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Winning Hearts and Minds: Representations of the Malay in the Films of British Malaya

Traditional entertainment for the Malays in the Malay Archipelago first came in the form of the Malay shadow play. It was nothing more than light entertainment meant for the ordinary Malay to recuperate after a hard day's work in the fields. More light entertainment, this time with song and dance, then appeared with Malay opera and Malay theatre. When Malays stepped into film (beginning in Singapore in 1933), the same fare and presentation was literally transferred onto the screen. Song and dance became one of the pleasures that the Malay looked forward to in films and soon it became a sine qua non for every film.

Though Malaya and Singapore were under British colonial rule, there were absolutely no anti-colonial feelings expressed in any form in the narratives. If any Englishman appeared on screen, it was usually in scenes at nightclubs and were always relegated to the background. Narratives were only about the Malays with criticism leveled at the ordinary Malays, aristocrats, the rich or royalty. The scenario was not much different in Kuala Lumpur in the films produced by the Malayan Film Unit (MFU), set up by the British in 1946 to produce documentaries. The British were shrewd enough to understand the Malay's predilection for entertainment. For reference, they turned to the Malay Cinema in Singapore. As a consequence, many documentaries looked almost exactly like the feature films coming out from Singapore. Even the films that covered the talks leading up to the granting of Independence for Malaya were a construct, cleverly designed to make the Malays proud of their leaders who were visually depicted as being 'on par' with the colonial masters.

This paper will explore aspects of Malay Cinema in Singapore and selected documentaries of the MFU during the pre-

Independence period to see how the cinematic apparatus was utilized to represent an Orientalist view of the Malay and his milieu. by not only the British but, surprisingly, also by the Malays when they replaced the British. The paper will first briefly look at the film production scenario of 1950s Singapore to see the kind of Malay that was represented on the screen in feature films (first by foreign directors and then by the Malays who took over the reins). It will then look at a feature and two documentary films made by MFU to see how the Malay was represented in Peninsula Malaya by British directors and also a Malay director. It will be seen that, unlike the Malay narrative cinema of Singapore, the image of the ordinary Malay on screen was actually uplifted by the British, albeit for propagandistic purposes.

Introduction

British Malaya comprised of both the peninsula of Malaya and, to its south, the island of Singapore. Both nations have a shared cinema history, i.e., before the split in 1965 when Singapore became a separate nation-state. The first film to be made, *Leila Majnun* (Love-Struck Leila, 1933) was directed by B. S. Rajhans, an Indian national, and was produced by the Motilal Chemical Company based in Bombay. The story, a popular Persian tale of two ill-fated lovers, was a favourite of Malay opera, and in India, has been made and remade fifteen times. Its film actors comprised logically of *bangsawan* (Malay opera), actors who brought to the screen the same kind of over-acting and mock pomposity they were used to displaying on stage. As such, *Leila Majnun* was nothing more than *bangsawan* on screen. Audiences who were already familiar with *bangsawan* had no problems relating to the story and its characters that were accompanied by song and dance which they were partial to. Appropriately, the advertisement for the film emphasized the same aspects:

The first grand Malay 100% talkie: *Leila Majnun*. Numerous beautiful Arabian and Egyptian dances, songs and dialogues in classical Malay, well-known local Malay artistes.

(The Straits Times: March 27, 1934).

Like cinema in India, Malay Cinema attracted talents from all over the country, including Malays from Indonesia. But unlike Hindi Cinema,

it never functioned as a site of exploration of national identity or ideology. Notions of identity, nationalism or feelings of repression under colonial rule were non-existent. The narrative, theme and approach of Malay opera, and in the nation's first film, *Leila Majnun*, in a sense, heralded what Malay Cinema was mostly going to look like for the next fifty years. Its texts, are promoted by the culture; preferred themes that were familiar and that were emotionally driven. In contrast, the national cinemas of neighbouring countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, reveal many enduring films of national figures and their resistance to colonial domination. Though Malaya and Singapore had been under British colonial rule for more than two hundred years, no feature film (then and now), has ever been made depicting any kind of struggle against the British.

