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### CONTESTING GLOBAL FORCES THROUGH CULTURAL HYBRIDISATION: JAVANESE COVER VERSIONS OF WESTERN SONGS ON YOUTUBE

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which cover songs on YouTube using traditional language and musical instruments serve as responses to the global music industry. A band from East Java, Indonesia, Gamelawan, will serve as the case study. Gamelawan contests the global music industry by covering a number of Western songs in Javanese language and arranging the musical accompaniment for gamelan instruments. Through Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) of selected Javanese cover versions of western songs on YouTube by Gamelawan (Channel *Gamelawan.P5Pro*), this article analyses how processes of cultural reappropriation provide insights into the ways in which Indonesian musicians respond to exchanges in world culture, in general, and what Gamelawan's works indicate about global, contemporary media usage, in particular. By utilising the concepts of hybridisation and participatory culture, Gamelawan's songs demonstrate that the adaptation and appropriation of outside influences through the use of technology contribute to increasing cultural diversity which, in turn, enhances stronger local identities.

**Keywords:** Globalisation, hybridisation, cover songs, local culture, Gamelawan

### INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology have promoted the flow of global media content, although the consequences may vary in dimensions and degrees. The media technology allows individuals to access an abundant volume of information. It also opens more opportunity for one to

experience a global encounter. According to White (2012, p. 6), a “global encounter” occurs when individuals with different traditions or worldviews come into contact and interact with one another based on information they have about one another’s values, resources, and intentions. Individuals can obtain this information with the work of technology like the internet that enables people from almost anywhere in the world to access information on almost any topic.

Some people may sense there is something new or unique in the global encounters. Robins argues that global encounters can be stimulating and productive as it can encourage the invention of new cultural forms and repertoires (1997, p. 18). However, the interaction between the local and global cultures in a global encounter can cause tension and friction. For example, Robins claims that ‘the globalisation process can equally be associated with confrontation and the collision of cultures’ (1997, p. 18) and there is the growing sense that the “older local” is dissolving as the “new global” is taking place. This debate illustrates that in global encounters there is a negotiation of power as well as a different version of reality, especially in cross-cultural settings (White 2012, p. 6). There is a tension between openness to global processes and the will to retain a cultural identity. There is also a concern that global encounter may threaten the local culture in how individuals are exposed to global content introduced by the media.

Despite the debates, the interactions between the global and local have become more intense after the development of Web 2.0 with its open-ended and user-generated characteristics. YouTube, the largest online video hosting service in the world of Web 2.0, provides ample space for people around the globe to exchange their ideas and creations. One example of the use of YouTube as a means to share creative work as well to respond to the pervasiveness of global culture is song-covering practices by Gamelawan, a band from East Java, Indonesia. This band of six creates cover versions of some Western songs using Javanese language and music. The use of traditional music instrument, *gamelan*, as well as the Javanese language in their version can be perceived as not only to offer a “new look” of the original songs but also to introduce Javanese music and culture to the global audience. The band aims to contest the domination of Western songs in the global music industry.

Song covering can be defined as ‘the musical practice of one artist recording or performing another composer’s song’ (Plasketes ed. 2010, p. 1). It had come to being in 1950-1960s when pop artists started remaking R&B and rock songs that have been a “hit” throughout the history. It has been an important aspect of popular culture ever since and even developed into a definitive genre (Solis 2010). Some people criticise song covering as mere re-performing or new iterations of an old song, nevertheless, Cusic (2005) argues that a singer who sings other musicians’ works is a legitimate artist and the cover songs ‘represent a form of artistic interpretation that goes beyond mere “copying”’ (p. 171). Supporting Cusic, Plasketes (1992, 2010) highlights that song-covering practices involve elements of apprenticeship, homage, imitation, and interpretation. Additionally, as Cusic (2005, p. 174) pointed out, covers are relatively important because they represent a song proven to be a hit to the repertoire, indicate the influence of the artist, and allow the audience to enjoy something familiar in new packaging.

It is clear that covering songs is not new phenomenon. However, media technology in the digital age makes song-covering practices more convenient as it is easier for people to share video or songs they create through networks in their daily life. Gamelawan made use of what digital technology offers. They create new songs, and video clips then circulate them through

YouTube. Since 2015, Gamelawan has covered more than 40 songs (mostly Western). These include the cover version of “See You Again” (Wiz Khalifa feat. Charlie Puth), “Locked Away” (R. City feat. Adam Levine), “What Do You Mean?” (Justin Bieber), “Imagine” (John Lennon), “Faded” (Alan Walker), “Shape of You” (Ed Sheeran), and “Fix You” (Coldplay) – the songs that once sat in the highest position of Billboard chart. As the original songs had been the most-viewed videos on YouTube, Gamelawan’s versions also managed to draw people’s attention. Their cover version of “See You Again” song has generated more than six million views to date. Although numbers cannot be a mere parameter to evaluate Gamelawan’s influence, YouTube video play counts can indicate a song’s popularity and its position in terms of worldwide adoration.

