

Malayness in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968)

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Abstract

This paper argues that the film *Gema Dari Menara* produced in 1968 reflects Brunei's attempt towards constructing a Brunei Malayness as a national identity. During the early twentieth century, the colonial powers particularly in the Peninsula, tried to help establish a sense of unity among the Malays. Although it was not clear whether this was entirely successful, it is possible that the presence of colonial powers had some influence towards fuelling Malays to be more proactive in their own identity construction. After the British began to leave Brunei, the nation-state can be perceived to have intensified its efforts in creating a national identity as a way to unify its people, including the preservation and reconstruction of its Malayness. A close analysis of the characters in the film will reveal portrayals of ideals of Malayness and how Islamic values penetrate Malayness in the Bruneian context. The main character Azman is arguably the epitome of ideal Malayness, as his behaviour, his way of thinking as well as the way he dresses complement what Brunei aspires to for its people, whereas his younger siblings' partying and wild behaviour are a cautionary tale. These findings will hopefully provide insights for further studies on the impact of the British administration on the Brunei Malay culture or identity formation in Brunei as a postcolonial state.

Introduction

The film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) opens with the performance of a titular song detailing the plot of the film. In it, the singer talks about how the film will portray an example of how opposite lifestyles will impact society and individuals, and implies that the viewers should be able to decide correctly which lifestyle will lead to peace and harmony (*kemakmuran umat Islam di negara*) which is heavily implied to be the Islamic way of life. While the content of the song serves to inform, I am also drawn to the ways in which the entire performance serves as a visual representation of Malayness. All the performers – the lead singer, backup singer and the musicians - are wearing traditional Malay clothes - a *baju kurung* which is a long blouse with a *songket* (woven cloth) as the skirt for the ladies, and a *baju Melayu*, a set of matching top and pants with a *sinjang* which is a type of sarong also made from woven material. The musicians accompanying the singing play traditional musical instruments - *gendang labik*, *gambus*, *rampana* (drum, lute, Malay tambourine) - and the music is in the *nasyid* style, “a genre of Islamic popular music” with roots that can be traced to the Middle East (Barendregt, 2011) which generally contains comments on “wrongs in society and corrupt politics in the Muslim world, the glory of Allah and the teachings of His Prophet” (ibid). The definition of *nasyid* corresponds to the content of the song, which stresses the importance of Islamic values. The fusion of both Malay customs and Arabic roots sets the tone for the type of Malayness that Brunei is seeking to define.

As stated by Anthony Milner in his book *The Malays* (2008), defining who the Malays are is not a straightforward task. For Milner (2008) “although the word ‘Malay’ is used across a wide geographical region, it is clear...that we cannot assume it conveys the same meaning” (10). Milner goes on to elaborate on the variety of opinions about what features make one a Malay. From his analysis, such variation is not only influenced by geographical factors but is in some cases caused by politics and religion. The scholar Siddique has defined a Malay as someone who “professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language (and) conforms to Malay custom” (Siddique 1981 as cited in Milner, 2008, p. 2). This definition was further refined by Muhammad Taib who established that “in Malaysia itself, a Malay was

defined as someone who spoke Malay at home, was a Muslim and observed Malay culture - in dress and food preferences” (as cited in Watson, 1996, p.13). However, “adherence to Islam has not been a criterion for being ‘Malay’ in the Singapore census process” (Rahim 1998, as cited in Milner, 2008, p.2). It is therefore clear that the definition of what constitutes Malayness differs even within the region. What can be observed from the different nations is that their own version of Malayness reflects nationalistic and cultural desires. In Indonesia for example, there has been resistance in using “Malay” to describe their people. Their national priority is to encourage and promote a more inclusive belonging to Indonesia, rather than using Malayness, which is seen as divisive. It was believed that instilling the idea of Indonesianess would lead to unifying patriotic sentiments among the people (Kipp, 1996 as cited in Milner, 2008, p.11).

