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How a song about moonglow became the symbol of nationhood

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Negaraku became the anthem of a new nation twice. (WikiCommons pic)
PETALING JAYA: Negaraku, a song about homeland and nationhood, has the unique distinction of having been chosen as the anthem of a new country not once, but twice.

Surprisingly, it was chosen in a roundabout fashion, after considerable efforts through a competition failed, and invitations for works by eminent composers also did not pass muster.

The story of Negaraku is a tale that weaves popular culture with imperial pomp and pageantry, exile in a faraway island, and a French connection.

As part of preparations for Merdeka in 1957, the chief minister of the federation, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, headed a task force entrusted with choosing the new country's national anthem.

According to a 2003 report published by Perpustakaan Negara, a global competition was launched in the mid-1950s which drew 514 entries.

They were all rejected by the national anthem selection committee, which then decided to invite a number of esteemed composers, among them musicians from the US and Britain, to submit compositions.

None seemed to hit the right note, and the committee turned their attention to existing anthems of the 11 Malayan states.

Perak's anthem was found to be the most appropriate, and its melody was selected on Aug 5, 1957, to be the basis of Malaya's national anthem.

But what was the origin of the Perak state anthem, Allah Lanjutkan Usia Sultan?

Composer Saidah Rastam believes that the root of the melody can be traced to French composer Pierre-Jean de Béranger, whose tune 'La Rosalie' was popular in the Seychelles during the late 19th century and often performed by French bands on the main island of Mahé.

His work would soon catch the ear of the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Abdullah Muhammad Shah II, during his exile to the islands off the coast of Africa.

Some believe he brought it with him on his return in 1922; however, Shazlan Hamzah, author of 'Negaraku: The national anthem binding Malaysians in integration', believes that the song was brought by an Indonesian 'bangsawan', or opera troupe, who began performing in Singapore in the early 20th century. The traditional folk song, adapted from the popular French melody of 'La



Rosalie', soon came to be known as 'Terang Bulan', or 'Bright Moon', and very quickly became popular across the country.

A traditional Malay opera or theatre troupe known as 'bangsawan' often includes music and dance performances. (WikiCommons pic)

There is debate over how the song became Perak's anthem, and two theories exist.

One theory is that it was first adopted as the Perak state anthem when Sultan Idris Murshidul Adzam Shah went to Britain for the installation of King Edward VII in 1901. But historian Mubin Sheppard suggests it was in 1888, when the Sultan was invited to London by Queen Victoria.

It was customary to play the appropriate state or national anthem when a foreign head of state arrived in Britain. To avoid the embarrassment of revealing that Perak had no anthem, the sultan's aide gave British officers the tune to 'Terang Bulan', which was popular among Perak people at the time.



It is widely believed that Sultan Idris Shah of Perak based the Perak regional anthem on 'Terang Bulan', a popular song in the early 19th century. (WikiCommons pic)

On Aug 5, 1957, this melody was chosen for the national anthem. It only remained to have the lyrics written.

Here too there is considerable debate about who should be credited for the lyrics, though the consensus seemed to be that composer-songwriter Saiful Bahri penned the words that all Malaysians know by heart today.



Composer-songwriter Saiful Bahri is believed to have penned the lyrics of Malaysia's national anthem. (Wikipedia pic)

The lyrics and melody of Negaraku as we know it today have not changed since 1957, although changes were attempted twice – in 1992, to rearrange the melody to a quicker, more upbeat tempo; and then in 2003, to renaming it from Negaraku to Malaysiaku.

Both attempts were stopped in its tracks by a public outcry.

