

## Cultural Imperialism and Popular Culture: Unveiling the Influence of Salmah Ismail @ Saloma in the Federation of Malaya

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### ABSTRACT

Salmah Ismail @ Saloma has been greatly influenced by imperialism, which led her to achieve such a fame in Federation of Malaya and also in the neighbouring countries. The influence of imperialism on the development of her career as an artist seems to be unnoticed even by Saloma herself and previous studies on her only conclude that Saloma was merely a singer with a melodious voice, actress, fashion icon, and a wife to a renowned artist, P. Ramlee. Cultural imperialism in Malaya is deemed to have influenced Saloma until she sparks the birth of popular culture in the Federation of Malaya. Therefore, this research would scrutinise the extent to which cultural imperialism in the Federation of Malaya has influenced Saloma in shaping popular culture in the country from the colonialism era until the post-independence era in the Federated Malay States. The results of this research show that Saloma had certainly brought a dominant image of imperialism in Malaya through culture imperialism. Saloma has successfully introduced a popular culture in the Federation of Malaya through her sense of music, media and fashion, and lifestyle. The finding of this study contributes significantly to the history of our country in relation to how the contribution of artists, which in this context referring to Saloma, had given an impact on our country's civilization. The findings of the current study can be used as a guide to highlight the role and contribution of artists that is less recognized in the civilization and history of the country.

**Keywords:** *Saloma, popular culture, imperialism, cultural imperialism, Malaya.*

### INTRODUCTION

.....*Bila larut malam*  
*Suasana sepi*  
*Tiada pun insan*  
*Yang ku lihat lagi*  
*Mengapa hatiku*  
*Merasa terharu*  
*Di malam ini*

*Terasa sunyi  
Ingin kukatakan  
Tapi pada siapa  
Purnama membisu  
Embun pun membeku.....*

The lyrical stanza above were taken from the lyrics of a song entitled *Bila Larut Malam* (When Midnight Comes) created by Ramli Putih, lyrics by Sudarmaji Abdullah sung by Saloma, which happens to be a song still very much popular and relevant to this very day (the video has been shared by Pakcummy, 2008, in YouTube channel). When we immerse ourselves in the meaning behind the song and enjoy Saloma's melodious voice, we will find ourselves automatically singing and moving our shoulders along to it and imagining ourselves in the pre-independence era of the Federation of Malaya, which was the golden age where Saloma made a name for herself in her career at the time (Abdullah et al., 2022; Sallehuddin & Ali, 2022). This clearly indicates how influential Saloma was in the performing arts industry of our nation, as throughout the times her songs are still consistently well-received despite Saloma having left us for quite some time (Johan, 2018). This begs the question, how does one interpret Saloma from a historical standpoint? What findings will be obtained beyond the public's perception of her as a singer? Furthermore, will this research be able to make a great contribution towards the writings of our nation's history? Certainly, the list of questions will continually hover in the minds of the society following the stereotypical thinking that an artiste has nothing to contribute to the history of our country. To date, there is no study on how Saloma is associated with cultural imperialism in the Federation of Malaya. Even the discussion of how cultural imperialism interacts with local culture through Saloma has not yet received attention by historians in Malaysia and abroad. In addition, Saloma's efforts in initiating cultural popularity in the Federation of Malaya are less noticed by other academics. Therefore, this research would scrutinise the extent to which cultural imperialism in the Federation of Malaya has influenced Saloma in shaping popular culture in the country from the colonialism era until the post-independence era in the Federated Malay States. Discussions related to cultural imperialism and Saloma are focused on the analysis of music imperialism, media imperialism and fashion, and lifestyle as well as the relevance of Saloma's efforts in shaping the popular culture in the Federation of Malaya.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural imperialism, the influence of dominant cultures on the cultural practices and expressions of colonized regions, has been a topic of significant discussion in academic circles. Edward Said (1978), a key postcolonial theorist, explored this concept in his influential work "Orientalism." Said argued that cultural imperialism involves the imposition of Western ideologies, norms, and values on colonized societies, perpetuating power imbalances. Other postcolonial theorists, such as Homi Bhabha (2012) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999), have expanded upon this discourse. However, there remains a gap in literature that specifically examines how cultural imperialism interacts with local culture through artists in colonized regions. This literature review aims to address this gap by connecting the theories of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and other postcolonial thinkers to the concept of cultural

imperialism in the establishment of popular culture. In addition, this review will highlight the need for more comprehensive research on the role of artists, using Saloma as a case study.

Edward Said's (1978) influential work, particularly "Orientalism," has played a crucial role in shaping postcolonial studies. Said's examination of power dynamics and the representation of the "Other" contributed to the discourse on cultural imperialism, highlighting how Western cultures dominate and shape the practices and expressions of colonized regions. Other postcolonial theorists have expanded on Said's ideas, focusing on the agency of the colonized in navigating and subverting cultural imperialism. Homi Bhabha (2012) further developed this discussion by introducing the concept of "hybridity," exploring how cultural identities evolve through the interactions between the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha's concept highlights the creation of hybrid cultural expressions that challenge the monolithic influence of the dominant culture. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) has also made significant contributions in the field of postcolonial theory. Spivak argues that the subaltern, representing oppressed and marginalized groups, are often excluded from the dominant discourse perpetuated by cultural imperialism, leaving them without agency and voice.