Therefore, defining the Malay race and the Malay identity or Malayness can be a challenge. Not least because the Malays themselves have undergone and are still undergoing a reconstruction of their own Malay identity or Malayness. The Malays were once known as a people who value customs more than anything - with customs being described as “the collective mind of the Malay peoples” (Zainal Kling 1989/1990 as cited in Milner 2008, p. 4). However, with the arrival and strengthening of Islam in Malay communities many of their traditional customs were revised and those deemed to be contrary to the teachings of Islam were removed (Milner, 2008) which has historically complicated the definition of Malayness.

Establishing a more stable definition of what constitutes Malayness is an endeavour that has historically been undertaken by colonial powers (Milner, 2008; Shamsul A.B, 2001; Hussainmiya, 2010). During the early twentieth century, the colonial powers in the Peninsula, tried to help establish a sense of unity among the Malays. It was common for the Europeans to attempt to instil a sense of structure and a unifying factor between their colonial subjects. It might be argued that this was part of the justification for colonialism, as it was believed that Europeans were more civilised than the Non-European Other, who were perceived as backward and therefore needed to be civilised (Said, 1993). As the introduction of the idea of statehood was one of the aspects of colonial rule (Fernandez, 1999), the colonial powers made it their priority for the Malay people in the South East Asian region to develop a Malay identity that they could be proud of and with which they could identify as the people of a nation. In the succeeding years, it was not clear whether the colonial powers had successfully achieved their objective in constructing a more unified Malay people. What is certain is that their attempts resulted in mixed reactions among the Malays.

However, it can be argued that colonial intervention brought positive outcomes. It is possible that the position of Malays in the world have been preserved due to the efforts of the colonial powers, thus helping to eradicate “the long-term fear... that ‘the Malays’ could actually “disappear from this world”” (Milner, 2008, p.16). There is also the possibility that the presence of colonial powers might have had some influence in terms of fuelling Malays to be more proactive in their own identity construction, as much of the reconstruction of the Malay identity was also partially shaped by the reaction against colonial influences (Shamsul A.B, 2001). I am interested in understanding the ways in which Brunei handled the influences of its own colonial power and how these influences impacted the construction of the Malay identity of the Brunei people. Bearing in mind that Malays and Malayness differ even within the region, this paper hopes to answer the questions 1) what aspects of Malayness does Brunei identify with? and 2) to what extent does Islam influence Brunei’s version of Malayness? The depiction of Malayness in the film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) offers some interesting insights to these questions.

History of Brunei Darussalam

Brunei was on the brink of “the dissolution of [its] ancient kingdom” (Hussainmiya, 1995) when the British intervened to restore the nation under the direction and initiatives of Malcom Stewart Hannibal McArthur. Hailed as a “jewel” by a British Consul who “gave a new lease of life” to

Brunei (Hussainmiya, 1995), McArthur helped the British Government see that “Brunei was more valuable than had been supposed and might even become self-supporting within a reasonable space of time” (Horton, 1986, p. 357). Being a British Protectorate meant that Brunei was safeguarded by the British, which at the time was imperative in ensuring that Brunei - “that blot on the map” (ibid, p. 358) - would not disappear completely. The British Residency period from the years 1906 - 1959 was essential if Brunei wanted to prevent further annexations of its lands by James Brooke and to regain the stability that the nation once enjoyed as an empire. In his report, McArthur outlined the lack of government institutions and policies in Brunei prior to being a British Protectorate:

There are no salaried officers...no forces, no police, no public institutions, no coinage, no roads, no public buildings—except a wooden mosque, and—most crying need of all—no gaol. There is a semblance of a judicature, but little justice... (as cited in Horton, 1986, pg. 360)

It was undeniable that much work was to be done if Brunei was to stand on its own and exist as a self-sufficient, independent nation. Under McArthur’s supervision, Brunei enacted “a Penal Code, the creation of a system of courts, and the introduction of Police” (Horton, 1986, p. 364). The journey towards that was not necessarily a smooth-sailing one either for Britain and Brunei. Having learnt of the ways in which “Malay customs had inalienable links to administration of justice and land” (Hussainmiya, 1995) from their previous engagements in the Malayan Peninsula, the British were careful to delete any clause that would prevent them from being able to carry out reforms in the traditional administration (ibid). Having said that, the benefits of the British Residency period were undisputable. Especially with a conscientious and assertive Sultan occupying the Brunei throne after 1950, the British administration could no longer remain complacent. New conditions had arisen which made it imperative for them to bring Brunei out of its stupor. (ibid)

