



AMIRMUHAMMAD

# Bahasa Indonesia

Omong-omong with ease!

A headline of *Kompas* newspaper a few days ago used the word *capres*. I didn't know what a *capres* was, so I looked it up in my *Kamus Indonesia-Inggris*. It didn't exist! The dictionary was last updated in 2002, so could the word have been coined more recently? Isn't it unbecoming of a major newspaper to use such a new word, in its headline no less? The outrage!

It was only while reading the article that I figured out that *capres* simply stood for *calon presiden*. The newspaper was trying to introduce a new term, and maybe also save space. A similar confusion was cleared up when I was told to meet someone at Citos. Was this the name of a Mexican restaurant? No. It was simply short-form for Cilindak Town Square.

The eminently quotable George Bernard Shaw once said England and America are "two countries divided by the same language". A sentence like "She stroked her muff thoughtfully" would mean something as banal but un-PC as a reference to fur apparel in America, but will, without pussyfooting about, reduce an English reader to a paroxysm of giggles.

Similar confusions can arise when a Malay speaker in Jakarta hears the words *butuh* and *pantat* bandied about quite freely here, without the need to cover the ears of children. For us, *aku membutuhkan kamu* (I need you) sounds more carnal than ever intended, while the second word, just like the now-quaint "fanny", refers to a different part of the anatomy altogether.

On a more PG level: Who knew that *cakap* here can mean handsome? I didn't. In the distant past, a native speaker of Malay and Indonesian probably could get by without too much exasperation or sign language. But Malay has since been coloured by English and lately Arabic, while Indonesian has a lot of Javanese (a totally unrelated language) as well as Dutch, like *bioskop* (cinema).

So it has come to pass that when we communicate, we need to occasionally resort to English. A case in point is the Indonesian *prakarsa*, which means the Malay *iltizam*, but you would never realise this without invoking the English "initiative". So you both end up using *inisiatif*, which wouldn't please the purists of either tongue, but gets to the pragmatic root of language, which is, listen up kids, communication!

"To an Indonesian speaker, Malay sounds too pampered," mused a local in Jakarta. "We say RUSA, with a hard 'r' and 'a', while you say 'rwusse.'" In other words, like some kind of *mat salleh celup*.

Be that as it may, I countered that Indonesian to a Malay speaker often sounds... funny.

"What do you mean, 'funny'?" was the defensive reply.

"You know, as in weird," I said. These were fighting words, but I was serious.

I have a strong memory of watching an Indonesian movie at Universiti Malaya. It was a sober period movie, when a flunkey reports on the death of a general. "*Dia mati... mati konyong!*" The hall erupted in laughter because *konyong* (suddenly) sounds, to invoke a complex linguistic term, funny. As in weird. Just as initials, such as PKI (for Partai Komunis Indonesia) being pronounced as "Pay Kah Eey" rather than the way any other nationality would pronounce them.

It's a myth that Indonesian is relatively uncorrupted by English. True, the average Indonesian has — how do I put it? — an England that is not so tall. But try getting through

a newspaper editorial and you have to pick your way through a thicket of *autoritas* and *kultural* and *identitas*, maybe even in the same sentence. There are many posters here with *Hindari Narkoba!* while we merely have to stay away from *dadah*. Although, to be fair, I prefer their youthful slang term *nyiping* for the cross-border habit of marijuana-smoking, so much more evocative than our own American "high" or "stoned".

It's a habit among Malaysians, intellectuals and writers in particular, to adopt Indon accents and vocabulary when *omong-omong* (chatting) with their counterparts. I guess it makes us sound more cultured. This is a sign of a cultural inferiority complex or, if you are feeling generous, our way of making others feel at home. But the latter explanation does not count during poetry declamations meant for a home audience, where you will suddenly get lots of *bisa* leaping out to sting you. The late, lamented Malay magazines *Siasah* and *Sentiasa Manja* were quite prone to this, too.

Indonesian pop culture is starting to bloom again in Malaysia, in the most concerted push since the 1970s. Dian Sastrowardoyo and Nicholas Saputra are the Christine Hakim and Slanet Rahardjo of the SMS generation. Their *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* had so much Javanese-derived terminology that the Malaysian screening needed Malay subtitles, but for some reason, pop songs have more comprehensible words to our audience than a typical Jakarta conversation. The foreign-sounding words are kept to a ratio of, at most, one per sentence. When Sheila On 7 sings *Saat rambutku mula rontok*, you don't have to reach for a dictionary to figure out that *rontok* refers to a state of decline.

