

Echoes of Empire, Sounds of Nation: Keroncong and the Politics of Musical Canon in Postcolonial Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: Keroncong music, a hybrid genre rooted in Portuguese colonial influence and indigenous traditions, has undergone significant transformation over centuries, culminating in its institutionalization as a national symbol in Indonesia. This article investigates the evolution of Keroncong across five distinct phases beginning with the Tugu community's early preservation efforts, through colonial and postcolonial media dissemination, to contemporary reinterpretations by diaspora and youth movements. The study applies a multidisciplinary methodology combining historical periodization, media archaeology, musicological analysis, and cultural theory. Through archival research and comparative analysis, the article identifies the critical roles of NIROM and RRI in canon formation, emphasizing how broadcasting and state cultural policy promoted Langgam Jawa and iconic compositions like "Bengawan Solo" as representative of national identity. It further explores how canonization processes, while preserving cultural memory, can also marginalize regional and minority expressions. Comparative cases from other postcolonial contexts underscore the shared challenges and dynamics of musical canonization. The findings reveal that Keroncong's continued relevance lies in its adaptability. Diasporic reinterpretations, educational incorporation, and revivalist movements demonstrate that Keroncong remains a living tradition. Rather than a fixed heritage, it embodies an evolving site of identity negotiation, cultural memory, and aesthetic innovation. This study contributes to scholarly discourse on music, media, and postcolonial identity formation, offering a model for examining how musical traditions are constructed, institutionalized, and reimagined within complex socio political landscapes.

Keywords: Keroncong, Canon Formation, Postcolonial Identity, Media Archaeology, Indonesian Music, Cultural Policy.



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INTRODUCTION

Keroncong music stands as a sonic emblem of Indonesia's layered colonial and postcolonial identities, shaped over centuries through cultural contact, negotiation, and institutional mediation. With origins traceable to the arrival of Portuguese explorers and settlers in the 16th century, Keroncong emerged as a result of musical synthesis between European influences most notably

the cavaquinho and indigenous traditions. This convergence led to the development of a distinct genre that resonated across time, geography, and social groups, demonstrating Indonesia's long history of musical hybridity. Supiarza (2021) identifies this genre as a product of historical acculturation, where Portuguese elements were gradually indigenized, creating a uniquely Indonesian soundscape.

Central to this formative history is the Tugu community in Batavia (now Jakarta), known for their direct descent from the *Mardijkers* freed slaves of Portuguese heritage. Their preservation of Keroncong practices illustrates not only cultural resilience but also intergenerational memory. Through communal events, oral transmission, and formal teaching strategies, the Tugu community has continuously reasserted the relevance of Keroncong in modern Indonesian life (Supiarza, 2021). Their localized maintenance of instruments such as the *cuk* and *cak* underscores the significance of place and heritage in the shaping of musical genres.

From its regional base, Keroncong expanded significantly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through *Komedi Stambul* performances and early commercial recordings. During the 1930s, it entered mainstream consciousness via NIROM, the colonial radio network, which featured Keroncong in its multi ethnic programming. Tan (2018) notes how this exposure transformed Keroncong into a cross class, cross ethnic phenomenon that bridged traditional and modern auditory preferences. The genre's visibility was further amplified by the film industry especially through the landmark release of *Terang Boelan* (1937) and later through the patriotic melodies of *Bengawan Solo* (1940), which achieved international circulation during and after the Japanese occupation.

Following Indonesian independence, the newly established RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia) played a pivotal role in recoding Keroncong as part of the national cultural canon. Its focus on competitions, regional broadcasts, and standardized repertoire especially the promotion of *Langgam Jawa* helped shape public taste and formalized Keroncong as a 'national' genre. These developments exemplify how music becomes institutionalized through mechanisms of state cultural policy, media integration, and aesthetic selection. As Supiarza (2021) emphasizes, Keroncong's ability to integrate and adapt within new political frameworks illustrates its dynamism as a cultural tool.