Towards the end of the British residency, Brunei was finally deemed stable financially - mostly due to the discovery of oil in the 1920s, which also propelled the Sultanate’s development plans forward towards an existing judicial system and administration (Horton, 1986). Despite the pressure by the British to implement a democratic system of government in Brunei, for Brunei to join Malaysia and to form a federation with Sarawak and the Northern Borneo territories (Nani Suryani, 2006), Brunei did not relent. During Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III’s reign, he continued to put into action his “mission of continuing Brunei’s age-old monarchy, according to the tenets of the religion and ancient custom” and “skilfully handled the forces that threatened the stability of the Sultanate” (Hussainmiya, 1995). It was also timely for the Sultanate as the British began to leave Brunei, to intensify efforts to create its own national identity. One very important aspect of the national identity was the preservation of their Malayness.

Malayness in Brunei

Previous studies on Brunei have discussed the nation’s aspiration to create a national identity (Hussainmiya, 2010; Noor Azam, 2005; Naimah, 2002). These studies are linked in their assertion that Brunei’s most prominent period for constructing its national identity began surrounding the 1959 Constitution. With the British departing and the Sultanate having emerged from the slums of the early twentieth century, the studies contend that Brunei recognized it was finally time to focus on what defined the Bruneians as a people. The threat of extinction that Brunei had faced in the early 1900s surely urged Brunei not only to stabilize itself economically and politically, but also to sufficiently lay a foundation for the people to identify as one nation. In addition, the outbreak of a civil rebellion in 1962 might have brought with it a reminder of

the effects of disunity and discontent among the people, and of the danger of not being loyal (Pelita Brunei, 31 December 1962). Therefore, as one of the efforts to unify the people, it appeared that the government of Brunei, influenced by “Malay ideologues [who] promoted the need to preserve their race as a bulwark against alien domination of Malay society” (Hussainmiya, 2010, p. 70) and “increasing antipathy to the alien presence” (ibid) started to focus on bringing together the Malay people. Documents from the British residential period in Brunei seemed to suggest not only would this racialization of Malayness be the first step in creating a sense of belonging amongst the people, it would also give the people a national language to unify them, as opposed to the different ethnicities that could potentially divide Bruneians further. One such document was a report written by Baki and Chang in 1959, which sampled heavily from the Razak Report on Education 1956 stating the importance of having a national education system with a national language as the main medium of instruction. Another is the clause in the 1961 Nationality Act of Brunei:

The “Malay by race” label was coined in the 1961 Nationality Act of Brunei, which stated that there were seven indigenous groups within the “Malay by race” category, these being: the Belait, Bisaya, Brunei, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut, and Tutong ethnicities. (Azam, 2005, pg. 1)

It is clear from the Nationality Act of 1961 that Brunei was seeking to create links between the ethnic groups by grouping them together as Malay people by race. In his paper, Noor Azam also presented Braighlenn’s observation of the apparent consolidation of “a single national identity, born of convergence on a dominant Malay culture” (as cited in Azam, 2005, pg. 9). The 1959 Constitution had significant effects on the curtailing of the powers of the British in Brunei. One of which was the British Resident’s post being changed to that of Resident and High Commissioner, retaining only the role of offering advice to the Sultan and the government (Jones, 1997). There was also a trend of filling more posts with local Malay Muslims (Horton, 1986) which signifies a more concerted effort to change the dynamics of the administration to one that was more Malay-centred. Once the Malays had been established, Brunei then put more effort into reconstructing its own culture. As part of her endeavour towards unifying her people, Brunei began to bring back customs and traditions and ceremonies that had once been once forgotten (Talib, 2002). This effort was most prominent in the 1960s and the most conspicuous was the coronation ceremony of the present Sultan in 1968 (ibid).