Song covering practices done by Gamelawan demonstrates a significant role technology plays in the cultural flows and dynamics in the music industry. This study hence examines how in which Gamelawan’s use of traditional language and musical instruments to cover songs on YouTube as a response to global music culture. Nevertheless, how does such a process of cultural reappropriation demonstrate the Indonesian music actors’ response to the exchange of world culture? What do Gamelawan’s works indicate about global contemporary media usage? To address these questions, the article begins by introducing the concepts of hybridisation and participatory culture as the key ideas that can help in understanding Gamelawan’s works in song-covering practices. In the next section, the article analyses two song covers by Gamelawan to illustrate how the concepts operate. In the global-local nexus framework, this case study demonstrates that adaptation and appropriation to outside influences through the use of technology contribute to the increase of cultural diversity and the building of stronger local identities.

## Hybridisation

Hybridisation has become part of an ongoing trend in cultural production, with both the globalisation and localisation of the culture industry. Pieterse (1996) promotes this concept to describe a process of trans-local cultural mixing; it contests the argument that globalisation has generated cultural homogenization. The view of homogenization is represented in the McDonaldization model offered by Ritzer (2008, p. 19) which refers to ‘the process whereby the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.’ It is because individuals increasingly conform to global ideal or standard, of which the meaning of “global” is identical to Western Euro-American (Tomlinson 1997; Liebes 2003).

Pieterse defines hybridisation as the ways in which cultural forms become detached from original practices and recombine with new forms in new practices (1995, p. 49). However, hybridisation is not simply about mixing, blending and synthesising different elements that form a culturally faceless entirety. In the sense of hybridisation, cultures often generate new forms and make new connections with one another. External and internal cultural flows are involved in a continuous interaction to create an integration; homogenization and heterogenization processes collapse and the demarcation between the global and local obliterates. Robertson terms (1995) this process “glocalisation.”

Scholars have used the term glocalisation to better represent the dynamic relationship between global and local entities. In the studies of music and culture with regards of global/local relations, Marina Roseman noticed that local customs had undergone social, environmental and political change over time as a consequence of their interaction with global

entities. During her renowned work on the “healing arts” of the Senoi Temiar, a group of hunters and horticulturalists dwelling in the rainforest of peninsular Malaysia in 1988, Roseman noticed that Temiar’s healing practice using sound, music and dance had been influenced by their compromise with the global economy. Temiar’s local music and culture evolved in a historical process as Temiar people seek their position in the nation-state (2000). Roseman’s work showed that in music, local performers and consumers naturally select and modify different elements from a range of global possibilities providing a wealth of creative opportunities (Post 2006, p.7). Hybridity at this point can be regarded as a form of local creativity in negotiating with foreign cultures.

Media technologies provide more space for those creative expressions. One can showcase local creativity to compete in the global industry with the aid of media technology. The situation where one not only consume but also produce media content brings out the concept of participatory culture, which will be discussed next.

### **Participatory culture**

Participatory culture perceived individuals as not only consuming but also producing and distributing cultural products, as a form of participation. Jenkins et al. introduced this concept in 2009, seeing that in the era of internet, the public is evolving and becoming more active not only in selecting media preference but also in the way they interact with the media. They became more involved in creating, shaping, reshaping and spreading media content. The public carried on these activities because they believe that their contributions matter to the culture. They also feel some degree of social connection with whom they share their creations (p. xi).

Jenkins et al. (2009) point to four forms of participatory culture, which are affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulation. Affiliations refer to a membership in online communities centred around various media platforms, while expressions are about producing new creative materials. Collaborative problem-solving happens when the member of the cultures working together in teams, regardless of formal or informal, to complete tasks or develop new knowledge. Finally, circulations are the practice of shaping the flow of media like podcasting or blogging (Evy, manager of Gamelawan, in a personal interview, 27 August 2016).