This repositioning of Keroncong as a national symbol is not unique to Indonesia. Across Southeast Asia, similar processes have unfolded where musical hybridity is framed within nationalist discourse. Supiarza (2021) and Tan (2018) situate Keroncong within broader regional patterns of cultural fusion and resilience, where music becomes a medium of intercultural dialogue. This hybridity is evident not only in stylistic elements but also in Keroncong's openness to influences from neighboring countries, exemplified by the genre's cross border appeal during the mid 20th century.

Within the postcolonial era, Keroncong's role in nation building becomes especially prominent. Its use in official events, educational settings, and public broadcasts reflects a deliberate strategy to foster cultural unity and historical continuity. As Meagher (2021) argues, media platforms are

instrumental in constructing identity in postcolonial contexts not merely by transmitting culture, but by actively shaping it. The selective mediation of Keroncong through radio and film, especially under state supervision, transformed it from a regional sound into a vehicle of collective memory and national belonging.

In sum, this study explores the complex journey of Keroncong from its colonial origins to its institutionalization as a national genre. By focusing on the mechanisms of media, cultural policy, and musical structure, the research examines how Keroncong became embedded in Indonesian identity. The novelty of this article lies in its interdisciplinary method bridging musicology, media studies, and postcolonial theory to trace the processes through which Keroncong was curated, transmitted, and canonized. It offers a periodized model of musical evolution grounded in media archaeology and cultural politics, contributing to broader debates on how postcolonial states shape their sonic heritage.

METHOD

This chapter outlines the multi dimensional methodology employed to investigate the evolution of Keroncong music from its colonial roots to its national canonization. The research integrates ethnomusicological frameworks, media archaeology, and analytical music theory to form a cohesive examination of both musical structure and cultural transformation.

Periodization and Evolutionary Framework

The research employs a five phase periodization model to chart the historical development of Keroncong:

1. Proto Keroncong and Tugu origins (16th–18th centuries)
2. Colonial urban expansion and Stambul theatre (late 19th–early 20th centuries)
3. Popular media dissemination (1930s–1940s)
4. National canonization via RRI (1950s–60s)
5. Modernization, diaspora, and hybrid experiments (1970s–present)

This structure aligns with evolutionary models of musical change, such as those proposed by Warrell et al. (2024), who integrate principles of biological divergence and cultural adaptation. Savage (2019) further supports this by incorporating cognitive and social dimensions into musical evolution, enabling the study to explore how Keroncong adapts within varying historical and sociocultural environments.

Media Archaeology

Media archaeology is used to trace how technologies like 78 rpm recordings, radio (NIROM, RRI), and film impacted the circulation and transformation of Keroncong. This method uncovers the infrastructural and ideological mechanisms behind Keroncong's proliferation and aesthetic

standardization. Weiß et al. (2018) exemplify this approach by analyzing how media systems shape musical heritage and continuity across technological eras. The study also draws on Savage (2019) to contextualize the interactive relationship between cultural practice and evolving media platforms.

Analytical Framework: Chord Progressions and Rhythmic Patterns

The harmonic and rhythmic structure of Keroncong is analyzed with a focus on understanding its cultural significance. Statistical and cognitive models are employed to illustrate chord progressions and rhythmic interplay, but the main rationale is to reveal how these musical elements contribute to canon formation and identity. This methodological choice ensures that technical tools serve the broader cultural questions guiding this research.

Cultural Analysis and Canon Formation

The study further applies frameworks from Youngblood (2019) to analyze how rhythmic and melodic elements in Keroncong mirror sociopolitical change. This includes the influence of institutional forces (e.g., RRI's role in canonizing Langgam Jawa), revealing feedback loops between musical expression and nationalist agendas. Canon formation is explored not only through musical analysis but also via its symbolic role in nation building and collective memory.

