

# SOCIAL VALUE SYSTEMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CREATIVE PROFESSIONS: THE CASE OF FARID ALI

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## Abstract

The musician Farid Ali was born in Singapore. The small state is based on high tech work force and its huge port. The arts and their many appearances, as well as the humanities and social sciences are seemingly ornaments attached to large economic achievements. Farid loved to play guitar like many other boys of his age, but did not find teachers that could challenge his guitar playing talent. So, he was fighting through competitions to eventually study in the US where he had a hard time since his competitive classmates were enormously well trained. Later, disappointed with the social conditions in Singapore, he went to Malaysia in search for a job. He was lucky. Not only was he becoming part of a famous band, he also learned about local traditions. He discovered the gambus and transformed his guitar into a gambus hybrid instrument. He played well attended concerts and he was celebrated. Knowing that he cannot perform his whole life, he was seeking to do some postgraduate courses in order to qualify for research and teaching work. Unfortunately, he passed away before he found out that he cannot just write something and get an academic title. His case is symbolic for many contemporary artists in various fields who tried similar approaches to overcome difficulties imposed through specific social value systems. This presentation analyses reasons, directions, and future necessities for important value systems in order to balance growing and globalizing communities and for the sake of a sustainable human society.

## Keywords

Sustainability, Value Systems, Creative Arts, Musicianship, Music Research

## Introduction

A scholar of Indian Classical Music living in the US<sup>1</sup>, complained about the admission system in India and the unworthiness of a PhD in society via social media.

As usual in the early morning, reading this I could not but comment in order to not let me stay alone with my thoughts about this topic.

My answer was: “Whether a PhD has a value or not depends strongly on the way how it is done. I dislike the general refusing of academic discourses and the abusive use of the term “academia”, which seems to become a pejorative title. As Confucius said indeed “have it, apply it”, firstly we must have it. There is value in drafting big pictures which serve the framework of society and in detailed knowledge, too. That should not be confused. Not all generations of scholars are alike or to be put in one category. It is the dumb system of assessments burdened on universities and institutions which have to deliver measurable outcomes to prove their worth in order to be well budgeted. ....” (Jähnichen, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018, FB, private timeline.

What has this beginning to do with what this paper wants to convey? The cause of confusion in a social media complaint and the desire of compliance to an academic system through any artist with higher education have the same roots.

Let us take a very brief look at the colonial and the colonialists' history of scientists and teachers versus artists and their different roles in the civil community since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the places where higher learning was most widely institutionalized.

The lining up of social measurements for achieving wealth and reputation, power and recognition, was introduced in times and spaces when there was a need of categorization in terms of hierarchies, when societies were restructured, rationalized, and re-oriented away from feudal systems of inherited lineages of power towards a value system that puts seemingly a meritocracy into a seemingly democratic frame. Let aside all the discussions concerning the turn of societal changes in the different eras of history, from a strict materialistic viewpoint, this process was to make a state system more effective and easier to overlook (Bast, Carayannis & Campbell 2015). Schools and universities needed a ranking among their faculties in order to categorize their outcomes and the worthiness of the investment from the perspective of the state. Artists, on the other end, were always extraordinary people, who took part in social affairs coming from the periphery of state businesses, interfering through their specific intelligence and their specific expressive skills. They were not in need to be put into such a category system, they delivered all the time worthiness as they were in the center of community attention. If not, this was indicating their social degeneration. A state who needed to create categorical rankings for artists, is actually refusing them as artists. And artists who wished to be in a categorical ranking system deny their artistry. This view is generated through the study of renaissance and early European history, which included the exodus of large parts of scientists and artists to the New World, America, where they re-established and partly deviated this system (Gever et al 2009; Bast 2015; Schmidt 2018).

## **Current Situation**

Now, we have the dilemma of dealing with an increasing number of artists produced over time in this process of institutionalization and pro-colonial ranking pushing into an additional and specific field of expertise: into pedagogy. The history of pedagogy is yet another issue since it is a quite young discipline of humanities that deals with education as a systemic approach to a learned upbringing within a community. The specifications of pedagogy are diverse and draw on interdisciplinarity with the subjects of teaching. Insofar, artists who become insecure in their living conditions and cannot assure a regular income, those who have to perform beyond healthy measures and will not be able to do so for their entire life – which is of course a result of declining social conditions for artistry – and those who feel not being competitive enough may switch to this profile and become arts teachers. The problem with this is that either research in arts or in pedagogy needs a completely different set of skills in which artistry is just a bonus in experience but not the main source of knowledge contribution. The bonus of being an experienced artist warmly welcomed by human resource managers at universities often covers this missing background and leads to further problems within institutionalized education such as arts colleges and universities.