Many studies have examined the impact of cultural imperialism on the establishment of popular culture worldwide. Scholars like John Tomlinson (2001) and Arjun Appadurai (1990) have discussed the homogenization of cultural practices through the dominance of Western media and entertainment industries. This dominance has led to the replication of Western cultural norms and values, often overshadowing local traditions and expressions. However, a critical evaluation reveals a lack of references that specifically address the interactions between cultural imperialism and local culture through artists in colonized regions. Existing studies have often overlooked the agency and contributions of artists in colonized regions, erroneously considering them as passive recipients rather than active participants in the formation of popular culture under cultural imperialism. By investigating the specific dynamics of how artists operate within the sphere of cultural imperialism, this review aims to fill this gap in the literature. Saloma, a prominent artist from the Federation of Malaya, serves as a compelling case study. Her music, fashion, and performances transcended boundaries and garnered international acclaim. However, her experiences as an artist from a colonized region and the ways in which she negotiated cultural imperialism in her work remain underexplored themes. The limited research on the role of artists in colonized regions regarding cultural imperialism is a significant gap in the existing literature. Recognizing the agency and ingenuity of artists like Saloma is crucial in understanding how they navigated and even subverted cultural imperialism through their creative expression. This research seeks to shed light on the multifaceted ways in which artists from colonized regions actively participated in shaping popular culture, creating an alternative narrative to the dominant discourse of cultural imperialism.



Figure 1: Saloma at the height of her glory

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is historical and uses qualitative research methods. Several actions and processes have been performed, such as critique, analysis, heuristics, and historiography, so that this research achieves objectivity in historical research. Like other historical research, library research has been used to collect primary and secondary sources (Mohd Noor, 2006). The researchers visited the National Archives of Malaysia, P. Ramlee Memorial House (*Pustaka Peringatan P. Ramlee*), P. Ramlee dan Saloma: Aku, Dia dan Lagu Exhibition, Fahrenheit88 Mall, April-July 2022 (Figure 2), P.Ramlee & Saloma Exhibition, IOI City Mall, August-September 2022 (Figure 3), The P. Ramlee House, the National Library of Malaysia, and Public Institutions of Higher Learning (IPTA) Libraries in Malaysia to collect the sources mentioned. The research is dependent on official documents such as newspapers in Malaya in the 1950s, especially, The Straits Times, official documents, newspapers, journals, books, youtube, album and song. Therefore, a compilation of the specified list of sources is important for researchers to master and explore the sources related to this research during the specified period.

This study also utilizes the interview method as a research approach. The research initiated by identifying an appropriate and relevant informant to be interviewed regarding the research topic. The informant was contacted via phone call to inform them about the purpose of the interview and clarify that the interview would be recorded. Subsequently, the interview date was determined based on the availability of the informant. During the interview, detailed notes were taken and the conversation was recorded. The interview was concluded with the informant's permission to use the interview recording for research and

publication purposes. In this case, the interview method was chosen to gather key information from Rozita Rohaizat (Figure 4, 5 & 6), a 66-year-old lady who is a close niece of Saloma and had accompanied her during her singing career until the end of her life. Rozita, who is also the daughter of the legendary actress Mariani and sister to Melissa Salla, provides valuable insights and firsthand experiences related to Saloma. Additionally, Rozita herself is a singer and was once popular for her song "Anak Ikan" (D'OR Entertainment, 2016). By employing the interview method, this research benefits from the informant's personal encounters and connections with the relevant figures and entities in Saloma's life. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of Saloma's career and contributes to capturing a more comprehensive picture of her influence and contributions to popular culture in the Federation of Malaya.



Figure 2: P. Ramlee dan Saloma: Aku, Dia dan Lagu Exhibition at the Fahrenheit88 Mall, April-July 2022



Figure 3: P. Ramlee & Saloma Exhibition at the IOI City Mall, August-September 2022



Figure 4: Rozita Rohaizad, Saloma's niece



Figure 5: Rozita Rohaizad and Saloma when Rozita was still young



Figure 6: Rozita Rohaizad when she was a teenager accompanying Saloma and P. Ramlee to a wedding

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Influence of Music Imperialism in Saloma's Singing*

Saloma had indeed proven herself when she was recognised as the National Songstress in 1978 during the award presentation for Malaysian artists by the Malaysian Artistes Association (SENIMAN) (*Berita Harian*, 3 December 1978). Furthermore, if one were to look at her playlist, one would see that she was a very versatile singer as she was able to perform various song genres really well (Figure 7) (Abu Bakar & Zamani, 2023). Aside from Saloma's efforts at elevating Malay songs, she was also seen to champion the development of music imperialism before the independence of Federation of Malaya as she also performed a collection of English songs. This is because her early career blossomed during the era of British colonialism in Malaya (Beng, 1996).