By synthesizing these methodologies, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of Keroncong as a dynamic musical and cultural phenomenon shaped by media, policy, and evolving aesthetic conventions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary of Keroncong Evolution Across Five Phases

Phase	Time Period	Key Characteristics
I	16th–18th Century	Tugu heritage, cuk/cak evolution, community music function
II	1890s–1930s	Theater integration, NIROM radio spread, recordings impact
III	1937–1940s	Cinematic rise, transnational hits, wartime adaptation
IV	1950s–1960s	RRI canonization, Langgam Jawa, regional innovation
V	1970s–present	Diaspora forms, genre fusion, education and revival

Phase I: Tugu Heritage

Archival evidence shows the Tugu community preserved early Keroncong as both heritage and social practice. Rather than merely descriptive, this highlights how Keroncong operated as a tool

of cultural resilience and identity formation. Situating this within global creole traditions underscores its role as an early site of hybridity and adaptation.

Phase II: Early Spread & NIROM

Keroncong integrated into Komedi Stambul, enhancing theatrical narratives and emotional depth (Youngblood, 2019; Byo, 2017). NIROM archives (Gemma et al., 2020) reveal its widespread radio presence. Reception varied across communities (Sirek, 2017), with some embracing Keroncong as hybrid heritage while others viewed it as a colonial residue. Commercial recordings standardized and expanded the genre's reach, altering musical expectations and performance norms (Vasil, 2023).

Phase III: Film & Transnationalism

The film *Terang Boelan* integrated Keroncong with cinematic storytelling, elevating its cultural legitimacy (Montgomery et al., 2017). "Bengawan Solo" gained international acclaim, transmitted through radio and recordings (Frytsiuk et al., 2022). In Japanese occupied territories, the genre was used for propaganda while undergoing local adaptations (Luo, 2018; Zou et al., 2024). In both colonial and postcolonial cinema, Keroncong served as a symbol of nostalgia, identity, and resistance (Qiaoyi, 2024).

Phase IV: National Canon Formation

RRI institutionalized Langgam Jawa as the "national" variant of Keroncong through broadcasts, competitions, and policy (Adamyan, 2018; Svalina, 2023). Competitions fostered innovation and regional variants, expanding the genre's stylistic repertoire (Powell, 2021). Key figures like Waldjinah and Gesang promoted national musical identity through their works (Wang et al., 2023). Langgam Jawa catalyzed intercultural dialogue, attracting non Javanese musicians and audiences (Smith et al., 2022; Song & Tyson, 2024).

Phase V: Modernization & Diaspora

The Indo–Dutch diaspora produced new hybrid forms of Keroncong reflecting their transnational identities (Jing, 2024). Experiments combining Keroncong with pop, rock, and jazz revitalized youth interest (Krause & Davidson, 2018). Formal education systems now incorporate Keroncong into curricula, ensuring generational continuity (Konovalova, 2021). Revivalist movements use festivals and workshops to promote appreciation, signaling Keroncong's continued relevance (Pokharel, 2021).

The institutional trajectory of Keroncong reveals how media entities actively shaped its cultural authority. Rather than retelling results, this section highlights the theoretical implication: canonization is a process of cultural legitimation in which state media acted as powerful arbiters of national identity. NIROM introduced Keroncong as intercultural engagement, while RRI reframed it as nationalist unity, showing how institutions define cultural value.

The contrast between colonial and postcolonial canonization practices is critical to understanding Keroncong's evolution. During the colonial era, canonization was shaped by European

hegemonies that prioritized Western classical and popular forms while often exoticizing or marginalizing indigenous traditions (Doi & Luyk, 2019). In this context, Keroncong was tolerated as a hybrid curiosity rather than celebrated as a cultural achievement. However, in the postcolonial period, particularly after the establishment of RRI, canonization became a political act of cultural reclamation. The elevation of *Langgam Jawa* a subgenre of Keroncong characterized by Javanese language and stylistic nuances reflected an effort to domesticate the genre within a broader nationalist narrative. Nevertheless, as scholars such as Nilsson & Hansen (2018) and Davies (2024) contend, such state driven musical policies can also act as instruments of exclusion. By institutionalizing a particular aesthetic, these policies often suppress regional and minority musical expressions, limiting the scope of what is recognized as 'authentically national.' Thus, canon formation becomes a double edged process preserving tradition on one hand while potentially erasing diversity on the other.