It's also a typical literary-intellectual complaint to say that Indonesian writing is much more vibrant than ours. Even if this were true, it has to do with a greater spirit of intellectual inquiry and adventurousness, which has as its symptom rather than cause the modish use of new words. I bought a book, *Esei-Esei Bentara 2002*, with the primary intention of learning new words, but enjoyed it for other reasons. It's an anthology of think-pieces originally published in the *Bentara* (Herald) supplement of *Kompas*. These wide-ranging essays on political, social, cultural and religious issues are a valuable record of often-controversial debate. *The War Against Cliché* is the title of a Martin Amis book; it would more aptly apply to this book, which wittily engages in contentious subjects.

To pick just one example, Amir Sidarta's *Seni Rupa Indonesia Memerlukan Keseimbangan* quite deftly sketches the dichotomy between profit-driven art galleries and "alternative" ones. Not so much a moral/ideological division between sellout commercialism and selfless integrity, but between work made for, respectively, *wacana pasar* (the discourse of the market) and *pasar wacana* (the market of discourses). It's nicely put and has the added attraction of being true. And the pieces on Islam and secularism manage to make rationalist cases for the latter firmly within the context of the lived Indonesian experience rather than something imposed from outside.

*Esei-Esei Bentara* is a handsome annual publication and I wish something like this could be done in Malaysia. It can help our *pasar wacana* and — who knows? — our *wacana pasar* too. **Bisa?**

Amir Muhammad is currently based in Jakarta on a grant from The Nippon Foundation's Asian Public Intellectuals fellowship

CHLOH

# Intifada blues

Middle Eastern saxophonist wages war with music instead of car bombs



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If you don't already know about Gilad Atzmon, hailed as the John Coltrane of the East, you may be forgiven for thinking that his latest album *Exile* is another one of those World Music albums that attempts to package Eastern music for Western digestion. Fans of Atzmon's reed-ripping style of saxophone playing may yet mistake *Exile* for another one of those World Music albums that attempts to package Eastern music for Western digestion.

*Exile* opens not with the Atzmon-style of blues that jazz fans know so well, but with a blues of another kind, with the soulful Middle Eastern vocal lament of Palestinian singer, Reem Kelani. And what a curtain raiser! Atzmon not so much bursts into this backdrop as he does creep in slowly, intoning in sympathy with his Palestinian collaborator. However, it does not take long before the real Atzmon appears, with horn in hand and ready to cook some hot jazz.

The CD liner notes are a vitriolic attack on the Zionist oppression of Palestinian rights that borders on the pretentious. This will no doubt go down well with the fashionably anti-Semitic among us, but consider this: Atzmon is not a flag-burning, stone-wielding Palestinian freedom-fighter but an expatriate Jew living in London. Some Israelis have branded him a traitor, while Palestinians like Kelani were shocked that he was even more militant than they were.

Atzmon is known not just for some seriously savage saxophone playing, but for his political stand on the continued oppression of the Palestinians. Perhaps it is about time the voice of dissent and reason rose from within the oppressors, and although he may not be the first to do so, he is certainly the most charismatic and musical of them all.

Atzmon takes his cause not only to the concert stage, but to the web, through [www.gilad.co.uk](http://www.gilad.co.uk), and through his satiric novel *A Guide to the Perplexed*. "I think that the Israeli people are the first to suffer from their own nationalistic aspirations... I do call for the dissolution of the Zionist state and an establishment of a democratic state that endorses full civil equality instead. I argue that it can be done and the sooner the better," says Atzmon.

## Gilad Atzmon & The Orient House Ensemble

*Exile* (Tip Toe Records / Trident Music)

Unless Palestinian freedom is your pet cause, you might do better to skip the CD liner and go straight on to the music.

The opening number *Dal'ouna* is a mystical Arabic incantation crowned by the phenomenal voice of Reem Kelani against a double-bass drone, answered by Atzmon on a breathy clarinet. It breaks into a foot-tapping Middle Eastern dance, but before you can sit back and say "ah, World Music," the second track, *Al Quds*, bursts in with a heady mix of jazz and Arabic dance in five and seven beats, as Atzmon launches into angry Coltrane-crazed improvisations.