Figure 7: Saloma with Percy Proctor, a popular jazz singer, seen here recording a song called "Anyone Can Fall In Love" for Radio Malaya in 1955

What is music imperialism? How was Saloma linked to music imperialism in Malaya? In general, music imperialism is part of the influence of imperialism in culture. The development of music in Britain was seen to be moving in tandem with the development of imperialism in the colonies. According to Jeffrey Richards (2017), the development of imperialism was indeed moving in tandem with the development of music of the time. This was due to the fact that the influence of the colonising masters on the colonies can be fortified through music and ideologies which represented English imperialism at its height. Several dominant elements such as religion, the might of the empire and her military, war and love can also be found in the ideology of imperialism. Furthermore, music was used to dramatise, visualise and enhance the image and culture of the colonial masters aside from placing emphasis on the English concept of multiple identities in human civilisation (Richards, 2017). During the British occupation of Malaya, music from Europe such as jazz, western classical, pop and many others were playing on the speakers of Radio Malaya, particularly in mid-20th century (Lockard, 1998). In addition, *The Straits Times* also promoted European music through advertisements for night clubs, operas, movies and news on current musical development (Muhamad, 2023).

Although the Federation on Malaya was colonised by the British, this does not mean Malaya is not influenced by cultural imperialism from other colonial powers such as the United States (Golding & Harris, 1996; Rothkopf, 1997; Mirrlees, 2013). It is clear to what extent America and Britain seek to expand their popular culture through music as their initiative to interact with other music cultures in the world (Krüger & Trandafoiu, 2013). In the early 20th century, American music was trending and spread its influence around the globe (Chase, 1992). Many are more interested and focus on the classical music, blues, and country music, as well as jazz which is popularised by the African Americans (Cooper & Cooper, 1993). Some American singers who are deemed prominent and influential at that time are Doris Day, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Shore, and other singers by dominating the international music arena during the rise of American music in the whole world, including the Federation of Malaya (Miletich, 1993). In fact, it is observable that colonialists like the United States and British have leveraged famous singers to promote their imperialism culture at that time to the whole world (Eacott, 2016). In fact, the British also adopt this method in Malaya by choosing Saloma to promote their culture through music. Although Doris Day, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Shore and Saloma are deemed unaware of their role as the imperialism agent at that time, it is apparent that this new form of colonialism is easier to succeed in comparison to the former form of colonialism (Frith, 1996).

Looking at Saloma, pop culture has indeed influenced Saloma's thinking from her early involvement in the music industry. Since she was a teenager, she has adopted Ella Fitzgerald's singing style as her own (Nicholson, 2014; Samad, 2012). However, according to Rozita Rohaizat, Saloma's singing style is more inclined to Doris Day, who is a famous American singer compared to Ella Fitzgerald's, since Saloma and Doris Day adopt similar ways of singing. This study had looked at Doris Day's singing through *When I Fall in Love* and it was found that indeed her singing style has significant similarities to Saloma's compared to Ella Fitzgerald's ways of singing. This shows that Saloma has made Doris Day as her reference in her singing than Ella Fitzgerald. This indeed changes the initial fact that Saloma has been influenced by the Ella Fitzgerald's way of singing in the previous research.



In 1948, at the age of 13, she made her debut performance at New World Cabaret, Singapore, rendering a popular western song called *Seven Lonely Days* by Georgia Gibbs. From this debut performance, Saloma received recognition as a singer with potential in Federation of Malaya, on par with other mainstays such as Nona Asiah, Lena Momo La and others. Saloma was able to deliver English songs well, in fact if anyone were to watch YouTube videos of Saloma singing songs in English, many today would be in awe of her ability to croon them exceptionally well. This indicates that Saloma had a unique gift not possessed by other singers in Malaya during her era (Samad, 2012). Furthermore, Saloma was more adept at putting herself ahead compared to others. Her ability to carry music imperialism had positioned her on a higher level in the music business. Night clubs that sprang up like mushrooms enabled her to successfully monopolise performance contracts from those night clubs within and outside of Malaya (Daniels, 2013). Furthermore, Saloma's performances that created soundwaves at night clubs and hotels were often advertised in *The Straits Times* and as a result, she was even idolised by the British officers in Malaya (Figure 8 & 9) (Muhamad, 2023). This information is also supported by information contained in the records found in a record player entitled *Malaya*, which was recorded in Singapore and released in the form of gramophone record by Sephia Records Limited of Austria which contains information stating that in Singapore, the city's booming recording and movie industries have nurtured many fine artists. Saloma dan P. Ramlee are among the famous singers who were expected to bridge the gap between the west and the musical and friendly country. Despite not being a new phenomenon at the time, this demonstrates the development of imperialism through music in Malaya had taken hold of Saloma (P. Ramlee & Saloma, 2021).



