

MUET210: Ethnographic Music Research Project

Sing Singapore: Building nationhood through National Day songs

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Every country has a national anthem (Kendall 2006) that is used and regarded to embody a collective sense of nationhood amongst its citizens (Daughtry 2003). Singapore, my country of origin, is no different, its anthem, “Majulah Singapura” (Malay for “Onward Singapore”) calls on its citizens to work together for Singapore’s success. Besides the national anthem, Singapore also has another genre of music known as “National Day songs” that serve a similar function. These songs — “Community Songs”, “National Songs” and “National Day Theme Songs” — are an essential component of National Day celebrations held annually in schools in August to commemorate Singapore’s independence since 9th August 1965. Shelemay’s (2000) concept of soundscape offers a way of analyzing how the settings, sound and significance of a musical event like National Day celebrations and National Day songs can build a sense of nationhood in its students.

Since I began schooling in 1995, I have attended a National Day celebration annually. Its format is similar across all schools in Singapore. On the day itself, classes are cancelled and students attend school in the national colors of red and white instead of their school uniforms. For about two hours, all students and teachers will be at the school hall watching skits put up by students dramatizing Singapore’s road to independence and singing along to National Day songs. The event culminates with the singing of the “Majulah Singapura” and the recital of the National Pledge.

This event’s setting reflects its function (Shelemay 2000) for creating in students a collective sense of nationhood. As it is held in a school, an institution for learning, the songs are framed as a subject matter to be

learned like anything taught in school. The spatial arrangement of the students and teachers in the event, where a teacher stands in front of the hall to lead the singing of lyrics projected onto a screen, also reflect this purpose as it resembles a classroom setting. I also remember other teachers sitting around the hall, surrounding the student to make sure we all sing along as if to ensure we pay attention. By having everyone wear clothes in the national colors also reinforces the idea of nationhood. The songs are played from a tape or CD recording, and the lack of a live performance of the songs might reflect the desire to ensure uniformity in this event’s experience amongst all students around Singapore. By ending the event with the symbolic rituals of reciting the National Pledge and singing of “Majulah Singapura”, marks it as an important national event amongst the students. As Daughtry (2003) points out, the singing of national anthems plays an important role in generating the collective sense of nationhood, and I remember how I always belted “Majulah Singapura” with pride at the end of this event.

The sounds of this musical event have changed over the years and they can be distinguished by the songs typology. “Community Songs” are a collection of melodic local folk songs usually performed by a choir in Chinese or Malay or Tamil. “National Songs”, commissioned between 1984 and 1990, resemble anthems and are only in English. With titles like “One People, One Nation, One Singapore” and “Stand Up For Singapore”, they were clearly meant for building a sense of nationhood amongst its citizens. They were usually composed by a foreigner and were not associated with a specific artist. A choir and an orchestra performed in most recordings.

Since 1998, “National Day Theme Songs” have been commissioned for the annual National Day Parade, a nation-wide celebration held on the 9th of August. These new generation of songs sounds less like anthems and more like popular music. They are written and performed by Singapore’s pop artistes and titled to sound less overtly propagandistic, such as “Home” and “Reach Out for the Skies”. They are even accompanied with music videos, making the songs seem more like pop hits rather than National Day songs. This shift to embracing local artistes and the pop music genre reflects a nation that is more self-confident and the desire to appeal to the changing generation of students. In fact, many of the older “National Day Songs” have been re-mixed over the years and re-released to sound more like pop songs. Still, the significance of National Day songs as a means to generate and maintain a sense of nationhood remains. The fact that the government still commissions these songs suggests its desire to perpetuate a particular view of nationhood through music.

National Day songs, like national anthems, play a part in generating and maintaining national identity (Daughtry 2003). Singapore is made up of mainly of Chinese, Malays and Indians. The use of music to reflect the distinct identities of the races and their relationship (Shelemay 2000) is evident in the type of songs played. All events play at least one song in the official language of the Chinese, Malays and Indians, and everyone regardless of race will have to sing along. This is a form of symbolic ethnicity (Gan 1996), where clear symbols are used to impress on the students a certain idea of Singapore’s ethnic make-up: that it is made up of Chinese, Malays and Indians and all are equal as enshrined in Singapore’s constitution. Despite there being other races and dialects in Singapore,

their languages are not represented in National Day songs as if to deny their place in the Singaporean identity.

The texts of National Day songs also connect the students to various “imagined links” (Waxer 1999) to ideas that are similar to the government’s worldview. For instance, in the start of “We are Singapore”:

“There was a time when people said that Singapore won't make it, but we did. There was a time when troubles seemed too much for us to take, but we did.” (Ministry of Information, Communication & The Arts, 2005)

Even though we were born after Singapore’s independence, the lyrics of this song depict and connect our Singaporean identity to the notion of the struggle for nationhood. Similarly, in Tanya Chua’s 2001 theme song for the National Day Parade, “Where I Belong”, an “imagined link” (Waxer 1999) is created to Singapore as our family:

“Where I belong, where I keep my heart and soul, Where we're one big family, I want the whole world to know, I want to shout it out loud, That this is where I know I belong” (Ministry of Information, Communication & The Arts, 2005)

Other values that National Day songs embody include working together for the country, doing our part for the country amongst others that aim to instill pride and a sense of belonging.

One also finds the changing sounds of these songs as aforementioned. Unlike in “We Are Singapore”, which was composed in 1987 (Wikipedia 2007), one cannot find

overt mentions of Singapore in Chua's songs although there are still patriotic ideas.

Thus, through the setting, sound and significance of National Day celebrations, a collective sense of nationhood is embodied in its students. The sounds of National Day songs have also changed in relation to the times but their purpose remains. They have been so successful that Singaporeans have adopted them as a platform to reflect their views of Singapore. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (2002) pointed out how Singaporeans changed the lyrics of "Stand Up for Singapore" to "Fare Up for Singapore" reflecting the bad economic times then. Hence, these songs have transcended beyond being propaganda "commissioned" by the government to a structure that facilitates a conversation between the government and citizens such that the collective sense of nationhood is constantly in negotiation.

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