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“THE WISHES OF YOUR PARENTS”: POWER BALLADS AND MALE ANOMIE IN
TANA TORAJA, EASTERN INDONESIA

Consider the power ballad. Sneered at, in the United States, by most “serious” critics of rock, it is nonetheless among the most popular forms of Western rock worldwide. Certainly, at least, it is so in Indonesia, where power ballads of the 1970s and ‘80s that are all-but-forgotten in the United States are collected on pirated VCDs (or video compact discs) and sold as collections of so-called *Slow Rock*, in English. Rock bands that are remembered in the United States for their hardness—Guns ‘n’ Roses, for example, or Scorpions—are better-known in Indonesia for their softer side. The Guns ‘n’ Roses power ballad “November Rain” is far more commonly collected and replayed in Indonesia than “Welcome to the Jungle,” “Paradise City,” or even “Sweet Child o’ Mine.” And before I spent a year in Indonesia I could have identified only two songs by the German group Scorpions: the rocker “Rock You Like a Hurricane” and the power ballad “Winds of Change.” After a 12-hour bus ride on the Eastern Indonesian island of Sulawesi in which I heard a pirated VCD collection of 12 Scorpions power ballads played at least five times in a row, my knowledge and appreciation of Scorpions’ power ballad prowess has been greatly enhanced.

Not surprisingly, Indonesian rock musicians have worked the power ballad into their own musical practices. The seminal Indonesian alternative rock band Slank included a few Aerosmith-esque power ballads on each of its 1990s albums [you could play “Maafkan” here].

The more recent wave of mainstream Indonesian alternative rock bands include a few power ballads on each album.¹ Often, these ballads have an overlay of “alternative rock” style. But the power ballad heritage shines through in the songs’ choruses, with their meaty power chord progressions and singalong major-key melodies. And typically, the tenderest power ballads are the biggest hits.

But this paper is actually not about Indonesian rock, but about the Indonesian genre of *pop daerah*, or, literally, regional pop. Indonesian regional pop is not, most of the time, what most Americans would call “rock,” except in the widest definition—popular music with a backbeat. But regional pop, too, shows the influence of power ballads. Regional pop songs are generally slow, with two common lyrical subjects: romantic love, and longing for home. In this sense they are like power ballads. Their guitar solos, too, are invariably soaring and distorted. The juxtaposition of a tender, slow, sentimental song with a distorted, soaring, heavy metal-influenced guitar solo is perhaps the defining characteristic of a power ballad—the *ballad* is the slow sentimental song, and the *power* is in the electric guitar.

Let me give you a little bit of background on regional pop before I play an example that illustrates the influence of power ballads on regional pop. Despite the stylistic borrowing from power ballads, the niche of regional pop in Indonesia is in many ways like that of country music in the United States in the 1950s or ’60s. Regional pop is identified with the countryside, not with the city—in fact, it is sung in regional languages, not in the national language. It is self-consciously nostalgic, often concerned with the loss of an idealized place that exists in the past. It is considered execrable, tasteless, embarrassing hillbilly music by metropolitans. Correspondingly, it grew to popularity as country people migrated to urban areas in large numbers, and the experience of migration is a key theme in regional pop lyrics. Regional pop is

¹ Examples: Slank’s “Maafkan,” Radja’s “Yakin,” Samsons’ “Naluri Lelaki,” Ungu’s “Andai Ku Tahu.”

stylistically conservative when compared to other forms of popular music, but like country it does take on influences (albeit slowly) from other popular musics. And it is unquestionably popular music in the industrial sense. Regional pop is produced in a Nashville-style system that is centralized in one city—Jakarta—and that divides the labor of production extensively among a large pool of aspirational songwriters, singers, and producers, and a small cadre of established synthesizer programmers, studio musicians, recording engineers, and mixing engineers, who play on almost any respectable album.

Let's look at an example. This is a regional pop song from Toraja, the region in Indonesia where I did fieldwork for my dissertation. The group that made the song is called Trio Pandin, and the title of the song is *Pa'poraianna Tomatuammu*, which means, in the Toraja language, "The wishes of your parents." I should say that this is not the most generic of Indonesian regional pop songs—this song is particularly reminiscent of the power ballad style. I am going to show about two thirds of the video for the song—all contemporary regional pop albums have original videos, including karaoke subtitles—from the beginning to the end of the guitar solo.