My hypothesis is that though times change, scientists and artists deliver primarily different values to society and are rewarded differently. They do not compete with each other, they contribute from their very own perspective and there is no reason for any unification of hierarchies such as inventing a deviation of scientific doctorates for artists or arts award systems

for scientific researchers. The same applies to pedagogy. To say it simply: an artist who feels in need to get a PhD, has to take over the role of a scientific researcher. And a researcher who wants to be awarded a highly valued medal of artistry has to be an outstanding artist in order to be valued by society based on his artistry and not on his research. The ‘courtesy’-doctorates demonstrated by some universities in the New World and Australia or their partner institutions in many countries should not blind anyone from seeing these facts.

The core problem, however, is the inequality in valuing the difference of skills. Meaning, though the skills are valued, the difference is obviously not valued causing a tendency to unify the reward system. This is due to the social environment that values the one skill set with more security in terms of material living conditions over the other. Finally, one can easily detect that the state budgeting is reflected in this circle of cause and outcome relationship. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that in each research is some art and in each art is some research, which supports a creative approach to just turn the emphasis in order to comply to any unified standard. But, it is not that easy and an idea that needs more thinking (Schmidt, 2018).

Here is an example: the musician Farid Ali, who wanted to do his masters and PhD at a Malaysian university in 2010. His reason was simply the fact that he felt not strong enough to perform for the rest of his life on stage and that he also wanted to “have an academic title” when establishing his own school. He approached me in 2009 and asked for becoming his supervisor in order to apply for a Master’s Program at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

### **The Case of Farid Ali**

The musician Farid Ali was born in Singapore. Singapore is a small city state on the southernmost tip of the Malay Peninsula. The small state is based on high tech work force and its huge port. The cultural life of Singapore’s citizens draws on various traditions of its inhabitants that are composed of Chinese, Malay, and Indian descendants. Their earlier generations migrated to the once swampy area during the last 300 years in waves and due to different reasons (Jähnichen, 2009, 2014, 2015). However, the splitting of Singapore from Malaya in the early 1960s led to an increasing nationalist movement that propagated the speaking of Mandarin together with English as official languages (Low & Low, 2016). Malay and different Indian languages, mainly Tamil and Malayalam are rarely spoken in public but also accepted languages. The shown tolerance in languages does not fully apply on all types of social and arts education (Low 2015). This language tolerance is only superficial since the various Chinese dialects that were in use among the different groups of Chinese were not supported in order to unify the Chinese speaking population under the rule of Mandarin. The impact of the former colonial structures and the strong economic desire in becoming a superpower due to working discipline, creative engineering, and modern technology applications, excluded over large periods of time a free development of the arts, the humanities, and the approach to local resources in that matter. Subsequently, there are wonderful concert halls, a strong conservatory, one of the richest universities in Asia, museums, gardens, and archives, all following a very competitive Western education. The arts and their many appearances, as well as the humanities and social sciences are de facto ornaments attached to large economic achievements.

Farid loved to play guitar like many other boys of his age, but did not find teachers that could challenge his guitar playing talent. So, he was fighting through competitions to eventually study in the US where he had a hard time since his competitive classmates were enormously well trained.

Later, returning to his home country and disappointed with the social conditions in Singapore, Farid Ali went to Malaysia in search for a job. He was lucky. Not only was he becoming part of a famous band, he also learned about local traditions. He discovered the gambus and transformed his guitar into a gambus hybrid instrument. He played well attended concerts and he was celebrated. Knowing that he cannot perform his whole life, he was seeking to do some postgraduate courses in order to qualify for research and teaching work. Unfortunately, he passed away before he found out that he cannot just write something and get an academic title. His case is symbolic for many contemporary artists in various fields who tried similar approaches to overcome difficulties imposed through specific social value systems. This presentation analyses reasons, directions, and future necessities for important value systems in order to balance growing and globalizing communities and for the sake of a sustainable human society.

