

# Technologizing Islam, Islamifying Technology: The Use of Modern Technologies in Brunei's First Film, *Gema Dari Menara* (1968)

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## Abstract

Historians of technology have for the past decade begun to recognize the important role that technology plays in nation-building. From the development of the steam locomotive in Britain in the early 19th century that was integral to the Industrial Revolution to America's emphasis on its technological progressiveness in its national narratives in the 20th century, studies have shown that the history of technology is necessarily the history of nations as well. While the majority of previous research focuses primarily on Western nations (and unsurprisingly so, considering that a greater proportion of technological advancements have happened in these countries in the recent past centuries), less have studied how other countries have dealt with the rise of modern technologies in the development and maintenance of their national identity. This paper seeks to expand the critical scope by examining Brunei's stance on technology in the 1960s – just after the 1959 Constitution was established declaring the nation an independent, sovereign Sultanate – a time when Brunei was still in the early stages of defining its own identity. I propose that Brunei used modern technologies in order to further solidify its Muslim identity as a response to modernization and globalization, which is distinct to many previously-studied countries that focus more on boosting their military and/or industrial prowess. Brunei's approach, then, notably counters oft-perceived contradictions between religion and technology. This study will focus on Brunei's first film, *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), which was tellingly commissioned by the Religious Affairs Department, and will examine the portrayal of modern technologies that seek to break the binary between religion and modernity to show an image of Islam that is compatible with a developing Brunei.

## Introduction

Brunei's first feature film, *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), opens with a panoramic shot that sweeps over the city centre in the nation's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. It is an area that includes several important Bruneian landmarks namely the historical water village, Kampong Ayer, and the gleaming golden dome of the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin (SOAS) mosque, standing as a testament to modern Islamic architecture. This scene juxtaposes the old and the new, which sets the theme for the rest of the film: the necessity of a harmonious co-existence (marked by the accompanying melodic tune in this opening scene that transitions to the call for prayer from the mosque's minaret) between religion and modernity – particularly technological modernity. This inclusive and unifying scene, after all, is only made possible by film technology.

Indeed, as I will demonstrate in this paper, the religion-modernity relationship is rendered necessary especially at a time when the Bruneian government was striving to establish the nation's identity as Islamic amidst a globalizing and increasingly technologized world. It was in the best interests of the government to make use of technology to propagate Islam and to "package" it in such a way that it would be more palatable to a population increasingly aware of and influenced by Western and globalizing forces threatening to dismantle national values. At the same time, the use of technology itself needed to be guarded as media technologies, for example, would increase encounters with cultures and attitudes beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Unsurprisingly therefore, a sense of anxiety about clashes between Islam and modernity underlies the opening scene and *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) as a whole. A sense of authoritarian control can also be detected: the unifying opening scene could also be construed

as panoptic, especially when we bear in mind that the sweeping, all-encompassing view is captured (and manipulated) specifically by those (in power) behind the camera. New technologies thus also facilitate greater control, particularly over narratives.

This paper explores the Bruneian encounter with, and approach towards, technological modernity as it simultaneously seeks to establish a stronghold with its Islamic, national identity. I will focus specifically on *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), which was commissioned by the Religious Affairs Department (since then evolved to become the present-day Ministry of Religious Affairs), as a reflection of the government's attempts at shaping the nation's attitudes towards Islam as well as technological modernity, particularly transport and media technologies. Questions that will be addressed include: how did Brunei reconcile the two seemingly opposing desires for modernization and a stronger Islamic identity? How did Brunei move past this dilemma to justifiably use technological advancements in building an Islamic nation? In attempting to answer the latter question, this study also addresses the gap in knowledge concerning "how new technologies impact on the experience of the sacred and the divine in Asian societies [which] is scarcely documented" (Lim, 2009, p. 1). By studying Brunei's management of the proliferation of technology using *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) as a case study, this paper offers some insight into how this small Asian nation managed to grow both Islamically and technologically in comparison to other nations within the region.