[Example: Pa'poraianna Tomatuammu]

I will get to the lyrics and story of the song and video in a few moments, but I want to start out by asking, what makes this a power ballad? Well, that gets to the definition thing. I wrote a couple paragraphs of thumbnail history of power ballads in Western rock, but I really don't have time to trace things back to ancestors of the form, like "Stairway to Heaven," "We Are the Champions," "Dream On," or even "Yesterday"—plus, this is IASPM, so there is probably someone in the room who wrote a dissertation on the history of power ballads, and I'd only get myself in trouble. So, instead, I'm going to cut to the chase and say that the power ballads that really matter in Indonesia are those from the mid-1980s, when the power ballad truly

came into its own as a distinct, easily categorizable, named, soon-to-be-hackneyed and overdone genre associated with what is now called hair metal. Classic, much-imitated examples would include Mötley Crüe's "Home Sweet Home," Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer" and "I'll Be There For You," Poison's "Every Rose Has Its Thorn," Def Leppard's "Love Bites," White Lion's "When the Children Cry," Extreme's "More Than Words," Scorpions' "Winds of Change," Metallica's "Fade to Black," Aerosmith's "Angel," Cinderella's "Don't Know What You Got (Till It's Gone)," Warrant's "Heaven," Lita Ford's "Close My Eyes Forever" (in a duet with Ozzy Osborne), and others too numerous to mention, play, or discuss in depth. And if you have the good fortune to be familiar with all of these examples (which you probably don't unless, like me, you were ten years old when your parents got cable TV in 1986), then you know that they are a surprisingly diverse group of songs, although they are all in some sense power ballads — Extreme's rather subtle, entirely acoustic "More Than Words" is quite far in terms of its musical style from Bon Jovi's entirely electric, entirely un-subtle "Livin' on a Prayer." We should not fence power ballads in, then, with a well-bounded definition. Rather, if you could somehow plot the songs' characteristics on a scattergram, there would be a cluster of songs in the middle that are all quite similar to each other, a few smaller competing clusters that share some set of characteristics with each other that are different from the main cluster, and a large number of outliers that share one or two characteristics with the middle cluster and could easily be classified in other genres. On this graphic, I've listed what I consider to be the most common traits found in that center cluster of Western power ballads:

1. Slow, quiet, introduction on guitar, or more rarely piano (often acoustic, often minor-key, often arpeggiated)
2. Heavy metal-style guitar solo

3. Singalong chorus over long, held power chords
4. Lyrical narrative of overcoming adversity, usually in and/or through love

Now, as I've said, many power ballads are not going to have all of these characteristics—Bon Jovi's "Livin' On a Prayer" does not have the slow introduction, "Close My Eyes Forever" and "Fade to Black" contemplate suicide rather than struggling against adversity. Similarly, my example of a regional pop song—"Pa'poraianna Tomatuammu"—has the slow introduction and the heavy metal guitar solo, but the other two traits are altered. In the chorus, the power chords are there, but the lyrics and melody are too complex to be called "singalong," to my taste. And you may have guessed from the video that the story of the song is not about overcoming adversity in or through love, but about accepting the denial of love.

The video shows the story of the lyrics. A boy has fallen in love with a girl, but the girl's parents forbid the relationship, presumably because the boy is too low in social status for their daughter. Toraja is a very status-conscious society—in fact, it is a society with a *caste* system, which is supposed to forbid men to "marry up" (women are technically allowed to "marry up," although the man's parents may forbid it). Stories of parents ending their children's love affairs for reasons of incompatible social status are in fact a recurring trope in Toraja regional pop. Here is a translation of the lyrics:

O siulu' kaboro'ku
 "Little sister [lover], my love"

La malena' umpessalaiko
 "I will go, though it is wrong"

Kuissan dikka' kaleku
 "I know, *dikka'* [pity me] . . ."

Tang sielle' la dio kalemu
 "That it is not right for you"

O siulu' kaboro'ku
 "Little sister [lover], my love"

Moraipa' dikka' la torro
"I want to stay, *dikka'* [pity me]"

La tontong dio kalemu
"To stay with you"

Susi tu puramo ta allu'
"As we had promised"

REFRAIN
Apa la kupatumbari
"What can I do?"

Tangia kaleku
"It is not me . . ."

Tu la mendadi
". . . Who makes . . ."

Bayu sangkamma' mu
". . . your intimacy (with me) grow stale?"

Denmo tau to senga' na
"There is already that other person"

La dio kalemu
"For you"

Pa'poraianna
"The wishes"

Torro tomatuammu
"Of your parents remain"

With entry of backup singers:
La malena'ku dikka'
"I will go, *dikka'* [pity me]"

Ussaleoi pa'dikku
"Though it hurts me"

Moina magasa kusa'ding
"Although I feel heavy"

Tang la dio kalemu
"Without you"

Apa la kupatumbari
"What can I do?"

Iamo a'ganku
"It is my way"

Iamo duka' passukaranku
"It is my allotment"

The four lines that conclude the song are a variation on a verse that Toraja people often recite when they are feeling fatalistic—which is often. The full version of this verse as I encountered it in other places translates to “What can be done? / It must be accepted / We have to say it is fate / It is the allotment.” In fact, this verse was presented to me as the key to Toraja philosophy by a high-caste intellectual whom I often spoke to in Toraja: the verse expresses a fatalistic acceptance of fate, of one’s lot in life, of the cosmologically-ordained castes that structure Toraja society.