In an interview, Ahmad Faudzi Musib from Malaysia, who also studied in Berklee at the time when Farid Ali was there explained about Farid Ali's work ethics the following:

"Farid Ali is a composer, singer, and instrumentalist (guitarist). I know him when I with my other 3 friends arrived from Malaysia [in Berklee]. He had a pleasant personality, great sense of humor, and was serious when it comes to music. He is also serious about the way his guitar sounds. At that time, in fall 1986, we were invited by his housemate Shafie Obe Hairuni from Sarawak at the Edgerly Road nearby Berklee. That is how I got to know Farid of Singapore. He demonstrated his upgraded Fender Stratocaster with Philip Kubicki guitar neck. I was impressed, I have heard through the Guitar Magazine of Eddie Van Hale who modified his guitar, but this is the first time I saw that. I was thinking, yeah that's the area I haven't explored yet. Being in the United States for the first time it's a whole new experience for me. So, Farid really explores his sound. Although he is an excellent Jazz Guitarist, he is humble and asking around including me, about his sound. I never had a chance to talk to him about his gambustar, but knowing Farid always searching for new sounds. Gambustar was an experiment that he is very much into and he was trying to connect to local music. I remember telling him that he sounded good with his solos and scat along with the phrase that he plays. I told him that he sounded like George Benson, and I think I offended him as he answered ***"Thanks babe, tapi semua orang boleh buat, you just practice"*** that means Thank you, but everybody can do that, all you need is to practice. I can sense that he has this self-assessment in him that sometimes his answer might have also offended me unintentionally. It is like "yeah, thanks but that's not me, I am Farid and I am not George Benson". There were more occasions that I encountered this kind of remarks from him. Later I found out that he is a child prodigy, who had started with music as early as 5 years old. He won many awards. The one I remember it was in Curacao when was still a student at Berklee. He had performed and record with Ernie Watts, Eric Marienthal, Bobby McFerrin, Randy Branson, Steve Thornton and performed at many Jazz Festival all over the world" (Musib 2018).

From this interview, analyzing the way it goes, written in English and often using the present tense as if he is still alive, I get the impression that Farid Ali must have clearly known his limits. He explored sound in order to make himself a brand on stage. Yet, he felt that this cannot serve him a whole life. One day, he would have to settle and think to a regular life. Though he was an excellent guitarist, he could not keep up with the speed of innovation and turnovers imposed on the music market in the Malay world. Embedded in this inclusive social context being reminded to the Actor Network Theory in its expanded and renewed version (Gevers, van Berlage & Michel Callon 2009) these various reasons in a sum of the artists within a population cause a lot of pressure and leads to a number of questions:

How do social value systems adopt to individual changes in the future? Which impact have these value systems on creative professions? Which professions will be and in what way developed? How transiting professions behave in changing context of dissolving limitations of nation states? What features of art would help to master these transitions? And many more questions that demand further and more detailed investigations regarding the vision of artistry.

Farid Ali, despite having been sick for a while, insisted on being trained academically. Yet his research skills were little effective and did not go beyond a basic description of his own way of life, merely a beginning of a manageable portfolio that could have served in an autoethnographic research and the complete missing of a kind of syllabus awareness for his desired Faridian Guitar Academy. All these observations have shown that the measurements for an intake were beyond his current capability. Yet he was a brilliant and widely known musician of his art without any doubt. His concerts were sold out, even in the large Dewan Petronas. Nevertheless, the refusal of taking in Performance-only-Degree-Masters by the University had good reasons, too. Being lucky of having had many opportunities to perform and to exhibit his extra efforts in localizing his way of playing music through implementing the gambustar, he still wanted to achieve this last part of social security as an acknowledgement. Another reason might have been a requirement by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (Musib 2018) of being awarded a higher title than the offered degrees in order to open a school that aimed at official education. So, his case was pending for more than two years and remained unsolved until his early death. The requirement was again bound to a control of budgeting school funding and to limit a wild growing of private schools.