## Technology in nation-building

For the purposes of this discussion, I borrow Suzanne Moon's definition of national identity as, [...] a set of ideals and characteristics meant to define the essence of a nation and to provide the foundational logic for a coherent, enduring, and most of all, legitimate political order. To define the reasons that a group of individuals should see themselves as part of a nation, proponents will cite characteristics that give reasons for social solidarity, such as shared geography, shared cultural practices and values, shared histories, and shared political aspirations [...] (Moon, 2009, p. 254)

This definition highlights the importance of a sense of community that is reinforced by the idea of a shared history or narrative as well as purpose in moving forward. It agrees with Benedict Anderson's view of national identity and sense of nationhood as "cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (Anderson, 2006, p. 4), which also emphasizes how integral continuity with a particular historical narrative is in making up the foundation of how a particular national community views or "imagines" itself. Technology, as widely acknowledged by historians of technology, has the capacity to continue or sustain that narrative and thus has a significant role to play in the defining and redefining of national identity. David E. Nye, for instance, contends that, "Since the early nineteenth century the technological sublime has been one of America's central 'ideas about itself' – a defining ideal, helping to bind together a multicultural society" (1994, p. xiv). In America's aim to set itself as one of the most advanced nations in the world, it idealized technological progress, which became synonymous with "the progress and welfare of the nation as well as of the individual" (Simon, 2003, p. 102), thus garnering support from the majority of the population. "For almost two centuries," Nye states, "the American public has repeatedly paid homage to [...] bridges, skyscrapers, factories, dams, airplanes, and space vehicles" (Nye, p. xiii). A sense of national solidarity was thus born in large part due to this shared belief in the nation's technological advancement.

Technology does not only help to strengthen national identity symbolically, but also materially, which is the case in France and the establishment of its electrical network. In studying the factors that influenced the rebuilding of French national identity, Gabrielle Hecht shifts the focus from "pre-twentieth century symbols and events [such as] monuments, literature, and revolutionary events" to modern technologies – the development of nuclear

power in particular (Hecht, 2001, p. 253). In one “vignette”, Hecht demonstrates how *Électricité de France* (EDF) emerged from an agreement that the “new France” would have a standardized electrical network under one public utility, thus “unit[ing] France symbolically as well as technologically: complete electrification would enable all French citizens to participate in the modernization of their nation” whilst also “embrac[ing] an ethos of public service” (p. 264). Establishing a standardized electrical network, in this case, helped to reinforce the sense of community, involvement, and progress among French citizens, thereby strengthening their national identification.

Technological artifacts may also eventually constitute part of the national identity, which is the case in Portugal where technology “became a fundamental element for the invention of a new shared culture” (Saraiva, 2007, p. 264). Proposing that technology does not just facilitate nation-building, Saraiva shows how, particularly in Portugal at the end of the 19th century, technology itself became part of that nation’s new identity. As technology was presented “side by side with historical monuments” – for example, “the new central railway station recovered the architecture of the expansion period of the 16th century,” and “the headquarters of the Geographical Society combined iron structures with imperial decors” – these “technological artifacts became urban landmarks, symbols of Lisbon’s identity” (Saraiva, p. 270). It is important to note that while these technological landmarks are newly established, they are nevertheless incorporated with significant pieces of Portuguese history, thus simultaneously preserving that history and modernizing the nation.