Figure 8: First advertisement of Salmah bin Ismail@Saloma as a Professional Night Club Singer in 1954



**SKY PALACE REST. LTD.**  
14th, 15th, & 16th FLOORS.  
ASIA INSURANCE BUILDING

PRESENTS NIGHTLY

14th floor: Miss **SALOMA** & Miss **LISA** — well-known singers accompanied by H. H. Tan & His Rhythm Boys.

15th floor: Cor Ryf's Trio  
Come and Dine (Chinese or Continental Food) and Dance.

**SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT:—**  
Book Early For Chinese New Year's Dinners.  
"Ballet Bastille" Will be appearing  
During the Chinese New Year.  
"Duo Sylvanos" World Famous Acrobatic  
Dancers will be Performing Here.

Tea Dance Every Sunday 3.30 to 6.30 p.m.  
BOOK EARLY FOR RESERVATIONS.  
TEL. NOS. 28606. 24716 & 24314.

Figure 9: Salmah binti Ismail (Saloma) performance advertisement in *The Straits Times*, 1957

Saloma's upholding and contribution to the development of music in Malaya can be seen when she implemented the western classical vocal technique in rendering her popular songs. The western classical vocal technique was applied in almost all of Saloma's Malay-language songs (except for those in the *Irama Melayu* and creative ethnic genres) such as *Perwira*, *Bosanova*, *Istana Cinta*, *Apa Guna Berjanji*, *Bila Larut Malam* and *Tunggu Sekejap* (Abu Bakar, 2018). Saloma used such technique because it was the foundation to the correct singing technique, and it was also able to protect the vocal cords from any damage. Her talent in delivering such songs landed her a job offer in Bangkok, where all of her songs were extremely well-received. The last English song ever sung by Saloma is *There'll Never Be Another You*, which is a popular song by Harry Warren and lyrics by Mack Gordon. In 1976, Saloma dedicated the song to her beloved P. Ramlee (Samad, 2012). Saloma's use of the western singing technique showed that she had brought a singing module that ought to be emulated by any singer from then until now. In fact, Dato' Sri Siti Nurhaliza stated that her song entitled *Menanti Pasti* which released in 2007 and *Anta Permana* which was released in 2018, also adopts Saloma singing style (MeleTOP, 2018; Dato' Sri Siti Nurhaliza, 2020). This indicates that her way of singing is evergreen across the era and has indeed become the singing reference the top Malaysian singer, Dato' Seri Siti Nurhaliza at present. Although Saloma did not realise that she had in fact carried and propagated music imperialism, her contribution had empowered the music industry in the nation. This clearly indicates not all from the west are detrimental to us. On the contrary, anything that does not bring harm should be adapted and utilised to make our lives better than before.

Moreover, Saloma has indeed contributed to the starting of Malay pop music which is oriented towards Western music and local Malay music into the form of commercial hybrid. Pop and Malay have distinguished symbolic associations from the existing music, generation, social class, and ethnicity in the Federation of Malaya. Malay Pop music is marketed to the young market segment who deem it as 'cool' (influential) and progressive (advanced)

(Weintraub, 2014). During the period of political and economic transformation in the 1960s, it is apparent that Malay pop music has a connection in bridging the present and the past. As the Federation of Malaya shifts towards having its own autonomy, Malay pop music sonically transcode images and memories of the past, albeit an imagined past, for younger listeners to look at 'pop' as the way to the future (Muhd Shukri & Abdullah, 2020). On the other hand, Malay music has its own ethnic connotations, tradition, and originality (Shah, 2006). Malay music, performed by the Malay orchestra at that time has a large audience base, yet it does not follow the trend. Malay in terms of composition and musical performance does not reflect the tradition in the face of modernity. Experiments of style and diversity of composition have long characterised Malay pop music (Weintraub, 2014). The genres of elite music, harmonium symphony, and gambus orchestra from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contribute to the mixed repertoire of Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Malay music, including the Malay Orchestra (Kinzer, 2017).

Even the term 'Malay orchestra' suggests a combination and contradiction, 'orchestra' (from the Dutch term 'orchestra' or English 'orchestra', which signifies modernity) and 'Malay' (indicating cultural past) (Beng, 2020). This research notices Saloma is aware of the need to change the Malay music landscape at that time towards a more modern and recent one. This is driven by the development of pop music is a popular genre that is originated from its modern form during the mid-1950s in the United States and the United Kingdom (Bennett, & Janssen, 2016). Therefore, it seems that Saloma blends Malay music and pop into the Malay pop music through her songs. Saloma's experiment is deemed successful in elevating the Malay music arena to remain evergreen, even until now. This is because it is indeed acknowledged that if Malay music remains limited and does not open to change, it will be left behind and hard to evolve, at that time, music from many countries had begun to interact and assimilate with each other. Such changes are made easier by her experience of performing abroad such as in Singapore, Borneo, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Australia, giving her the ideas in empowering the Malay music. (The Singapore Free Press, 1960). In fact, the rapid growth of Malay pop music was lasting until the glory of pop yeh yeh music in the 70's through A. Ramlie, M. Osman, Afida Es, Jeffrydin, J. Sham, S. Jibeng and others, indicating that Malay land music has uniquely evolved in line with the development of music worldwide (Liew & Fu, 2006).