Symbols of the supremacy of the ruler, such as the regalia, the hierarchy of officials, the titles and terms of address and other royal paraphernalia as well as court ceremonies like the *puja puspa* and *ciri gelaran*, which highlighted the sovereignty of the Sultan, were also given prominence (Abdul Hamid, 1992 as quoted by Talib, 2002, p. 143).

According to Eric Hobsbawm (1982), traditions are invented to “inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition” to “create the illusion of primordality and continuity” (Edensor, 2002). It appears that the revival of these traditions and encouragement of traditional arts and crafts are rejuvenated for the same purposes. The affirmation that such practices are Malay practices can serve to unify the people of the nation-state and reassert their identity as Malays.

In his essay, *Melayu Islam Beraja Sebagai Falsafah Negara Brunei Darussalam* (Malay Islamic Monarchy as Brunei Darussalam’s Philosophy), Pehin Haji Abdul Aziz Umar stresses that the philosophy sums up a way to live peacefully in communities and as a nation, under the Malay government, guided by Islam with monarchy as the form of government (1992). Hussainmiya (2010) asserts that Malayness is “a fundamental component of the essence of Brunei Darussalam along with two other related components, namely Islam and Monarchy” (p. 67). Siti Norkhalbi (2005) contends that Malay is not just a race, but also an official language

that is “the main mode of communicating collective cultural values and virtues, such as solidarity, loyalty and respect, which are considered as significant attributes of the Bruneian” (Hashim, 1999 as cited in Siti Norkhalbi, 2005, p.8). All of this can be traced back to the Malay Islamic Monarchy philosophy that the nation adopted on the eve of its independence on 1st January 1984, when the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III decreed that:

...Negara Brunei Darussalam, with God’s Grace, will forever be a Malay Islamic Monarchy nation, sovereign and democratic, in line with the teaching of Islam of the Ahlussunnah Waljama’ah, based on justice, trust and freedom... (Titah, 1st January 1984)

Together, these sources outline that Malayness within the Bruneian context will always be connected with Islamic values. As stated earlier, the Malay identity is contested by various communities and often influenced by a nation’s priority. To some, Malayness can be seen in the dress code and in the customs of the people, and others have placed importance on the ability to speak the language. Since the film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) was a government-endorsed project initiated by the Department of Religious Affairs of Brunei Darussalam, and one that is undertaken very much as a sermon to its people, this paper attempts to show that the portrayal of the characters and the classic storyline of the good and the evil are in line with the message that the government wished to communicate to the people: embrace the Malay lifestyle and there will be peace and harmony. It is undeniable that Islam has influenced many aspects of the Malays’ daily lives, in terms of family, politics and economy. With the arrival of the British in the early twentieth century, Brunei might have made light of the importance of some of the Malay values. However, one might argue that in preparation for its independence, the Sultanate recognized once again the urgency of creating a foundation to unite its people by re-establishing and refining common values. This study hopes to explore the ways in which the film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) portrays ideals of Malayness. An analysis of the characters as well as the storyline will reveal not only Brunei’s definition of Malayness but also how Islamic values penetrate Malayness in the Bruneian context.

Analysis

The main character in the film, Azman, is the voice of reason as well as the vehicle through which many of the messages about Malayness are delivered. Throughout the film, he is the only constant in his family who upholds Malay moral values. As a Western-educated individual, he is described as his father to be a model child as he has managed to synthesise modernity with a dedication towards Islam: *Azman yang berpendidikan barat kenapa juga boleh patuh kepada ajaran-ajaran Islam?* [Despite being Western-educated, Azman is still able to comply with Islamic rules] which the film suggests is the ideal characteristic of a Malay. The opening scene sees him leaving a school where he is presumably a teacher, which helps form the impression that Azman is a trustworthy individual. The audience can hear the call to prayer as Azman is leaving his workplace, and as soon as he arrives home, he is seen promptly completing his midday prayer. Afterwards, he has lunch with his parents, where he first shares his concerns about the unseemly conduct of his siblings, Nordin and Noriah. In this first scene, the audience is shown the first aspect of Malayness in terms of the way Azman dresses. All three characters - the father, the mother and Azman - wear traditional Malay clothes with Azman’s home clothing of *kain pelikat* (sarong for males), the father’s *songkok* - a traditionally Malay woven hat worn for official and family functions as well as for prayers and the mother’s *baju kebaya*, an Indonesian-based traditional clothing, with a blouse and sarong, which is commonly worn by Malay women across Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei as well as other parts of Southeast Asia. Meals are shared, and as in the first scene, eaten by hand, as generally done by Malays. Hence,