As these studies show, Western nations have come to place significant value on technological power and its role in nation-building. For nations beyond the West, nation-building with the help of technology thus means that they are able to demonstrate their own power and identity on similar, comparable terms. Moreover, the project of defining national identity becomes especially pertinent for postcolonial nations such as Indonesia, which Moon argues was (and still is) struggling to unite and redefine itself after independence in 1945 especially considering its “geographic and social fragmentation” (Moon, 2009, p. 255). Indonesia thus presents fertile ground for research into technology’s role in nation-building and there have been several studies on the different kinds of technologies (such as communications technologies and transport technologies, most notably the National Airplane project) employed to help unify Indonesia. Moon focuses on the development of a steel factory, *Trikora Steel Plant*. Although the factory does not seem to have the capacity to unite the nation in the more obvious ways of transport technologies or electrical networks, it nevertheless enabled the nation to produce and process its own raw materials for both domestic use and export, which is a significant marker of the nation’s economic independence post-colonization. As Moon argues, “industry therefore carried connotations of domestic strength and international power, making it possible for a steel mill to become a potent symbol of national strength and a defining characteristic for a postcolonial nation” (p. 263). So great was this symbolization that it surpassed the “practical shortcomings” of establishing the factory in the first place such as choosing Cilegon as its site, which had limited access to fresh water as well as raw iron resources (Moon, p. 265). The fact that the project had sufficient support for it to proceed highlights how highly technology was regarded in building a nation’s identity.

## **Technological modernity and Islamic identity in Brunei**

Technology thus plays different roles in uniting the nation as well as strengthening the national narratives or identities. The case of Brunei, in this paper, centers on the technologically-facilitated bolstering of its religious, Islamic, identity, which became officially established as the religion of Brunei Darussalam in the Constitution of Brunei Darussalam in 1959. Thereafter, the Brunei government can be seen to have made significant steps towards fortifying this aspect of its national identity – a project that was perhaps made even more urgent after the arduous,

conflict-ridden process towards promulgating the Constitution – one of which was cementing Islam in the national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB), Malay Islamic Monarchy, on the day of its independence, 1st January 1984. Added to that was the earlier 1962 Brunei revolt that must have continued to haunt the government. Taking these events into consideration, it is unsurprising that *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) places so much emphasis on sermonizing (Azman delivers lengthy lectures to his younger siblings) and tightly controlling the heavily didactic narrative.

As religion is commonly perceived to be incompatible with the processes of modernity, with which technology is highly associated, how to attain a balance between the two, as a nation seeks to excel in both arenas, becomes a major concern. Secularization theory, in particular, argues that, “modernization leads inevitably to secularization, and that religion is negatively affected by the consequences of rationalization, technologization, and functional differentiation, by an increase in the level of prosperity, education, and urbanization” (Pollack and Rosta, 2017, p. 2). At the same time that Brunei was struggling to become a constitutional Islamic monarchy, after the discovery of oil in 1929, the nation also found itself with great wealth and prosperity. As Hussainmiya notes, due to this increasing awareness of Brunei’s burgeoning wealth, nationalist sentiment also heightened within a nation that felt “stung by feelings of deprivation” during the British residency and Japanese occupation in 1941 to 1945. This was a nation that became hungry for modernization, which is evidenced by nationalists’ calls for “proper educational, social and political facilities” (Hussainmiya, 2000, p. 6).

In the 1960s, the government was discernibly taking simultaneous leaps towards modernization and strengthening Brunei’s national, Islamic identity. At the start of the decade, for one, a nationwide electrical network was in the process of being installed (“Ranchangan bekalan lestrik”, Aug 1961, p. 1) and a few years after, increased water supply was provided to more remote areas such as Labi in the Belait district (“Ranchangan perbekalan ayer”, June 1965, p. 3). Additionally, students, teachers, and government officers were frequently being sent abroad for further training and higher education, which shows the degree of investment in producing a highly-skilled local workforce. At the same time, steps were also being taken to study the country’s own unique characteristics to make better-informed decisions about national development. For instance, in 1967, the then-Director of the Language and Literature Bureau stressed the need for more scientific studies of the land to be published in order to help make informed decisions about how best to develop the country’s infrastructure (“Buku ilmu alam negara”, May 1967, p. 5). To this end, help was sought from University of Malaya researchers in an effort to expand local knowledge and expertise. Further indicating the broad scope of the government’s efforts towards modernization, entertainment in new media was also brought to the population. For example, *Pelita Brunei*, the “*Akhbar Rasmi Kerajaan Negeri Brunei*” [“Official Newspaper of the Brunei Government”], also began publishing schedules for films, which under the Information Department’s initiative, would be shown in viewings held across the country in various venues such as schools.