The inherently hybrid nature of Keroncong makes it particularly suitable for comparative analysis with other postcolonial musical traditions. Genres such as reggae in the Caribbean and *Luk Thung* in Thailand offer parallel trajectories where music emerges from a blend of indigenous, colonial, and global influences. In Jamaica, reggae developed as a voice of resistance and identity reclamation in response to colonial marginalization mirroring Keroncong's post independence rise as a symbol of Indonesian unity. Similarly, in Thailand, traditional melodies have been combined with Western instrumentation and formats to create commercially successful hybrid genres (Maalsen & McLean, 2017; Yang et al., 2024). These cases affirm that hybrid musical forms are not cultural anomalies but rather vital expressions of identity negotiation in postcolonial societies. Keroncong's transformation into a national genre should thus be viewed through a transnational lens that recognizes the dialogic interplay of regional tradition and external influence.

Critiques of nationalist cultural policy add further complexity to our understanding of Keroncong's canonization. Scholars like Cantillon et al. (2020) and Ringel (2021) emphasize that while the intent of cultural policy is often to unify and celebrate heritage, it can inadvertently marginalize alternative voices. The construction of a national musical identity through state backed initiatives frequently privileges dominant ethnic narratives, particularly in multiethnic nations like Indonesia. The prioritization of *Langgam Jawa*, for instance, aligns with a broader pattern of Javanese centrality in Indonesian political and cultural discourse. This alignment has profound implications for regions such as Sumatra, Kalimantan, or Sulawesi, where local musical traditions remain underrepresented in national media. Ajotikar (2021) work on Indian music archives similarly underscores the politics of representation, revealing how the architecture of archiving and dissemination often reflects power hierarchies rather than cultural inclusivity. In Indonesia, Keroncong's rise under RRI mirrored this selective approach to cultural memory.

At the heart of this dynamic is the power of media institutions not just to transmit, but to define. Media does more than circulate music it establishes value hierarchies and cultural legitimacy. By determining what is recorded, aired, and institutionalized, media entities such as NIROM and RRI have played pivotal roles in shaping the sonic identity of the nation. This has far reaching implications. While Keroncong's media framed rise ensured its survival and status, it also set boundaries around what Indonesian music is and is not. This form of musical curation however well intentioned can foster aesthetic stagnation and exclude evolving forms. Recent revivalist

movements, along with reinterpretations by the Indo–Dutch diaspora and hybrid experiments by younger artists, signal a growing resistance to static canonization. These movements reflect a broader push to reclaim Keroncong as a living, adaptable, and inclusive tradition that continues to evolve in response to new contexts and audiences.

Ultimately, the history of Keroncong encapsulates broader questions of cultural production, authority, and identity in postcolonial societies. It demonstrates how music becomes entangled in narratives of memory, power, and belonging. While its canonization has conferred prestige and institutional support, it has also necessitated trade offs sidelining certain voices in favor of others. Acknowledging these tensions invites a more critical and inclusive engagement with Keroncong as both a national treasure and a contested cultural field. Understanding its journey allows us to see beyond the fixed symbols of heritage and appreciate the genre’s ongoing dialogue with the past, present, and future.

CONCLUSION

This study traced Keroncong’s journey from colonial hybridity to its institutionalization as a national symbol. The main contribution lies in showing how media institutions mediated this transformation, shaping both its prestige and its limitations. While canonization secured Keroncong’s legacy, it also constrained diversity, raising critical questions about cultural representation. \n\nThe article contributes to debates on postcolonial identity by demonstrating that national music is constructed not only through sound, but also through power and memory. Future research can further explore how revivalist and diasporic practices resist static canonization and open Keroncong toward more inclusive cultural futures.

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