Early 'Cinema' of the Malays

A kind of cinema already existed for the Malays before the coming of film to the Malay Archipelago. This was in the form of the *wayang kulit* (shadow play), which made use of a white screen, upon which the *dalang* (puppet master) threw moving shadows by manipulating leather puppets. Sound came from the *dalang*'s voice narrating the story with him playing the numerous character roles. Music was supplied by a team of musicians who sat behind him. The characters depicted 'on screen' were from popular Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that were adapted to fit into the local context. Next to develop was the *bangsawan* (Malay opera), which looked to Indian and Middle Eastern stories and characters. Both these forms resembled cinema in their apparatus. There was the proscenium within which space the action would take place. Only basic acting skills were necessary and good looks, of course, helped. For *bangsawan*, costumes and sets were designed and many shows utilized crude but effective special effects. Having had the experience of being in and exposed to show business, the arrival of cinema then was not a culture shock for the Malays. Cultural legitimacy was accorded but ironically, cinema would eclipse and ultimately cause the death of these traditional art forms.

Many of the *wayang kulit* and *bangsawan* practitioners were illiterate. As a consequence, they developed prodigious memories – something that was to stand them in good stead when they made the transition to film. All they needed was an exposition about the characters

they were to play and a guide as to the dialogue. Under the direction of experienced film directors from India, most of the actors shone in their roles. Many began to receive the kind of adulation they had experienced in their *bangsawan* days, but there was an important difference. Now, they had a steady income. With *bangsawan*, they had only been eking out a living and so were glad to leave it for good.

Early Malay Cinema in Singapore

Feature filmmaking began in earnest immediately after the Second World War. The paradox was that it was totally Malay Cinema produced by Chinese entrepreneurs and directed by foreign Chinese, Indian and Filipino directors! Though Malays were made assistant directors, they were there only there to provide communication between the directors and the cast and crew. The foreign directors' contracts specified that they were also to write scripts and so the Indian directors (like the practitioners of *wayang kulit* and *bangsawan*), looked to India. The scripts of successful films in India were adapted. As the filmmakers found their feet, they began to look further afield and adapted films from other countries, among them, *Arabian Nights* and *The Thief of Bagdad*, and texts like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Faust*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Les Miserables* and *Wuthering Heights*. Narrative and stylistic influences came from Hollywood, British and other Asian films. The Indian directors also brought the highly-stylized acting methods from Indian films but this was readily accepted by the locals as it was similar to that seen in *bangsawan*.

Though the foreign directors were slowly edged out by local Malay writers and directors within a decade, the producers remained Chinese. As only they had access to capital, equipment, distribution and exhibition, the producers determined what, who and how it was represented on the screen. The foreign directors did not speak the local language and so had to depend on their Malay assistant directors to communicate with cast and crew. Any reference as to culture, manners, palace protocol and other Malay customs or traditions were usually done according to what the Malay cast and crew thought was right. There was no research or use of consultants. The locals' lack of education and understanding showed in the shallow depictions of characters on the screen. Characters were black and white, clichéd and stereotypical. The characters and storylines of some were copies of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musicals of the time that had a South Seas backdrop. Among these films were

Chinta (B. S. Rajhans, 1948), *Kembar* (S. Ramanathan, 1950), and *Aloha* (B. S. Rajhans, 1950), that featured sarong-clad women with bare shoulders; idyllic scenes of beaches and women frolicking in the sea as men head for the shore in boats, singing, and with a wardrobe of flower garlands and straw hats. And to top it all off, there were the obligatory songs with Hawaiian-style music and hula dancing! Anuar Nor Arai, writer and film critic, rightly remarked that “the ‘fifties emotion (in film) was very strong, but the backdrop was painted”, pointing out that the Malay world on screen was only a creation of the studios (Personal Interview, 2006).