As technological modernity, catalyzed by processes of globalization, continued to permeate the nation on many levels, a question appeared to be brewing regarding potential clashes with the Islamic values that Brunei was also trying to instil and reinforce within its identity. This question seemed to have become more urgent as the country strove towards independence in 1984, and was acknowledged by Abdul Aziz Umar, the last Chief Minister in 1983, in his reflection on the birth of Brunei’s national philosophy. He notes that at the time, in order to stave off “the tides of globalization” Brunei needed to “perform a balancing act, aiming to preserve our distinctiveness as a people while at the same time embracing the ever-changing world culture” (Abdul, 2013, p. 95). Thus, “MIB was proposed as a solution” (*ibid.*).

Even before the implementation of MIB, Brunei was already performing this balancing act between technological modernity and Islamic beliefs and values. In fact, technology itself was

deployed in order to strengthen those beliefs. In May 1963, for example, the prayer timetable began to be published in every edition of the then bimonthly *Pelita Brunei* (“Waktu sembahyang”, May 1963, p. 4), pointing towards the usefulness of print media in disseminating necessary religious information to the rest of the country whilst also reinforcing with every edition the centrality of Islam to the nation. The Department of Religious Affairs (now Ministry of Religious Affairs) also utilized print media to their advantage, publishing educational articles on Islamic history and principles (“Benarkah Islam di-siarkan dengan pedang?” April 1967, p. 3) and even broadcasting religious talks on national radio (“Siaran Jabatan Hal Ehwal Ugama”, Jan 1963, p. 6). Alongside the development and modernization of the country, the government sought to expand Islamic knowledge as well by awarding scholarships to students under the Department of Religious Affairs to continue their studies abroad (“20 orang penuntut2 sekolah2 ugama Brunei”, April 1967, p. 2). All these efforts to strengthen Brunei’s Islamic identity were clearly only possible with the help of modern technology and it thus became necessary to dissolve the perceived binary between religion and modernity and to keep emphasizing and effecting a beneficial relationship between the two.



Figure 1. Image included in news article covering the return of the Crown Prince, Duli Pengiran Muda Mahkota Hassanal Bolkiah, from Malaysia (“Do’a untok selamat balek”, April 1963, p. 1).

A symbol of this constructive relationship can be seen throughout images portrayed in the media, such as a front-cover photo of the then Crown Prince, Duli Pengiran Muda Mahkota Hassanal Bolkiah and other officials reading prayers in front of an airplane after his safe return from Malaysia (“Do’a untok selamat balek”, April 1963, p. 1), thus visually uniting modern progress in the form of transportation technology, future leadership as symbolized by the Crown Prince, and the centrality of Islam as represented by the prayers. Notably, print media, as exemplified by the publication of this image, also proved to be one potentially effective way of repeatedly declaring the nation’s alignment with the pillars that would go on to constitute the national philosophy.

## Rethinking Islam and technological modernity in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968)

The values and tensions of the relationship between technological modernity and Islamic values are played out between the siblings in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968): the eldest brother and protagonist, Azman, is a Western-educated man who has managed to hold on to his Islamic faith and is thus portrayed as the ideal Bruneian citizen working hard to spread Islamic awareness in the country. In contrast, his younger siblings, Noriah and Nordin, are shown to be reckless and disrespectful to their brother and parents, constantly transgressing Islamic laws by drinking alcohol, gambling, and partying. In the end, Noriah and her partner are caught by the authorities engaging illegally in pre-marital sex and are sentenced to prison. Nordin ends up in a debilitating car accident after driving under the influence, having lost most of his parents' money by gambling. Their parents, the film suggests, are also to blame for neglecting to discipline their two youngest children<sup>1</sup> and they end up living with Azman and his family in a modest home, in stark contrast to their previous modern, luxurious home sold recklessly by Nordin. Their "punishment" is perhaps a reminder of the necessity for parents as authority figures within the family unit (and extensions of the nation's governing body) to guide (and discipline) their children.

