



Against making sense: Appreciating absurd roundabouts in Malaysian Borneo

written by Asmus Rungby
April, 2024



In Kuching, the capital of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, I found a musical roundabout. Large loudspeakers turn this otherwise innocuous infrastructure into an absurdist mashup of techno beats and car noises. Someone found a way to get a stereo system running in tropical rain, allocated budgeting for purchasing equipment, contracted builders and scheduled musical programming for these enigmatic loudspeakers. Surely this someone had a reason.

Writing about this roundabout, my reflex is to reach for a well-worn trope about encountering what one does not understand.



Writing about this roundabout, my reflex is to reach for a well-worn trope about encountering what one does not understand. At the outset, the reader is presented with something strikingly foreign – both strange and confusing. Gradually, this encounter with strangeness will be contextualized, disassembled, and interpreted. In the third act, readers meet what was strange once again, but now made meaningful, understandable, and tame. Meaning is forcibly conscripted to pacify what was once strange and unsettling. So what else can I do? Making interpretive sense of idiosyncratic actions is what anthropologists do, right? (Geertz 1973).

To Kuchingites this baffling roundabout seems more of an aggravating reminder of wasted development dollars than a mystery in need of explanation.

I have asked friends from Kuching about this beat blasted roundabout. Inevitably, they would shrug in glib exasperation and say, “nang bodoh ah” (it’s so stupid). For them, this unlikely roadside discotheque joins other pieces of engineering prowess in Kuching that scoff at straightforward explanations. Most prominent of these is the cat museum by the north Kuching city hall, identifiable by its entrance in the likeness of a distended paper mâché maw of a Cheshire cat whose mocking grin has been replaced by a rusty turnstile admitting visitors one at a time. A second less feline example is the enormous national pétanque center (the only pétanque courts I have ever seen in Malaysia) which dominates a village of less than 1000 people half an hour’s drive from Kuching. To Kuchingites this baffling roundabout seems more of an aggravating reminder of wasted development dollars than a mystery in need of explanation.

Yet, as a survivor of doctoral training my impulse is still to brandish my scholarly bolt cutters and start forcibly breaking apart the barriers to understanding. Maybe, the techno music of this confounding roundabout is one of those things where some bit of cultural logic, so obvious and imponderable to my friends that it does not even need mention, would explain the seeming absurdity? If I had to guess along those lines, the music could be there to scare off ghosts and



witchcraft. Noise often does (Skeat 1965). Apparently, ghosts in the Malay world tend to prefer eating the livers of cheating husbands over raves in roundabouts. Or perhaps I would do better to adjust my theoretical lens? I suppose an interesting play of the ecstatic and the mundane inhabits this unintuitive roundabout. The music of raves and parties transposed onto roadside banalities could be read as a moment of questioning what is gained by distinguishing between the raucous and the routine. Do roads need to be mundane? Do raves need to be extraordinary? Perhaps this post-colonial hybridity of pathway and partying invites reconsideration not so much of why the music is there, but why we are surprised by its presence? Have cartesian dualisms and protestant ethics taught us to not only draw a sharp divide between carnival and conveyance but to wrinkle our collective noses at their inappropriate mixture? I guess I can't decisively say no. But are we really any better off for divining some poignant insight about western intellectualism through the artful application of 'Theory'?

Whatever insights are embedded within this displaced dance music, no one is actually dancing. There are no raves, no parties, nor casual enjoyers standing about, not even any aunties keeping the pounds at bay with collective jazzercise. Over iced coffees, roti canai and bawdy jokes, my friends and I just sit in the interminable techno trying to ignore the insensible and insignificant intonations of some DJ whose stylings are neither credited nor appreciated. No one even mentions it. The most acknowledgement this music gets is a slight shrug or a shaken head as we return to the car, crossing the roundabout with fingers in our ears.

Even so, would this whole thing be less strange if people were dancing to the music? The locals do not seem inclined to boogie down in this intersection. Dancing in Kuching is usually either the carefully rehearsed performance of ethnic heritage or deliberately silly gesturing in one of the restaurant backrooms that, come nighttime, transform into semi-legal dance clubs. The music DJ Roundabout puts on is too modern and the location too public to suit either purpose. It would be too hot to dance in the sun anyway. That particular cosmic disco ball is a bit too bright for the many Kuchingites who wish to avoid



heatstroke. Alas, no shade awnings shield prospective dancers from ultraviolet radiation amid the music. Roofs or no, the rain does nothing to halt the music either. Kuching's tropical downpour often disrupts traffic and occasionally sends river crocodiles into flooded homes, but it cannot stop the music.