Participatory culture gives rise to a new generation of cultural participants termed the prosumer (a mix of “producer” and “consumer”) (Jenkins et al. 2009). The term denotes the collapse of the boundaries between consumers and producers of media, hence dispels the notion of “consumers are passive, and producers are active” because globalisation means individuals can adopt both roles simultaneously. Similar to Jenkins et. al.’s notion of the prosumer, Bruns (2008) promotes the concept of the produser to illustrate how the roles of the “consumer” and “producer” have become blurred, and that ‘the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative significance’ (Bruns 2008, p. 2). Consequently, Bruns argues, user and producer have become a hybrid, since media technology allows them not only to take but also make a media content. Bruns proposed the term “produsage” to replace “production”, which the author writes, is no longer accurate given the users also actively participate in both producing and consuming the shared knowledge through the media (Bruns 2008, p. 15).

The terms prosumer and produser/produsage in participatory culture have evolved in response to contemporary media convergence. According to Jenkins (2006), media convergence is the

merger of mass communication outlets through various platforms. In a simpler formulation, media convergence is the organisation of various types of media, previously considered separate and distinct into a single media. Due to the convergence of technology, a converged audience who conduct producing practices, has emerged. This audience participates in content creation to develop new knowledge and improve the community. The power that was heavily centred on the media companies and limited parties is now considerably more decentralised, blurring the line between producers and consumers.

In participatory culture and media convergence, individuals can undertake the function to spread information that once was monopolised by hierarchical institutions such as newspapers, radio stations or TV stations. For instance, there are more opportunities to create and distribute messages online. Moreover, newer web-based services and platforms have encouraged the emergence of collaborative knowledge banks such as Wikipedia, social networking sites, and video-sharing sites. One example of the use of video-sharing sites, such as YouTube, to produce media content in the context of participatory culture will be discussed below.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilised QCA. The study of representation concerns the construction of meaning. At its most basic level, meaning is constructed through language, signs and symbols, but these processes are never value-free (Kidd, 2015). For Hall (1997), representation is the process by which language and knowledge-production systems interact to create and disseminate meanings. In this sense, representation turns into the mechanism through which cultural hybridization meanings are produced and solidified.

Content analysis is commonly used in media representation studies because it provides a systematic approach to examining and understanding text-based data (Stemler, 2001). In this context, a text can also be any object whose meaning and significance to interpret in depth: a film, an image, an artifact, even a place (Caulfield, 2019). When a researcher employs an interpretive paradigm, qualitative content analysis is regarded as a valuable supplement to more traditional quantitative content analysis. (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p. 11). White and Marsh (2006, p. 36) noted that 'both qualitative and quantitative content analysis researchers sample text and choose text that is relevant for their purpose, but qualitative researchers focus on the uniqueness of the text'. Following those methods, QCA generates more than just totals and statistical significance; instead, it uncovers patterns, themes, and categories relevant to social reality (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p. 5). The form and extent of reporting will finally depend on the specific research goals (Patton, 2002).

Furthermore, to explain the sample design, the primary criteria for being included for content analysis was that the media must contain data that will assist a researcher to answer research questions (Krippendorf, 2013, p. 113). This study analyses Javanese cover versions of western songs on YouTube by Gamelawan (Channel *Gamelawan.P5Pro*). Samples were conveniently selected by researcher of Gamelawan video play list on YouTube in which correspondents with the research questions.

A procedure of searching for samples in the Gamelawan video play list on YouTube was carried out by visually inspecting the thumbnails and titles and skimming of the lyrics of the songs to get the gist. A specific list of searches criteria and phrases such as western cover songs, popular western songs, and Javanese songs title was used in the skimming process identified

in the literature review on media representations of hybridisation and participatory culture. These cover songs were interpreted and analysed qualitatively using elements and symbols of local and global contexts.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Gamelawan consists of six young men from Sendang Agung Village, Lamongan, East Java, Indonesia. From the start of the band's formation in 2015, Gamelawan specialises in covering current modern songs using gamelan, Javanese traditional music instrument, and circulate their creations through YouTube. Awan, the lead singer of this band, attended Wilwatikta College of Art located in Surabaya, the capital of East Java. After graduated from the college, he started the initiative to cover contemporary songs using traditional music instrument. His first cover song earned positive responses from the audiences on YouTube. Departing from there, he and some friends later formed the band as well as the management and began covering popular Western songs using Javanese music in 2015 (Evy, manager of Gamelawan, in a personal interview, 27 August 2016). To date (November 2023), Gamelawan had more than 162,000 subscribers on YouTube and covered more than 40 cover songs, most of them are Western and Indonesian languages. Recently they also expand on Tiktok @Gamelawan. Including Shorts on YouTube, Gamelawan.P5Pro had produced 200 videos.