### *Saloma in Media Imperialism*

Apart from the medium of music, the colonisers also implemented imperialism in mass media and print media to reinforce their occupation and domination of the colonies by launching propaganda on certain issues (Abdullah et al., 2021). For example, the British controlled the media in Malaya, especially the newspaper, television, radio and others. This created a global hegemony which became the basis of imperialism in the form of culture (Anderson, 2006; Gunaish et al., 2022; Abdul Manaf, 2022). The coloniser's newspapers in Malaya and abroad were seen to be controlling the news being reported in all of the colonies (Adnan, 2014). This indicated that the media served as a new colonising tool and proved that occupation was achieved not just by the use of weapons and conquest, but also through the mass media and print media. Through imperialism on the media, the British colonists need not incur huge expenses in strengthening their hold over Malaya. Instead, the British only needed to control the mass media and print media to shape the psychology and thinking of the readers as how they desire (Thompson, 1995; Tahir et al., 2023). This is because the influence of the mass media and print media can imprint a profound and lasting effect (Tahir et al., 2013). As the

saying goes, *the pen is mightier than the sword*. Therefore, domination in the form of control of the media can create certain prejudices in the minds of the readers (Abdullah et al., 2021).

In the context of Saloma, she certainly did receive constant coverage from the print media and electronic media such as newspapers and magazines, both within Malaya and abroad, especially from media owned by the British (Lockard, 1996). Most mass and print media made Saloma the subject of their respective reporting and writing. This is because the media saw Saloma as an exemplary modern Malay woman who upheld the image of imperialism throughout her years of glory. For that reason, the newspapers have tried to provide sensationalised news about Saloma to their readers in the colonised land with various strategies. For example, by displaying western elements in Saloma's life which encompassed fashion, lifestyle, songs and other elements, Saloma was portrayed as the epitome of a modern woman who embraced the call of the colonisers to modernise the backward society in Malaya. One news report after another published by the mass media and print media portrayed Saloma as a personality who had successfully found herself a place in the western media and became a topic of conversation throughout the world. In 1995, *the Sport Magazine* even published Saloma's hit song "*Inang Baru*". This achievement was seen as almost unparalleled by other artistes and personalities during the same era as Saloma. From a different aspect, this can be seen as having its own objective, that is to show that Saloma's success was due to exposure given to her by the British (The Sport Magazine, 1995).



Figure 10: Romance between Saloma and Ken Davis caught the attention of popular British newspaper, *Daily Mirror* in 1956

Aside from the print media in Malaya, reports of Saloma were also published in the media abroad. There were four British newspapers that published reports on Saloma in 1956, namely *Daily Mirror*, *Belfast Newsletter*, *The Yorkshire Observer*, *Daily Herald* and *The Evening Express* which were based in Britain. In general, these newspapers presented Saloma as a modern woman from Malaya; an accomplished singer with a beautiful voice who can sing English songs really well, and a Malay woman who had been engaged to a man from Scotland, Ken Buchanan Davis (Figure 10). The ensuing breaking off of the engagement between them was also reported by these dailies, which showed that Saloma was known in the western world through these stories (*Daily Mirror*, 1956 *Belfast Newsletter*, 1956; *The Yorkshire Observer*, 1956; *Evening Express*, 27 August 1956; *Daily Herald*, 1963). It is evident that the characteristics and talent which Saloma possessed, together with her engagement to a Scottish man, had garnered the interest of the newspapers from Britain who deemed the life of this Malay woman interesting enough to be shared with the people of Britain.

Other than the British newspapers, a magazine from Australia, *The Australian Women Weekly*, had in 1959 published a report on Saloma in its *Holiday in Malaya and Singapore* segment. Saloma was touted as “*The Dream of The East*” (Figure 11). The magazine had introduced Saloma as a singer from Malaya, one with a beautiful voice, and a night club performer who was able to sing songs in various languages such as English, Japanese, Chinese and, of course, Malay. Based on the report published by the magazine, it is understood that Saloma was projected as a popular icon. She was seen as the unofficial tourism ambassador of Malaya and Singapore as her persona had successfully attracted tourists from Australia to come to Malaya and Singapore for a holiday. This indicates that other countries had acknowledged Saloma as one of the priceless attractions of Malaya. Hence, she was recognised as being capable of attracting foreign tourists to visit Malaya. Thus, it is evident that Saloma had contributed immensely to the tourism industry in Malaya at the time despite Malaya still being in the infancy of its independence in 1959 (*The Australian Women Weekly*, 1959).