The thing I cannot get past is why the system plays Christmas music in December. The seasonal playlist does not even switch to celebrated Christmas classics like the dulcet intonations of Mariah Carey reading aloud her single item Christmas wishlist. Instead, this roundabout's music programming sticks to the same techno-concerto as usual, except remixing Christmas music instead of Asian pop. This modulation of musical style does not correspond to a neighborhood wide celebration of Jesus Christ's birthday either. Kuching itself is a Muslim dominated city in a Muslim dominated Malaysia. So, who chooses to make this and only this minor seasonal modulation to the roundabout's music? Why does the music only shift for Christmas, not Easter, not Ramadan, not Chinese New Year? Perhaps there is some pious hacker out there who decided to update the music for Christmas, never bothering to justify themselves to anyone. Either way there is no Christmas tree to rock around.

Over Christmas I went on a road trip with Sarawakian friends. Starting early in the morning, we drove, in Sarawakian fashion, between houses sprinkled throughout Kuching and its periphery to shake hands, show face, and eat our way through the festive period. There was a clear pattern: handshakes - food - beers - jokes - watch half of an Adam Sandler movie on a stranger's couch - drive on - Repeat. It's fun. You eat too much, you meet people, you compliment the hosts' little Christmas altar in the corner and gradually get drunker. A couple of hours past midnight, you sit in the back of a pickup truck on a country road somewhere in the Bornean jungle trying to finally get someone to explain that noise polluting roundabout. But they just shrug, laugh and start calling you Kampung boy. Or maybe that's just me. Either way, I had to wake up the next morning with a hangover and find a different frame of mind.

But honestly, whose anxiety am I mitigating by tying myself in knots to



speculate about the rhyme and reason of this sonorous traffic circle?

Incongruous music played non-stop for an unappreciative roundabout does not make a lot of sense. In principle, I could have spent my days trying to figure it out, finding out whose decisions led to this and puzzling out the work involved and costs of running it round the clock. But honestly, whose anxiety am I mitigating by tying myself in knots to speculate about the rhyme and reason of this sonorous traffic circle?

I will blame a bit of it on hardwired anthropological training – A professional drive to demonstrate publicly to every doubter in the world that my second home makes just as much sense as anywhere else. I admit there is also an impulse to prove myself and show that I actually understand the place and people I purport to study. I feel the professional need to demonstrate that I can conjure the high-level mysteries of anthropological mysticism and explicate the sublime purposes of the absurd. But I will not for this particular roundabout. Even if its noisy infrastructural mundanity makes sense to an anonymous someone out there, its social life is its absurdity.

Disenchanted the strangeness that colors people's lives does not always serve an anthropology guided by empathy and sharing life.

Nietzsche observed that what he called the will to truth is often a project of pacification. Nietzsche asks why we seek to pin down the world in orderly recognizability. He then informs us that we are principally concerned with assuaging our own sense of discomfort at the inexplicable and the not yet known (Nietzsche 1999). Instead, he encourages us to rejoice when knowledge fails us because it permits us to continue to grow in our struggle. As anthropologists we sometimes find ourselves in situations where the impulse to understand and render something meaningful is misguided. At these moments we must reckon with what scholarship is when understanding itself is misleading. Susan Sontag went down a similar road in her essay 'Against interpretation' (2001). She argues



that as the critic interprets art they destroy what is important about art - its pleasures, its aesthetics and its emotionality. For Sontag, "The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means" (Sontag 2001, 10). Disenchanted the strangeness that colors people's lives does not always serve an anthropology guided by empathy and sharing life.

However, anthropology is not art critique, and sometimes we do need to understand and to see the meaning in things. To resist interpretation only to otherize and problematize would impoverish the discipline. The real conundrum is not whether I need to understand, but how to discern when deeper insights require gaps of understanding. When do I need to stop myself before I spend time investigating and disenchanting issues that inflect life with ineffable particularity?

When absurdity informs, flavors or shapes life we should learn from it, savor it and dare to cut ourselves on its sharp edges.

Asking friends and interlocutors is probably the first and best move. If those who drive around musically absurd roundabouts think I am wasting my time in trying to understand the infinite infrastructural dj session then I probably am. Yet, even though I suspect this rule of thumb is a valuable bit of ethnographic pragmatism it is not wholly satisfying. In practice, asking locals or interlocutors is often intellectually indeterminate. What if locals disagree? What if disinterest in understanding reflects local ethnic differences or political faultlines? While my interlocutors' insights are crucial, it abdicates my own intellectual responsibility to leave them the work of distinguishing between anthropologically instructive absurdity and uninformed dismissal. The crucial question is whether there is something valuable to learn by grappling with how something might not make sense? When absurdity informs, flavors or shapes life we should learn from it, savor it and dare to cut ourselves on its sharp edges.

There is a palpable peculiarity to the ever-new incongruities of Kuching and Sarawak. I would misunderstand Kuching if I tried to understand every puzzling



thing there. Life there can be weird and confusing as much as it can be joyous, challenging, painful, restful or rewarding. Knowledge, anthropological or otherwise, often requires making sense of things, but not always. We should be brave enough to be baffled.

References

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 1-30. New York: Basic Books.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Translated by Thomas Common. Unabridged edition. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Skeat, Walter William. 1965. *Malay Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsular*. London: Routledge.

Sontag, Susan. 2001. *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. First Edition. New York, N.Y: Picador.