whose words are nonetheless known throughout the Swahili coast and beyond. Regardless of Makeba’s incorrect pronunciation of Swahili poetry, the song is received with pride for the respect its recording conveyed. Ethnomusicologist Jean Kidula has remarked to us that Makeba’s association of the song with Tanzania is itself a function of that country’s role in providing political refuge from South Africa during the long apartheid period,<sup>11</sup> creating a new political, social, and musical network along the east African coast. Makeba’s Indian Ocean connections thus move in multiple directions.

In performing “Suliram,” we suggest, Makeba was not reflecting her own experience of Cape Malay choral singing (though she may certainly have heard the tradition). Rather, she was participating in a decolonial musical project that promised to place Africa and the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the United States on equal footing. This utopian project of an egalitarian world of recordings is, of course, as vexed and unrealized in 2023 as it was in 1965. Recall that the apartheid regime’s “homelands policy” used the first linguistic and ethnic association of African citizens “to police and restrict the circulation of acoustic assemblages between listening entities” (Titus 2022, 19). For musicians like Makeba, being heard in English and other international languages was a freedom indeed. Yet the global status of English in pop music comes with imperial overtones. The assumption that Makeba was transmitting the Malay song “authentically” and directly from Malay sources was a constraint never applied to Seeger. In contrast, we—Jim and Julia, two white, Anglophone scholars working in an academy structured to support us—see ourselves all too well in Pete Seeger’s recording: speaking languages not our own, received as experts for transmitting the songs of others, and likely mispronouncing their words at that.<sup>12</sup>

The current decolonial shift in music studies—a vastly unrealized project that nevertheless proceeds apace—is matched, perhaps, by the promise of the Indian Ocean as a decolonial space—constituted by performances across the region, from hip-hop and punk to traditional music genres, performed on stages, Zoom, YouTube, and countless elsewhere. Networks of songs in Swahili, Malay, Tamil, Arabic, and beyond are not only connecting their native speakers across vast distances but also reaching audiences in one or more of these other Indian Ocean networks.

In this volume, we have facilitated a shared discourse between the authors of the essays, but our broader goal is for dialogue among an emerging readership as broad and diverse as the Indian Ocean itself (assisted by the egalitarian mechanism of open access). And we look forward to future work by scholars living and working in the Indian Ocean region. Makeba’s “Suliram” made it back to the Cape Malay community in Bo-Kaap and on to Ann Arbor and Indonesia, where it was transformed in new ways; “Malaika” continues to resound throughout Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, Canada, and beyond. So too, we hope this book—and the insights of its authors and the communities that formed their knowledge—will circulate throughout the Indian Ocean, engendering further documentation of the region’s musics and their resonant waves.

## NOTES

1. Many Singapore Indians descend from laborers who worked in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca, Dinding, and Penang) or on plantations or in cities (like Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh) that belonged to the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, all part of British colonial Malaya. Today, Singapore Indians are diverse, numbering about 360,000 of the resident population and 700,000 total; Tamils still constitute the majority (Sinha 2007). The number of Malaysian Indians is higher, roughly two million (7 percent of Malaysia’s population).

2. They also play in some secular contexts, such as state-sponsored cultural events, school gatherings, and weddings.

3. One of the most famous Malaysian groups is called Masana Kali.

4. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tXpv4iJ4mE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tXpv4iJ4mE).

5. The latter were the interlocutors of a CUNY doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology, Stephanie George, who organized the joint concert.

6. At the time of writing, a wonderful live performance of the song by Makeba was available on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=knt4XZ9Gb9w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knt4XZ9Gb9w).

7. See, e.g., [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGDzhK6Z\\_6E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGDzhK6Z_6E).

8. Curiously, a Dutch colonial almanac lists Mas Daroesman, “doctor Djawa,” as a weather observer in Riau, a likely place for learning a Malay lullaby (Koninklijke Magentisch en Meteorologisch Observatorium te Batavia: 213).

9. At the time of writing, this version of the song was found on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=subtnez9viM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=subtnez9viM).

10. We leave you to make your own comparisons with “Mbube”—first recorded by South African singer Solomon Linda but made famous decades later when a version by The Tokens, whose lyrics were added through a similar chain of transfiguration, was made famous by *The Lion King*.

11. Jean Kidula, personal communication, July 23, 2023.

12. We are reminded of the comment by General Carlos P. Romulo of the Philippines made at the 1955 Bandung Conference that the gathering represented “[an] important manifestation of a conscious, deliberate, banding-together of the non-white world against the white” (cited in Rasmussen, this volume).

## REFERENCES

- Belafonte, Harry, and Miriam Makeba. 1965. *An Evening with Belafonte/Makeba*. RCA Victor, LSP-3420. Vinyl LP.
- Blood, Peter, and Annie Patterson, eds. 2016. *Rise Again Songbook*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard.
- Ghani, Saleh. 1962. *Tun Fatimah*, film. Singapore: Cathay-Keris Film Productions.
- Johan, Adil. 2018. *Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music of the Independence Era*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Koninklijke Magnetisch en Meteorologisch Observatorium te Batavia. 1910. *Regenswaarne-mingen in Nederlandsch-Indie*. Jakarta: Batavia Landsdrukkerij.
- Makeba, Miriam. 1960. *Miriam Makeba*. RCA Victor, LSP-2267. Vinyl LP.
- Noh, Muhammad Md, and Mastura Muhammad. 2021. “Character Portrayal and Malay Women Characters during Studio Era: ‘Musang Berjanggut’ (1959), ‘Tun Fatimah’ (1962).” *IESTEEM Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, no. 1: 26–39.
- Place, Jeff. 2009. “Track Notes—Disc 2.” *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert, 1960*. Smithsonian Folkways, SFW40184. Compact disc.
- Sinha, Vineeta. 2007. *A New God in the Diaspora? Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Titus, Barbara. 2022. *Hearing Maskanda: Musical Epistemologies in South Africa*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Winstedt, R. O. 1938. “The Malay Annals of Sejarah Melayu.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 16, no. 3: 1–226.