## **Discourse**

Trying to guide him in an exploration of his gambustar-creation, a hybrid instrument between guitar and gambus alias ud, he was not really able to find a way into the elementary craft of researching. He had actually enough time. Also, he was well equipped with material and experience, yet he did not find the right questions and that is what research is all about. Not giving all answers or executing the most virtuous performance acts but putting all the burning questions that have to be solved or explained in order to serve the community in particular and humanity in general. Getting to the pedagogical viewpoint, there is little acceptance of pedagogy as a field of research. One of the reasons might be the century old bias that pedagogy and upbringing of a family member in one's own craft is like cooking and cleaning a household activity. Any human should be able to transmit their own knowledge from the older to the younger generation. This simplification is a good example for modern ignorance. Why is the upbringing of artists seen as less important than giving a keynote speech on a symposium or a performance highlight in an evening concert? Since institutions of higher education can choose their students from a large pool and independent of family lineages, there must be professionals in exactly that way of transmission. Teaching itself is not researching but it is as well as performing a subject of research. Though all these dimensions of skills are overlapping and complementing research achievements that are applicable widely on many cases and over a larger time span cannot be compared to neither teaching nor performing. Therefore, any desire to follow up with "studying after graduation" is hard work of another kind, it is like starting over again. Artists may have advantages as well as excellent teachers, but it will not spare them from learning research from scratch. The only compromise is to introduce another equally valued hierarchy system for performers and teachers. Yet there would be no reason to call these titles by the same label.



**Figure 1: Farid Ali playing his gambustar, a fretless guitar with an increased number of strings. (Photo: courtesy of Farid Ali).**

All these thoughts were discussed with Farid Ali and other similar applicants. He then started to open his school completely as a private institution without degree awards but with exams and personal certificates. It worked well for some time and did not limit his impact on the younger generation of guitar players in KL and surrounding. He has known about his weak points both in research and pedagogy, yet he still tried to convince his followers. A few weeks before he passed away, he wrote: "I've been a professional musician for almost 30 years and I am fortunate that I had an education and training at the Guitar Institute and the Berklee College in the early 1980s. For those who have the experience and perhaps education: you should share your knowledge to the younger musicians. There are many things that they can learn from us and there are also things that they shouldn't. Knowledge is more accessible these days through YouTube and other websites. But, unfortunately, the younger musicians get it so easily served that they do not possess the desire and the fire like the older musicians." (Farid Ali 2014).

This last writing shows that he was just transiting to understand the challenges of current pedagogy and the huge knowledge needed in guiding and motivating younger people. Though he could not do any Master's or PhD, he was a musician, a personality of some format, which is dearly missed in many of today's communities. Again, this should be another large topic of research that answers all those questions of how to be a "useful human" that Farid always wanted to be. For those doing research in any field of arts and humanities, the most honored goal is to make people changing how they see the world and what may result from this changed view and what can be expected from an all over constantly change going on in the nature of humankind.

## Final Thoughts

George Smith (2010) quoted Wunsch when describing the need and appreciation of differences in value measurements “if the way artists see the world changes, if their range of perception broadens and deepens, then their artistic ability, their ability to represent history, human consciousness, the history of aesthetic discourse, all that will change for the better because *they* will have changed for the better. In other words, the ... practice gets taken to the next level because the artists who goes ahead has developed intellectually, spiritually, and as a citizen of the world.” (Wunsch 2010). George Smith adds to this “...There are some, though—a tiny fraction of the total population of artists—who really want to understand theory and philosophy in relation to art and to themselves as practicing artists.” Yes. I fully agree. Those are the chosen one who switch to become researchers in a field of knowledge that co-operates with science. However, the problem is multi-layered. There is a lot of unsubstantiated knowledge about knowledge cultures, for example, the bias that science is “purely theoretical”. This is a wrong assumption since especially sciences on arts or any kind of creativity is always based on practical resources and on living arts (Brockmann 2011). The process of gaining knowledge is also embedded in social reality as well as in the material preconditions of creativity. So, if speaking about academia always includes this background thinking of purely theoretical knowledge the value given to scientists in these fields is discriminating and self-colonizing (Bolton & Houlihan 2009). Self-colonizing, because this thinking pattern dominated over a relatively long period of time the European academia that developed only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to become a powerful tool in supporting economy and politics, hence academia helped exploit colonies. Surprisingly, this successful function was later re-interpreted as generally successful academia even in colonies which achieved independence. So, people following the theory-bias are re-incarnating a colonizing knowledge approach.

In conclusion, the story of Farid Ali and the general problem of social value systems and their impact on creative professions are alarming cases in the context of problematic nation states transiting to become responsible agents in the global perspective.

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