Figure 11: *The Australian Women Weekly* magazine stated that Saloma was a main attraction for visitors in Singapore and Malaya

Aside from the foreign press, western newspapers owned by the coloniser of Malaya such as *The Straits Time* also published reports about Saloma in her days of glory. Such reports ought to be analysed in new studies, considering that the daily had a specific strategy in elevating Saloma as a product of the coloniser. Overall, *The Straits Times* had positioned Saloma as a singer with a beautiful voice, a modern Malay woman who had a relationship with an Englishman (Figure 12). Female gender exploitation was seen to occur in the press when any reporting on women were done with a specific stereotype applied; the wife of P. Ramlee, international success, night club performer; and the crowning of Saloma as the Marilyn Monroe of Asia (Muhamad, 2023). In fact, influential film director and activist Marlon Brando dubbed Saloma as the Marilyn Monroe of the East (Zakaria & Mohd. Yunus, 2017). This title gave rise to the questions regarding who was Marilyn Monroe, what was the link between Marilyn Monroe and Saloma, and what truly lies behind the image of Marilyn Monroe (Figure 13).



Figure 12: Romantic episodes between Saloma and Ken Davis continued to garner the attention of *The Straits Times* in 1956

In the context of Saloma, the British-owned papers had positioned Saloma on par with Marilyn Monroe. This was seen as a tribute to Saloma for her extraordinary achievements in Malaya and abroad, which were not only confined to the beauty of her voice but also to her image as a westernised, modern and sexy woman who successfully attracted the attention of local and foreign newspapers. However, the press's actions in likening Saloma to Marilyn Monroe as a sex symbol in Malaya were deemed as excessive and ran counter to the values of the east image, as well as seen to be lowering the dignity of a Muslim woman. Islam protects women against anything that may tarnish their honour and lower their dignity (Khan, 1988; Mohd Sharif et al., 2021; Abd Wahab et al., 2022). Although the title was given as a tribute by the western media and personalities, it was found that Saloma felt uncomfortable

with the actions of certain parties who equated her to Marilyn Monroe. After Malaya achieved independence, Saloma had requested the media based in Malaya to no longer equate her with Marilyn Monroe (Singapore Standard, 1958). Nevertheless, this study notices Saloma is indeed aware of the importance of print and electronic media in her career. Her spotlight and headlines featuring her in the western media is deemed as one of the marketing initiatives to make her famous in the entertainment field. For Saloma, if her name is often mentioned by the media, this can give her values in making a name for herself in entertainment, because it was not easy for local artists to do so especially during the colonial era because the British media tend to highlight their culture in the colonised countries by introducing music from Britain and America. On the other hand, the media spotlight especially by the British, is seen as a quick way for Saloma to introduce popular culture in the Federation of Malaya. Although it was emphasised from the beginning that Saloma does not realise that she is an imperialism agent and a significant individual in developing popular culture in the Federation of Malaya, but her fame has successfully influenced people's interests and behaviour in their lives, in fact her fashion remains a trend until today. Only via photos in magazines and newspapers, Saloma manages to shape the modern lifestyle of a society that is still bound by tradition. Furthermore, Singapore, which becomes the focus of journalists, writers, writers, and film stars in preserving their work, has empowered the printing and newspaper industry, thus helping to introduce the popular culture in the Federation of Malaya (Mohd Sharif et al., 2022).



Figure 13: Marilyn Monroe also a subject of American Imperialism States in the 1950s and 1960s

### *Saloma, Fashion and Lifestyle*

Generally, Saloma was known as a “Malayan Fashion Pioneer” and “Retro Fashion Icon”, following her contributions to the nation’s fashion industry from the start of her golden age until today. According to Hanizah Jonoh, Director of the National Archives Division, the National Archives of Malaysia (ANM) who was interviewed by Bernama Radio on 29 April 2022, ANM has 255 pairs of Saloma clothing attire pending to be displayed and studied by researchers (Hanizah Jonoh, 2022). This situation shows that the recognitions as the “Malayan Fashion Pioneer” and “Retro Fashion Icon” to Saloma are indeed worthy of her efforts in introducing pop culture through modern Malay fashion during the past that remains until today. In fact, Saloma does in general deserve the recognitions that she had received, and this proves that Saloma’s contributions were not confined solely to her singing. In fact, Saloma’s contributions were far greater than what was displayed or what was said about her all these years. Saloma received such recognitions because she was seen as constantly taking care of her appearance through having an attractive personality, paying great attention to her looks when working and always keeping abreast with current fashion developments. Saloma had the courage to infuse some western and eastern elements in her couture whenever she appeared in a film, on stage, and when images of her were recorded by the media both locally and globally. The fashion carried by Saloma merged two cultures that have always been at odds with each other. Through her experiences delivering performances abroad, clearly such experiences had inspired her to come up with a western fashion style that was amalgamated with eastern sensibilities. This also shows that although Saloma was seen as upholding imperialism through fashion, she did not fully import western fashion into Malay fashion. Instead, she observed, analysed, adapted and adjusted such Western images with local fashion.

