

Expressing Community and Translocalism through Pop: The Indonesian Student Popular Music and Culture Scene in Australia

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Abstract

Australia's Indonesian population increasingly includes large numbers of Indonesian students who are enrolled at Australian tertiary and other education institutions. These students mostly intend to return to Indonesia at the conclusion of their studies and are therefore temporary residents of Australia rather than settlers or migrants. As such, their social interaction is primarily with their fellow-students rather than with the broader Indonesian community or with Australians.

The paper examines the role of popular music and other popular culture expressions in articulating the social space and dynamics of this group of young Indonesians and its translocal connections, focusing particularly on the scene they have created in Melbourne. This scene involves music-making and production in the form of band activity, song-writing, CD production and diverse live music events, as well as (amongst other things) fashion shows, independent film-making and multimedia production. These pop culture activities bind the students' self-contained, in-group social and cultural world and reinforce their shared identities as well as exhibiting localized features that tie them to their Melbourne context. Collectivity, fluidity and an emphasis on participation and process characterize the scene. The popularity of competitions, such as their Battle of the Bands contests and even an 'Idola Melben', is arguably due to the collective, participatory nature of the process, which produces a result that belongs to and can be claimed by the entire group.

The fluidity of the scene extends to its boundaries, which take in Jakarta, from where most of the students come. As students arrive from or leave for Indonesia, bands constantly form and re-form in different combinations with interchange of membership, both in Melbourne and Jakarta. They also maintain connections and pop culture interests and activities in a virtual space that includes social network websites, blogs and internet forums. Their transnational connections—between Australia and Indonesia-- can be read as translocal in the sense that nation-state or geographical borders do not represent a barrier to either group communication or the pop music and culture activity that is a part of it. While these activities span boundaries, they are also highly localized, and therefore embody translocal as distinct from national or transnational identities.