The film makes clear that Azman represents the ideal Bruneian citizen by being able to adhere to his Islamic faith whilst also being open to certain kinds of modern progress, whereas his siblings are set as prime examples of wayward youth who have abandoned their Islamic (as well as Malay) values, seeing them as incompatible with their Western-influenced perspective of what is modern. At the root of the conflict between these siblings are the opposing ideas of what being modern means: for Nordin and Noriah, being modern and being Islamic are mutually exclusive, whereas for Azman, they are mutually beneficial. These contrasting perspectives are outlined early on in the film when Nordin, Noriah, and a group of their friends, while listening to the radio, dancing and having a picnic on a beach, criticize Azman for his faith and therefore his backwardness. Someone like Azman, Nordin declares, "*sesuai hidup beribu-ribu tahun yang lalu, bukan dalam zaman kemajuan ini!*" ["may be suited to live thousands of years ago, not in this era of development!"]. Nordin thus presents the view that Islam is incompatible with modern society. According to him and his friends, modern progress means youth who know how to "*bergaul seperti kita – pandai ber-twist, pandai berdansa [...] dan sebagainya*" ["socialize like us – know how to do the twist and dance [...] and so on."]

The next scene shifts to a calm atmosphere inside their family home where Azman is having a serious conversation with his friend Hassan that undermines Nordin's view about Islam's incompatibility with modern societies. Both Azman and Hassan agree that Islam rather encourages development "*untuk kesempurnaan rohani dan jasmani. Bukan hanya kemajuan tiruan sahaja. Adakah perjuangan dalam arti kata begini bertentangan dengan dasar-dasar Islam?*" ["towards physical and spiritual perfection. Not just imitation disguising as development. Does development necessarily have to be contrary to the policies of Islam?"]. Note that Hassan uses the word *tiruan*, meaning artificial or imitation, when he describes the kind of development or modernity that Nordin and his friends embody. The word carries with it criticism of the view of progress that imitates that of the West rather than occurring under the guidance of Bruneian practices, beliefs and values. Meaningfully, in the middle of Hassan's speech, Nordin enters the living room and disrupts the atmosphere by playing a record loudly on the gramophone and dancing to the music. Evidently, the imitation of development that Hassan is referring to is Nordin's version of modern progress that equates to that of the West.

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Najib Noorashid, Nur Raihan Mohamad & Ririn Kurnia Trisnawati's essay in this issue, *Gema Dari Menara (1968): Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Mungkar As Islamic Da'wahism in Bruneian Film* which specifically investigates the role of the siblings' childhood education in inculcating Islamic values.

Indeed, as Azman points this out to Nordin towards the end of the film, “*engkau hanya mengenali kemajuan Barat. Tetapi engkau tidak tahu bahawa kemajuan Barat itu sendiri dimulai oleh pergerakan umat Islam*” [“you only know of the West’s progress. But you aren’t aware that their progress was initiated by the efforts of Muslim believers”].

The aesthetics of both scenes also serve to underscore the different views and attitudes. The outdoor setting for Nordin, Noriah and their friends appears to represent liberation from restrictions and tradition (further marked by their casual and relatively revealing clothing of swimming trunks and swimsuits), whereas the proximity to the sea and the waves on the beach signify their longing for change. Placing them on this physical border suggests their own marginality in an Islamic Bruneian society. Furthermore, the outdoor setting, with nature surrounding the characters, combined with the lack of clothing as well as their reveling in food, music, and dance suggests something primitive, thus undercutting their claims to modern progress. This is in stark contrast to the scene immediately after, which takes place inside their relatively modern and neat home, where Azman and Hassan discuss religious and current affairs rather than gossip or backbite. Azman and Hassan are even clothed in smart shirts and long pants, almost in a business-like manner with Hassan donning a tie. A connection is effectively drawn between the civilized manner of both men and their religious faith. Their Western-influenced outfits here also suggest their openness to certain Western influences as well, especially those that are compatible with Islamic and Malay values of conservativeness. Again, the film challenges the idea of being Islamic as being restricted and closed off to any notions of modern development. It is worthwhile to note here that the approach to Islam practiced in Brunei is moderate and inclusive (Kathrina, 2019; Mansurnoor, 2008), thus more open to encounters and exchanges with secular cultures.