In producing their cover versions of Western pop songs, Gamelawan creates a new story and delivers it in the Javanese language. The new story is created with different interpretation and approach compared to the original song. Besides, they use gamelan music as a central element in re-arranging the songs. Evy affirms (2016, August 27) that the band members emphasise local music and culture in their works. They usually combine traditional gamelan music with modern musical instruments to a ratio of 60:40 or 70:30. The band members also take a similar approach to the making of the video clip of each cover song. They produce video clips that correlate to local cultural reality and elements.

The following section will discuss this topic in more depth using two examples of Gamelawan's works on YouTube, “Nelongso/Misery” (a cover version of “See You Again” by Wiz Khalifa feat (Figure 1). Charlie Puth) and “Ojo Lunga/Please Don’t Go” (a cover version of “Locked Away” by R. City feat. Adam Levine).

**Figure 1**

*Nelongso/Misery, a cover version of “See You Again” (Gamelawan 2016a)*



Nelongso, which is a parody version of “See You Again,” portrays a boy’s (Tole) reaction to losing his close friend (Bejo). This story is akin to the original narration created by Wiz Khalifa. “See You Again” is a tribute to actor Paul Walker who died in a car accident. In Nelongso story, Tole and Bejo were apart for a quite long time. One day Tole visits his best friend, but Bejo has died and that day is the funeral. Tole is shocked, and in his grief, he rides a bicycle at speed, eventually ending in a crash that also takes his life. At the end of the story, Tole and Bejo finally meet again in the spirit realm (Gamelawan 2016a).

Nelongso video clip represents the local context and reality in Javanese villages. Gamelawan created the video in a rural area and involve local people as the clip talents. In the video, rural modes of transportation and housing were apparent. Starring in this video are the members of “Metamorfosis” theatre club from Sendang Agung Village, Gamelawan’s origin. This appearance is in clear contrast to the original video clip that takes place in the major cities. Evy (in an interview, 2016, August 27) confirms that the band’s objective was to describe the real atmosphere of Indonesian villages. According to her, Gamelawan deliberately portrays the local environment to compliment the Javanese lyrics and music arrangement as well as to make the song and video as close as possible to Javanese locality.

## Figure 2

*Ojo Lunga/Please Don't Go, a cover version of 'Locked Away' (Gamelawan 2016b)*



Through Ojo Lunga, Gamelawan creates a slightly different story compared to the original song (Figure 2). “Locked Away” song is about a man who wants his woman to love him the way he is, through bad and good times, for better or worse. Ojo Lunga is about a husband who is fed up working for little money and plans to go overseas to find a better life, but his wife does not agree. Instead, she wants him to stay so that together they face whatever lies ahead. In the end, the husband realises that life is not just about money and he should be grateful for everything he has. He tells his wife he will always be by her side, for better or worse (Gamelawan 2016b).

Ojo Lunga represents a situation commonly found in Indonesian lower class's life: a desire to be free from poverty by means of being a migrant worker. Similar to Nelongso, Ojo Lunga also presents local settings and involves local talents in the video. Actors featured in the video dress in regular daily clothing and wear less make-up. Awan, the vocalist, always wears blangkon, a traditional Javanese headdress worn by men, in every appearance in the video. He mostly dresses in Javanese batik shirts or plain shirts (see Figure 3). Furthermore, Gamelawan involves only minor presentations of global brands or goods. Representations of global culture's signifiers are only in the form of Quicksilver brand on Tole's racing jacket, the Italian soccer club jersey worn by the Husband character, and the Honda motorbike that the Husband rides (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3**

*Top: clip talents dress in regular daily clothing, no fancy accessories or make-up.  
Bottom: Gamelawan's vocalist dresses in Batik and wears blangkon, Javanese signature traditional clothing.*



Evy (2016, August 27) confirms that the band members deliberately set out to represent local conditions in the video clip using local culture signifiers to make the story as real as possible. It indicates their effort to contest the domination of global brands in music video clips as well as an effort to preserve Javanese music itself. They concern that Western music has considerably influenced Indonesian youth's music taste and potentially erode traditional music (Indonesia Morning Show NET 2016, sec. 1:08-1:22). Therefore, Gamelawan shows their idealism and effort to negotiate Western songs by covering them using Javanese music and showcasing local elements rather than the global brand in the clips. Nonetheless, Gamelawan inserts English and Indonesian subtitles in the video (see Figure 5) so that non-Javanese speakers can understand their message and still enjoy their music. They are aware that adding subtitles allows them to cater broader audience and aids them to promote Javanese music to the global music industry.