quite early on, the audience is informed of the importance of piety and familial relations. Because familial relations are also considered important in the Islamic teachings (with there being an emphasis on respect for parents and elders, and also maintaining *silaturrahim*, which means the ties between people in the name of friendship or family), the interaction between Azman and his parents in the first scene show that the filial piety that Azman displays towards his parents is the desired behaviour that the government would like to encourage among young Bruneians. The urgency with which Azman and his father complete their midday prayers (as it is generally advisable to complete the prayer soon after the call to prayer is made) also indicates the aspiration that the government has for its people with regards to their commitment to Islam.

According to Milner (2008), “in the wider [Malay] community the stress is on refined (*halus*) public behaviour – and it is often said that there is a desire to avoid the crude (*kasar*)” (p.195). Through Azman, the film reveals further instances of this aspect of an ideal Brunei Malay. An example of this is during a house visit by Azman’s friend Hasan. In the middle of their discussion about how Islamic teachings would improve society as a whole, Nordin, Azman’s younger brother, walks in, puts on music on the gramophone and starts dancing to the music. This causes Hasan to leave immediately and Azman reprimands Nordin for putting on loud music in the presence of his guest. Later on, their father also sides with Azman and agrees that Nordin had crossed a line. Nordin’s disrespect towards their guest is seen as crude behaviour, and the scolding reflects the government’s sentiments towards such behaviour. It is also significant that the scene is a contrast between a philosophical discussion - where Hasan and Azman ponder over what society should do to improve their quality of life - and Nordin’s dancing - which is an expression of ‘Western’ influence. By juxtaposing these, the government sends a clear message about the kind of values that it would like its people to assimilate in their everyday lives.

The portrayal of Nordin is crucial for showing the type of behaviour that is denounced by the government. Apart from his dancing and crude behaviour, the film shows him celebrating his birthday lavishly, which is the opposite of the modest and humble nature that Malays are presented to aspire to. Azman, who arrives at the party quite late with his complete *baju Melayu*, is confronted by Nordin who mocks him for turning up at all to his party, as he knows that Azman does not like to be involved in his parties. However, Azman hints that there must be a different way one can celebrate such events without sacrificing one’s own identity: “*Majlis seumpama ini barangkali boleh kita sesuaikan dengan keperibadian kita sendiri*” [Events such as this perhaps can be adjusted according to our personality]. The live band, with their electric guitars, modern percussion instruments and trendy sunglasses, are a contrast to the musicians in the opening scene, who play traditional instruments, which further shows the disparity between the Malayness that the government is trying to promote versus the form of entertainment that supposedly does not reflect the nation’s identity. Such comparisons further exemplify how Nordin and Noriah’s lifestyle preferences are contradictory to the Malay lifestyle that Azman upholds. In contrast, Nordin and Noriah represent a refusal to uphold Malay values and respect Islamic teachings. The film is clear in its message that the behaviour of Nordin and Noriah is undesirable. Zainal Kling (1995) describes behaviour in the Malay community as:

...regulated by the traditional values of *budi* (etiquette) and *bahasa* (language). The term *budi bahasa* summed up the kind of proper behaviour an individual should display both in the privacy of family life and in public. This is much in line with morality (*akhlak*) as enjoined by Islamic teachings. To this extent then, adat and Islam are in complete agreement. (p. 64)