Throughout the rest of the film, this connection between Islam and civility is repeatedly highlighted, especially by Azman. In a final attempt to persuade his siblings of Islam’s compatibility with modern civilization, he asks, “*Dan siapakah yang melahirkan temadun sekarang ini kalau bukan Islam?*” [“And who created the civilization of today, if not Islam?”] and points out how Muslims were the ones who “*mengembalikan dunia ini jadi gemilang dari zamannya yang buas dan nahas*” [“restored the world’s glory from its savage and violent era”]. By demonstrating Islam’s historic role in advancing civilization, Azman underscores Islam’s potential to help guide the modernization of the nation in addition to, and as a reciprocal effect of, using technology to help strengthen the people’s identification with Islam.

Several modern technologies are featured in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), including transport technologies (airplane, cars, boats) and media technologies (radio, gramophone, the film itself). The film demonstrates that these technologies can be used in two ways, i.e. for beneficial purposes (Islamic, national, moral) or otherwise. One of the scenes follows Azman, Hassan, and Shamsiah driving around the capital and even reaching the Tutong and Belait districts in order to learn more about, as well as facilitate, the Department of Religious Affairs’ efforts in developing and disseminating Islamic knowledge throughout the country. This scene is important for two main reasons. Firstly, without the car, these efforts would have taken a much longer time. Secondly, the automobile, which is featured prominently in the film, signifies a motorized, and therefore modernized, nation. A growing number of Bruneians were becoming vehicle owners, prompting the formation of the Land Transport Department in 1962. As the camera’s view shows the pace of the changing scenery from within the car, the audience is also able to participate in the speed that so characterizes the modern experience, like a symbolic propelling of the nation into a more modernized future. Couple this with the actions of the characters as well as the film itself helping to propagate Islamic knowledge, Islam (the Department of Religious Affairs and the Bruneian government by extension), is placed firmly on the side of modernization, rather than against it. The same can be said for the opening shot in the film of the bridge that extends from SOAS Mosque to Kampong Ayer as well as the many

passenger boats speeding along the water village – both the bridge and boats become representatives of technology seen to help ease the movement of people to and from home, work, and worship.

By opening with this particular scene, the film also alludes to the introduction of Islam to the nation and to wider Southeast Asia. Francis Gek Khee Lim notes that,

Historically, the spread of religion in Asia has always been closely linked to the growth and proliferation of new technologies. From their places of origin in the subcontinent, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam made inroads into Southeast Asia partly through the improvements that were made in means of transport, such as the sea-going vessels that allowed for long-distance trade between important centres surrounding the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. (2009, p. 1)

Without such transport technologies then, it seems much less likely that Islam would have even reached the shores of Brunei. Again, the film emphasizes that Islam and modernization go hand-in-hand. Contrast Azman's purposeful drive through Bandar with Nordin's reckless driving, particularly when he ends up in a near-fatal accident. The scene cuts quickly through different camera angles, from outside the car, to the windscreen, and to a close-up of Nordin struggling with steering, effectively emphasizing the excessive speed as well as disorientation of driving under the influence of alcohol. The scene then immediately cuts to an image of his father visiting him in hospital as he lays injured and immobile, wrapped completely in bandages. Consequently, the dangers of using these new technologies without Islamic guidance are stressed. Perhaps the strongest image in the film of the necessary partnership between Islam and modern technologies is of the Malaysia-Singapore Airlines aircraft touching down on the Brunei Airport runway bringing Azman's father home from his Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca. As this is one of the five core pillars of the faith, which needs to be performed by every able Muslim, the figure of the airplane brings home the necessity of technology in facilitating this compulsory act.