In addition, Saloma also gave shape to her own fashion, which encompassed many aspects from the choice of fabric all the way to tailoring and finishing (Zakaria & Mohd. Yunus, 2017). However, according to Rozita, Saloma did not sew her clothing totally on her own, instead she outsourced to some tailors and modified the dresses according to her taste (Rozita Rohaizad, 2022). In general, she was well known for her tight kebaya (modern contemporary kebaya) combined with the wearing of a black corset as inner wear to appear more graceful and stylish. She used fabric imported from abroad such as gowns and blouses made of polyester. Saloma evidently placed a lot of emphasis on quality in terms of her clothing. At the height of her glory, Saloma always seen to be wearing fashion that combined eastern and western culture. Fashion that displayed elements of two continents include the Blouse, the Tight Contemporary Kebaya and Gowns. A short and tight-fitting blouse of hers, heavily adorned with ruby sequins sewn to the sleeves, weighed 126 grams (Figure 15 & 16). Meanwhile, cotton was used as the basic material to produce blouses with sweetheart necklines. Such a blouse was modelled by Saloma in the 1964 film *Ragam P. Ramlee* in a scene where she rendered the song “*Hancur Badan Dikandung Tangan*” (Figure 14). When comparing the details of Saloma’s apparel to those from abroad, the differences were obvious. Western blouses (buttoned women’s dresses) typically have buttons which are reversed to differentiate them from men’s shirts. This demonstrates that Saloma did not simply adopt western blouse fashion entirely, but rather she made adjustments so that the blouses she wore incorporated styles and ideas closer to the local culture. Clearly, she was



advanced in aspects of fashion and her support for the western dressing style had significantly impacted the fashion industry in Malaya (Zakaria & Mohd. Yunus, 2017).



Figure 14: The tight-fitting short blouse decked with hand-sewn ruby sequins, with cotton as the base fabric, weighed 126 grams and was worn by Saloma in the 1965 film *Ragam P. Ramlee* when she rendered the song “Hancur Badan Dikandung Tangan”

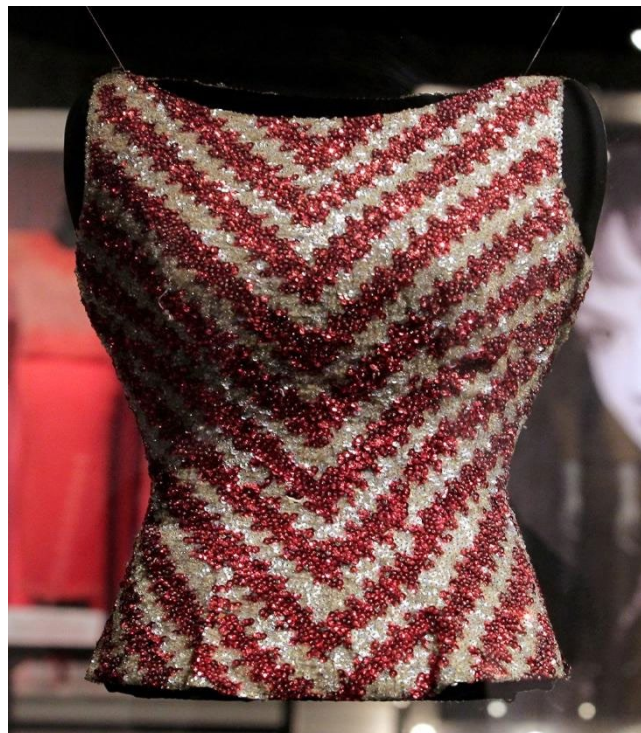


Figure 15: Sleeveless blouse was among Saloma’s favourites when performing



Figure 16: The blouse belonged to Saloma had been on display at P. Ramlee and Saloma Aku, Dia dan Lagu Exhibition, Fahrenheit88 Mall, April-July 2022



Figure 17: "Malayan Fashion Pioneer" and "Retro Fashion Icon" by Saloma had been on display at P. Ramlee and Saloma Aku, Dia dan Lagu Exhibition, Fahrenheit88 Mall, April-July 2022

Saloma was also seen to have made alterations and injected the local fashion couture such as kebaya with western elements. This was clearly the case with the Tight Contemporary Kebaya, seen as her main choice of apparel at the time. It is generally known that the kebaya is a traditional wear that reflects features of Malay women's fashion in Malaya, which had evolved in stages. If the history of the kebaya is to be examined, it can be seen that this item

of clothing had undergone a process of continuous development. Saloma had added value to the kebaya fashion when she made adjustments to the design based on her own creativity. Tight-fitting contemporary kebaya which she produced were made from printed polyester with bright blue hue and pink floral motifs. This kebaya design had a round-neck collar on the front with a v-shaped cut at the back. The zipper at the back which zips upwards was the main attraction of this kebaya. The finishing of this kebaya was done with hand-sewn stitches. Saloma had paired this kebaya with a seamless batik skirt of the 1950s and 1960s (Figure 17 & 18). Saloma's contribution to the country's fashion industry was seen to have been in a class of its own and served to inspire many contemporary fashion designers. In 2007, Dato' Seri Siti Nurhaliza brought back fond memories and nostalgia of Saloma's classic appearance by giving tribute to the contributions of P. Ramlee and Saloma to the local performing arts industry in a concert called "*Konsert Istana Cinta, Nostalgia Tan Sri P.Ramlee & Puan Sri Saloma*" (Figure 19) (Dato' Siti Nurhaliza, 2007). Although the fashion designs introduced by Saloma contained influences of western imperialism, the preservation of local fashion design and style demonstrated that local influences can never be displaced entirely by the British occupiers. In relation to this, Saloma was recognised as a national fashion icon.