For over half of the film, Noriah and Nordin are shown to be getting increasingly wild: “*Noriah dan Nordin sudah terlalu liar nampaknya*” [Noriah and Nordin, it appears, are becoming too wild], an observation made by their mother after their house was sold and she was forced to move into a much smaller house. In yet another confrontation between the siblings, Noriah also reveals that she and Nordin have been spending time attending parties, which Azman denounces as something that is against Eastern and religious values: “*parti yang langsung tidak berunsur timur dan ugama itu bukan?*” [a party that does not have elements of the East and its (Islamic) religion]. There is also an allusion to the idea that Noriah and Nordin’s behaviour is too foreign and forgetful of Malay values: “*meniru pengaruh asing dan melupakan keperibadian kita sendiri*” [imitating foreign influences and forgetting one’s own personality] which Azman warns will lead to the destruction of society: “*masyarakat kita akan runtuh*” [our society will collapse]. Noriah, despite recognising the danger of being in the same room alone with a man who is not a family member (a behaviour called *khalwat* which is against the law in some Muslim countries), has premarital relations with Zul. Nordin also becomes more uninhibited in his partying which leads him to pass out in his car after one particularly excessive night of drinking.

The word “*keperibadian*”, which can be translated as identity, is repeated by Azman on more than one occasion. On all occasions, his reference to *keperibadian* is not distinctly stated as only Malay or Islamic, but is a combination of both. Hence, it is clear from the film that Bruneians identify their moral code as one that is inextricably Malay and Islamic. Towards the end of the film, Noriah and Nordin’s trespasses become more pronounced. As a way to warn the community against such unchecked conduct, their deeds are immediately punished: Noriah and Zul are caught in the act of *khalwat* by religious and police officers, and Nordin, in a hungover state, drives himself off the road, leading to a serious injury. This humiliation (Noriah and Zul are imprisoned and sentenced to community work, and Nordin is confined in the hospital and abandoned by his friends) act as a reminder to the audience and society in general that renouncing one’s own values will only lead to degradation.

It can therefore be assumed that the government of Brunei had chosen to promote the importance of a Malay and Islamic way of life as a way to preserve the nation and ensure its stability in a globalizing world. The decision was pivotal in the process of its nation-building where “royal supremacy [would be] sustained and an ideological framework that is both modern and Islamic [would be] institutionalized” (Talib, 2002, p.145). The observations from this film may help us understand the reasons for such effort and why the government would continue to promote such a way of life as one of the strengths of the nation and a fundamental part of its identity.

Conclusion

As previous studies have shown, defining Malayness is not a straightforward task. Malays from different regions have shown different definitions of Malayness as well as what they value as a race. Another challenge in defining the Malays is also because of the ongoing reconstruction of the Malay identity as well. Often, this task falls onto the colonial powers to help not only define but also unify the Malay people, as part of their efforts in introducing the idea of statehood (Fernandez, 1999) in their colonies. Brunei was part of that effort at the beginning of the twentieth century when its dying kingdom (Hussainmiya, 1995) was forced to seek help from the British. It was proven that the only way for Brunei to revive itself was by getting the British to install administrative posts and putting in place judicial and educational systems in its government. Luckily, Brunei was in a position to support itself after the discovery of oil in the 1920s. Thus, it slowly allowed the nation-state to focus on nation-building. One important aspect of its nation-building, as studies on Brunei have suggested (Hussainmiya, 2010; Noor Azam, 2005; Naimah, 2002; Siti Norkhalbi, 2005) was its attempt to establish a national identity

that will seek to unify its people. The formulation of the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) concept was one such effort and this paper analyses the early attempts of the emphasis on the Malay identity as presented in the film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968). This paper has argued that Brunei Malayness as an identity is closely connected to Islam and the analysis has indicated that the government of Brunei, through the Department of Religious Affairs propose that a combination of the two values is to become the moral guide for the nation. An issue that was not addressed in this study was a closer scrutiny on the values of Malayness in Brunei prior to the arrival of the British as a point of comparison to see whether they were different from the values portrayed in the findings. Further research might explore the impact of British administration on the Brunei Malay culture and its identity formation as a postcolonial state.

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