Figure 2. Still from *Gema Dari Menara* showing the return of the father from his Hajj pilgrimage (Mohasbi, 1968).



Communication and media technologies such as the radio and gramophone also feature heavily in the film. As the then Head of the Department of Religious Affairs explains in the introduction, one of their department's responsibilities is to "*meluaskan perkembangan syiar agama Islam di negeri ini*" ["expand the spread of Islam in this country"]. Considering "*perkembangan zaman ini*" ["the developments in this era"], he emphasizes that doing so "*patutlah dilaksanakan menerusi berbagai-bagai jurusan [...] membuat filem adalah boleh dijadikan sebagai saluran untuk menyampaikan ajaran-ajaran agama*" ["should be implemented through various media, [hence] film can be used as one of the channels to convey the teachings of the religion"]. The department at the time recognized the potential in modern technologies to facilitate their efforts and actively sought new media to utilize, manifested in the production of *Gema Dari Menara* (1968). Besides the film itself, the radio is also shown to be advantageous in broadcasting religious guidance. At the beach scene with Nordin and Noriah, a close-up of a blue-colored radio dominates the scene for a lengthy 25 seconds as a talk on the importance of religious guidance takes place. The scene emphasizes again the connection between modern technology and the strengthening of the Islamic faith. Thereafter, a hand invades the shot to change the channel to dance music, the synecdoche perhaps implying man's propensity towards waywardness in the absence of guidance.

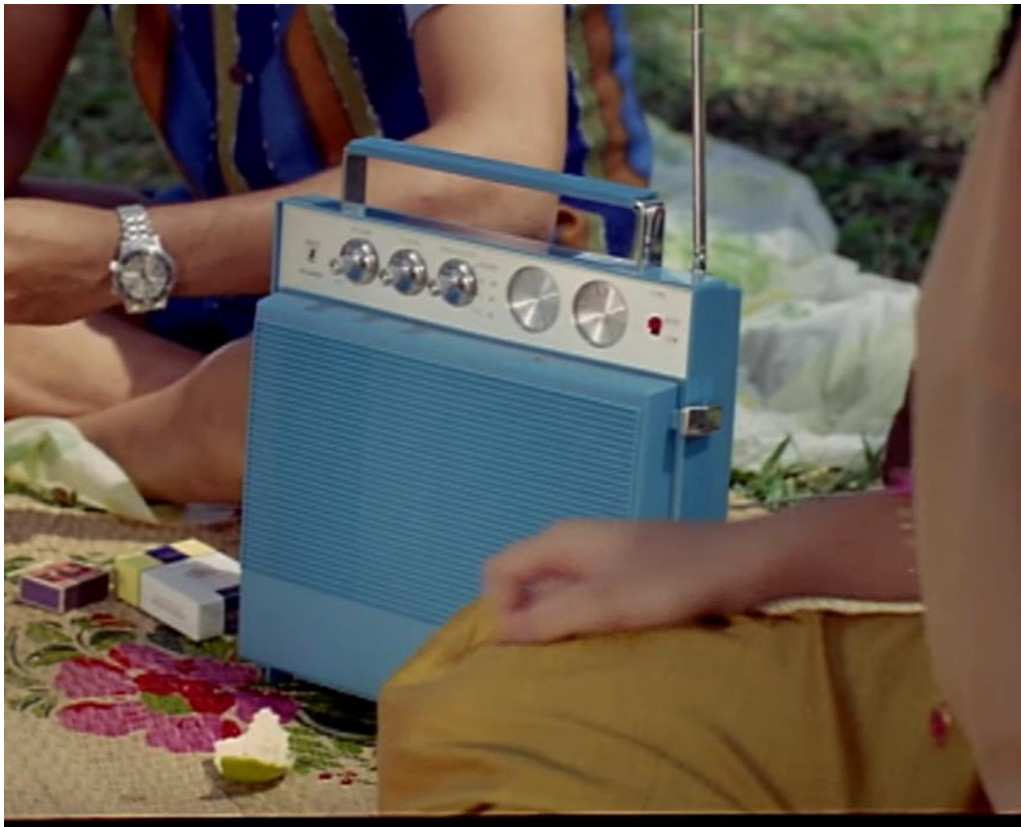


Figure 3. Still from *Gema Dari Menara* focusing on the radio used by Nordin and his friends (Mohasbi, 1968).