It is, I think, instructive to compare “Pa’poraianna Tomatuammu” to a song that I think influenced it: the power ballad “Still Lovin’ You,” by the German heavy metal band Scorpions. I’ll play a bit of that song, in case you’re not familiar with it. And I’ll put the lyrics up.

[Still Lovin’ You]

Time, it needs time
To win back your love again.
I will be there,
I will be there.

Love, only love
Can bring back your love someday.
I will be there, I will be there.

Fight, babe I’ll fight
To win back your love again.
I will be there, I will be there.

Love, only love
Can break down the walls someday.
I will be there, I will be there.

If we’d go again
All the way from the start,
I would try to change
The things that killed our love.

Your pride has built a wall, so strong
That I can’t get through.
Is there really no chance
To start once again?
I’m loving you.

Try, baby try

To trust in my love again.
I will be there, I will be there.

Love, your love
Just shouldn't be thrown away.
I will be there, I will be there.

If we'd go again
All the way from the start,
I would try to change
The things that killed our love.

Your pride has build a wall, so strong
That I can't get through.
Is there really no chance
To start once again?

If we'd go again
All the way from the start,
I would try to change
The things that killed our love.

Yes I've hurt your pride, and I know
What you've been through.
You should give me a chance
This can't be the end.

I'm still loving you.
I'm still loving you,
I need your love.
I'm still loving you.
Still loving you, baby...

Now, the power ballads of Scorpions, as I have mentioned, have a very high profile in Toraja. You might have noticed the similarities between the Trio Pandin song and the Scorpions song. There's the minor key, of course: both songs begin in minor—g minor for "Still Loving You," f minor for "Pa'poraianna." Both begin quietly, slowly, with arpeggiated guitar parts. But the really striking moment comes in the vocal melody of the first verse. In both songs, the first line of lyrics starts on the 5th scale tone, a 4th below the tonic. Then, in the second line of lyrics, there is this dramatic melodic leap of a minor 6th from the 5th scale tone, a 4th below the octave, to the third scale tone, a third above the octave.

[Pa'poraianna 00:31-41]

[Still Lovin' You 00:22-30]

Now, the two passages are not exactly alike, but they both start out hovering on or around the fifth fifth below the tonic, then make that striking leap up to the third above the tonic. Given the popularity of Scorpions in Toraja, it seems likely that there is some influence, intentional or unconscious, here. At any rate, what is really interesting about this comparison between the two songs is the contrast in what they say about love. The Scorpions power ballad says, “we’re having difficulty in love because of our own difficulties being in relationships, but I am going to keep loving you, and we will overcome this difficulty.” The Trio Pandin song, on the other hand, says “we are having difficulty in love because your parents have decided that I am too low-caste for you—and so we must give up.” There is an explicit protest in the lyrics—the singer says that the prohibition of their love is *sala*, wrong. Nonetheless, he concludes that it must be accepted, because that is his allotment in life.

Robert Walser, in *Running with the Devil*, has called Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer” “a musical construction of romantic transcendence.” That transcendence, of course, comes in the transition from the brooding verses—in which Jon Bon Jovi sings of the economic hardship of a young couple—to the satisfying, singalong chorus, in which Bon Jovi assumes the voice of the couple and pledges, “We’ll make it, I swear.” They’ll make it because they’ve got each other—that is, they will overcome adversity on the strength of their love. Love conquers all.

Correspondingly, “Pa’poraianna,” in which love does not conquer, but *is* conquered, by the social-cosmological order, *never* transcends its brooding into a satisfying chorus, the way most Western power ballads would. Instead, the song merely gets darker, more brooding, as the singer—joined by male and female backup singers—mouths the fatalistic cliché. The last word, “passukaranku” or “my allotment,” lands, defeatedly, on the minor tonic.

I have asked, implicitly, why the power ballad travels so well in Indonesia—so much better, in fact, than most other Western rock. What I see travelling here is a sense of anomie: the sense of being a young person who feels that he (in most cases, the singer and subject of the song is male) does not really have a place in society. In many Western power ballads, that anomie is redeemed through love: the singer rejects society, but searches for belonging, for redemption, in love and in his beloved. This narrative of anomie, then of the redemption of anomie through love, seems to appeal to many young Indonesians; many mainstream Indonesian rock songs do carry on the idea “romantic transcendence,” of redemption through love. What is interesting about “Pa’poraianna” is how it accepts only half of the story. The anomie is clearly there, in the images of the singer sitting alone in his traditional village. Social rejection is communicated in the images of the lover’s father throwing the singer out of the house. But the aesthetic power of this ballad comes from the way it plays off our normal expectations of the power ballad—the way it pointedly declines the “musical construction of romantic transcendence” that we expect to find in the big singalong chorus, and instead gives us only more brooding, more darkness, more anomie.