**Figure 4**

*Appearances of global brand signifiers in Nelongso and Ojo Lunga video clips*



**Figure 5**

*Indonesian and English subtitle in Ojo Lunga/Please Don't Go video clip*



Gamelawan's practice of covering songs indicate their engagement with participatory culture. It incorporates the role of produser, that is, consumer-taking and producer-remaking of media content. Gamelawan takes musical and narrative elements in "See You Again" and "Locked Away" songs and uses it as the material to create new songs, resulted in Nelongso and Ojo Lunga. Gamelawan's works represent the four forms of participatory culture. The form of affiliations is seen from Gamelawan's membership in YouTube, while the form of expressions is visible from their creation of cover versions of foreign songs.

The form of collaborative problem-solving is noticeable from the interaction between Gamelawan and their fans who leave a comment on their YouTube videos. In that comment section, the audiences frequently request a song to be covered by Gamelawan. The band also has created a Facebook fan page named "Kancawan" (means "friend of Gamelawan"), a place for their community and their fans to gather virtually. At this respect, Gamelawan as a consumer and producer is actively altering the media environment, while YouTube as the new technology plays a role in empowering consumers to be a creator, an artist, and a visionary. It is also visible that Gamelawan's works are a form of cultural hybridisation, which operates when an artist is dealing with cultures that are different from his/her own in their artistic work

(Lashley 2012, n.p.). The decision to choose Western songs reflects the band's appropriation of elements of a foreign culture. Further, they use their approach to shift the original story of the songs and create new ones in which Javanese local elements and reality predominate. For the members of Gamelawan, creating hybrid cover versions is a combination of the expression of their admiration toward gamelan, great musical skill, awareness of the current trends in global culture and contemporary music, availability of new technology and their literacy on it. However, there is also a practice of cultural identity as they use local signifiers to the utmost in video clips. This practice is also the embodiment of their mission to preserve Javanese traditional music in the middle of Western music "traffic."

By utilising the concepts of hybridisation and participatory culture, the article analyses how processes of cultural reappropriation provide insights into the ways in which Indonesian musicians respond to exchanges in world culture, in general, and what Gamelawan's works indicate about global, contemporary media usage, in particular. Gamelawan's songs demonstrate that the adaptation and appropriation of outside influences through the use of technology contribute to increasing cultural diversity which, in turn, enhances stronger local identities.

## CONCLUSION

This article attempts to examine how Gamelawan's use of traditional language and musical instruments to cover foreign songs is a response to global musical culture. Gamelawan's approach to prevail in local music and values in the making of new cover versions is a representation of their effort to negotiate penetration of Western songs through YouTube. Media convergence allows the exchange of information including foreign music content, faster and farther. Gamelawan concerns this foreign culture erodes local customs. Therefore, they respond to it by covering Western songs using Javanese music and language. YouTube acts as their vehicle to circulate their hybrid cover versions.

At the same time, their approach to overwrite a foreign musical product with local and traditional music represent their appropriation of global music. Gamelawan is aware of the current trends in global culture and contemporary music and attempts to adapt to it. They subsequently take global cultural products, in this case, foreign popular songs, and reproduce them into not only new "products" with a different approach in transforming a song. Here we recall Jenkins's argument (in Lashley 2012, n. p.), 'the power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but by writing over it.' This case also exhibits how *produsage* or *prosumer* operates: Gamelawan is a consumer of Western songs as well as a producer of new cultural works with a new authenticity that refer to those Western songs. By creating a hybrid cover version and uploading it to YouTube, Gamelawan has played the role of prosumer in the participatory culture. Member of this culture is actively contributing by sharing their creation or knowledge to be used by other members.

Gamelawan's works also indicate that covering a song is not a mere copying and borrowing practices. It tends to go beyond just re-performing or reproducing a song (Cusic 2005, Plasketes 2010). Gamelawan demonstrates that each cover song offers a new interpretation or approach and provides the opportunity to the audience to enjoy an old song in new packaging. Furthermore, performers who practice song covering also have cultural idealism, skills and mission behind each work, as noticed from Gamelawan's hybrid cover versions.

However, these findings cannot be generalised to all Gamelawan's cover songs. The same research needs to be carried out with the non-Western cover songs from other playlists to verify if there are any parallels or differences between the sample in this study.

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