Using traditional Jewish melodies and subvert-

ing them with Palestinian ideas, Atzmon is quick to establish his style of improvisation within the framework of a multicultural sound world. He lifts the Middle Eastern harmonies and modes to a higher level, speaking his mother tongue in a new vocabulary, as it were.

Atzmon and his band, made up of core members the Israelis, Yaron Stavi (double bass) and Asaf Sirkis (percussion), and the English pianist Frank Harrison, serve up a delicious platter of styles and influences as they jam with consummate musicians from across the Mediterranean, cooking up what might be best called truly delicious Arabic blues.

There is the laid-back swing of *Jenin*, which tells a horrific tale of mass slaughter in easy, nonchalant slow blues, and the unmistakable humour of *Ouz*, which sets the tale of Zionist cruelty to a most flippant arrangement. Do not expect lots of breast-beating about rights and freedoms — Atzmon has a great sense of humour and it permeates to the very end, closing his angry album with a cheeky Mediterranean tango.

Atzmon speaks of his subject with the honesty and passion of a musician who happens to be ashamed of what his people are doing, and this comes across in a highly enjoyable yet thought-provoking album of sophisticated music-making.

## Javier Ruibal

*Sahara* (Riverboat / Trident Music)

There was a time when World Music became synonymous with Latin Music, as record companies cashed in on the popularity of Ricky Martin and Enrique Iglesias, knowing as they do that music lovers cared not for Tibetan Chant nor Iranian Oud, but good old hip-swaying music that somehow could not be admitted into the pop shelves because they weren't American.

Thank God those days are nearly over, and the true voices of Spain finally have their day. Ruibal is a veteran belter and one of Spain's best-kept secrets, and already has a string of albums to his credit. He makes his world debut in this compilation, which is a sampling of his gutsy, flamenco-inspired voice that lends his songs an air of joyful abandon and uninhibited ardour for life and love.

Ruibal draws inspiration from a broad spectrum of styles, from Mediterranean to Arabic to Caribbean, and moves from mambo to flamenco with a poetic ease, even dabbling in a little Erik Satie for a brand new number for this album, *La Flor De Estambul*.

*Sahara* opens the typically infectious Spanish number, *Isla Mujeres*, complete with Ruibal's sensuous guitar style and sultry vocals to a kaleidoscopic backdrop peppered with flamenco handclaps and a solo violin, and from there it is an enjoyable journey, from the sonero serenading the moon against the shores of North Africa to the fiesta of late nights at the street-side café — 15 tracks of living la vida loca without the cheesy marketing. **E**

C H Loh's collection of music spans aeons

## Poco a Poco (bit by bit)

The 12 girls of Chinese New Year

On the first day of New Year my true love said to me, "What's with this all-girl Chinese orchestra playing on every street corner VCD stall? Is that Vanessa Mae's latest stunt?" I took a better look at the TV screen showing a dozen Mae lookalikes in cheongsam delivering Chinese classical gas with their er hus and pipas in disbelief.

Then it struck me. Recall that popular Hollywood horror flick about a cute and cuddly mogwai who, upon contact with water, spawns numerous duplicates of hideous creatures known as Gremlins. Didn't Vanessa Mae, EMI Malaysia's only claim on classical music success, come into contact with water in the infamous publicity poster that launched her into the stereos and underpants of almost every male music listener in the country not residing in Kelantan or Terengganu?

That must explain the sudden proliferation of these 12 girls, known as, well, 12 Girls Band (easier to remember than Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky for sure), peddling Chinese classical music à la Mae, in sexy splits, long lustrous hair swaying in time to the pop beat, smiling to beguile. They are a big hit this festive season (yes, still), from Japan to Singapore, and are looking towards the States. If you can't pick it up at Petaling Street you can get it on [www.chinasprout.com/shop/MCT030](http://www.chinasprout.com/shop/MCT030)

In all, a happy ending for Chinese classical (for these girls really do know their di dar from their pipa), and a sure sign that China is finally ready to take on America. As for Vanessa Mae, she may not go down in history as a Jascha Heifetz, but at least her spawn will carry on her tradition. And that's the scary part.