Figure 18: Kebaya Saloma had been on display at P. Ramlee and Saloma Aku, Dia dan Lagu Exhibition, Fahrenheit88 Mall, April-July 2022



Figure 19: Dato' Sri Siti Nurhaliza wore a dress inspired by *Citarasa Saloma* (Saloma Taste) during her performance of *Konsert Istana Cinta, Nostalgia Tan Sri P. Ramlee & Puan Sri Saloma* in 2017

Saloma was also daring enough to parade a fruit headwear (Figure 21) as was worn by Carmen Miranda in the film “The Gang’s All Here,” (1943) (Figure 20) (Mandrell, 2001). This costume was used in the film “*Saudagar Minyak Urat*” (1959). Aside from colour-block fashion, Saloma also created a unique fashion to display a 21-inch waist and exposing the top half of the chest. The peplum (tapered skirts) design, side-split skirts, and tight kebaya were introduced by her between the 1950s and the 1960s, which incorporated both eastern and western characteristics.



Figure 20: Carmen Miranda in the film “The Gang’s All Here” in 1943



Figure 21: Saloma restyled the fruit headgear worn by Carmen Miranda in the film “The Gang’s All Here”

Clearly, the fashion designs as discussed in this paper had given shape to a more modern, stylish and trendy lifestyle for Saloma. Indeed, her lifestyle was modern and quite westernised. This was because Saloma was influenced by imperialism of culture and this brought about a huge impact at the height of her glory. It was seen that Saloma’s lifestyle was very progressive. The media in Malaya had often published images of Saloma who frequently wore sexy outfits similar to western artistes at the time. It was undeniable that the lifestyle practised by Saloma ran contrary to the norms practiced by the Malays who lived in in Malaya during the time. Her appearance in modern clothing, as seen in films and magazines, were regarded as immoral in the eyes of the Malays in Malaya at the time. This ultimately led to the local communities making the assumption that artistes like Saloma were immoral for not setting a good example for society (Hussin, 2004).



Figure 22: Saloma has introduced popular culture through modern Malay fashion during the past that remains until today

Saloma's inclination towards the western culture was intended to ensure the continuity and smoothness of her career as a popular artiste in the era of British occupation in Malaya. Saloma's practice of the modern way of life aimed to introduce an ideal lifestyle as emphasised by the western community. To her, the practice of a modern lifestyle brought about a higher quality of life and level of competitiveness, while society would be seen as more progressive and keeping abreast with the current development. This indicates that Saloma was among the pioneers who propagated a modern lifestyle in Malaya. This was emulated by other artistes and certain sections of society, despite a handful of people being against the image of imperialism represented by Saloma.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this research have illuminated the profound and previously underestimated impact of imperialism on the iconic figure of Saloma and the development of popular culture in the Federation of Malaya. Saloma, often celebrated as a singer with a melodious voice, actress, fashion icon, and wife to the renowned artist P. Ramlee, emerges as a central figure in the narrative of cultural imperialism's influence. Throughout the colonial and post-independence eras in the Federated Malay States, Saloma's career and contributions serve as a testament to the power of cultural imperialism in shaping not only her artistic journey but also the broader popular culture landscape of the nation. Despite her own unawareness of the extent of this influence, Saloma's impact is undeniable.

Saloma's ability to navigate and embrace various elements of popular culture, including music, media, fashion, and lifestyle, allowed her to introduce and popularize a unique cultural blend that resonated with the people of Malaya. Through her artistry, she conveyed dominant images of imperialism while also contributing to the birth of a distinctive popular culture in the Federation of Malaya. The findings of this research underscore the importance of recognizing the often-overlooked role and contributions of artists like Saloma in shaping a nation's civilization and history. It serves as a valuable guide for acknowledging and celebrating the profound impact of artists who, despite the challenges of their time, left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of their country. In essence, Saloma's journey and her role as a cultural influencer provide an intriguing lens through which we can better understand the complex interplay between imperialism, popular culture, and the indomitable spirit of artists who shape the cultural tapestry of a nation. This research not only unveils the hidden layers of Saloma's legacy but also underscores the significance of artists in the ongoing narrative of a nation's history and identity. The findings of this research have shown that Saloma did indeed carry a dominant colonial-influenced image in the performing arts industry in Malaya through cultural imperialism.

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