The prominence of radio in the film is significant considering its role in nation-building. According to historian Rozan Yunos, as media technologies "allow countries to be built, and diverse societies and cultures be forged into one nation," (Rozan, 2010) the radio broadcasting service proved to be necessary, particularly in reaching non-literate groups. The first radio broadcast in Brunei happened in 1957 by the official national service, Radio Brunei. The daily broadcast consisted of Malay and English programs for 2.5 hours playing musical

entertainment, religious programs, plays, talks, and the news, both world and local (*ibid.*). By broadcasting the same content to the rest of the nation in 1965 (radio transmission began with a small radius and reached other regions in stages), the radio would help in uniting diverse groups of people separated by distance and culture. Furthermore, the mix of programs themselves was crucial. The world news, for one, helped to keep the population updated with current events beyond the borders in almost real-time, and this new experience formed part of the modernization of the nation. Besides current world affairs, the broadcasting of local news helped to unite the different groups of people in the nation by keeping them up to date with events that more directly affected them. Additionally, the religious programs would educate the public as well as reinforce the centrality of Islamic principles within the national identity.

Interestingly, mixed in with these practical programs were sessions mainly for entertainment (with an undercurrent of didacticism) such as popular drama series *Diangdangan Bujang Sigandam*. The series is based on an epic narrative about a king called Bujang Sigandam and would be sung on the radio as per its oral origins. By broadcasting such historic and familiar stories, the radio also helped to augment and root local listeners to their “shared history” as included in Suzanne Moon’s definition of national identity. These cultural programs would resonate more with listeners than exclusively informational ones, and this can be detected in the overall creative, fictional direction of *Gema Dari Menara* as opposed to filming a merely informational religious speech, for instance. The montage of several religious speeches placed in the middle of the film interspersed with enactments demonstrating the dangers of un-Islamic behaviour effectively produces a kind of affective didacticism as it balances moral lessons with entertainment for audience engagement.

## Conclusion: Modernity and functionality, tradition and aesthetics

The musical prologue that welcomes viewers and introduces the themes of the film already suggests that the creative arts and entertainment need not be shunned entirely in order to abide by Islamic values. The film, itself a product of modern media technology, is able to help preserve and highlight traditional Malay musical instruments such as the *gendang* and *gambus* used in the prologue. Their accompaniment to the song emphasizing the Islamic faith as necessary guidance indicates that new media technologies do not necessarily conflict with Islamic values. Modern technologies are shown to be capable of further enhancing and popularizing Bruneian cultural practices and Islamic values. In fact, as several scenes in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) demonstrate, they can also help to highlight, for instance, the beauty and aesthetics that characterize Islamic art and architecture. The repeated panoramic shots of the gleaming SOAS mosque, standing out even more amid the houses of Kampong Ayer underscore the significant value placed on aesthetics in Islamic architecture. This mutually beneficial relationship is also highlighted in several recent studies in history of technology that demonstrate technology’s capacity to “form identities” and which find that “users embody their identities within the technologies they employ” (Brinkman and Hirsh, 2017, p. 337). Not only does technology help to capture and disseminate information and ideas, in doing so it also plays an integral role in constructing and bolstering the nation’s collective and individual identity. Modern technologies, as seen in their uses in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), thus form extensions of the Bruneian body, modernized and Islamicized.

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## Notes

All translations of film dialogue in this essay are author's own.