Representation of the Malay in the films of 1950s Singapore

The 1950s was a time of turbulent politics as socialism was becoming a world-wide phenomenon. Some political organizations in Peninsula Malaya were declared illegal by the British in Malaya. Many leading figures fled to Singapore and became involved in literary organizations such as ASAS 50 that was set up in 1950, among other things, to safeguard Malay literature and culture. Singapore was part of the Malay World but it was radically different from any part of the Peninsula as it was a British colony and a strategic military base for the British. Malays from all over made a beeline for modern Singapore to find employment. But moving from the safe and familiar confines of the countryside to a cosmopolitan city created dislocation and displacement. Malays were initially disoriented but were forced to adapt themselves to the new environment because to return to their villages without having improved their lot would be to lose face. The Indian directors, to their credit, were aware of the new social milieu of the Malays and their attempts to negotiate modernity. This is reflected in two films directed by S. Ramanathan: *Juwita*, (Juwita, My Love, 1951), and *Kechewa* (Disappointed, 1954), and in B. N. Rao's, *Hujan Panas* (Rain in the Daytime, 1953).

All three films use nightclubs as their main setting, signifying the milieu of the modern Malay and the arena for their struggles with modernity. In *Juwita*, Ramanathan contrasts the values found in the village with that of the city. The protagonist, a successful musician, is depicted as one who has a village sweetheart but the female singer in his band schemes to have him for herself. During one of the musician's

sojourns to a foreign country, the singer sends a telegram to his sweetheart informing her of his sudden ‘death.’ The musician is devastated when he learns that his sweetheart has married another (a man who was, in fact, in cahoots with the singer). However, the film ends happily when the man appropriately pays for his misdeeds by dying in an accident, with the singer later being arrested by the police. In *Kechewa*, Ramanathan shows that life in the city for the Malays was one borne out of necessity and not choice. During a song on stage in a club, there is a fight. The female owner settles it and appeals to the perpetrators that their actions might cause the club to be closed down - which then would lead to the workers being unemployed. The perpetrators leave, mortified. In *Hujan Panas*, Rao depicts the protagonist as one who is talented in music and is also imbued with traditional values like the protagonist in *Juwita*. He is humble and gives thanks to God for all that he has achieved (the characteristics of the average Malay from the village). However, he is blinded by his love for a woman who is only concerned with her egoistic self. Even after they marry, the protagonist’s problems are not over. She rejects the baby borne to them (a very un-Malay attitude for the times).

A more realist commentary on Malay society and modernity only came about with the entry of legendary filmmaker, P. Ramlee. He made four films between 1955 and 1957: *Penarek Becha* (The Trishaw Peddler, 1955), *Semerah Padi* (The Village of Semerah Padi, 1956), *Panca Delima* (Five Pomegranates, 1957) and *Bujang Lapok* (Three Raggedy Bachelors, 1957). *Penarek Becha* was based on a Chinese story but through it, Ramlee was able to portray the reality of the ordinary Malays in Singapore in his subject matter. His theme (and one that was to run throughout his oeuvre), was one of how successful and upper class Malays were unwilling to help uplift the lot of those who were less fortunate. The butt of his criticism was leveled at characters such as the Hajjis, the Syeds, the aristocrats and royalty. The Hajji in *Penarek Becha* learns the hard way that the poor trishaw peddler that he had maligned, is more magnanimous than the ostensibly rich and gentlemanly young man he had placed his trust in (who ends up trying to rob him). In *Semerah Padi*, Ramlee gives a clarion call to the Malays to go back to the teachings of Islam. The protagonist is heroic and steadfast in his resolve even though he has succumbed to his base desires. However, in *Panca Delima*, Ramlee appeared to have lost his way. The Malay world was remarkably absent, giving way to one that was intrinsically Hindu. Hindu religious iconography such as cobras and

cows proliferated with characters also being cursed to turn into animals. The Malay actors were dressed in flashy costumes and acted as in a *bangsawan*.

Among Ramlee's best work is *Bujang Lapok*, done in a light-hearted style which was to become his trademark. In it, he depicts Malay in the city and how it tries to dehumanize them. Ramli plays the role of a door-to-door salesman but the Malay manager he calls upon is more concerned with his losses at the horse races and has no time for him. An elderly Malay is depicted as a drunkard, drug addict and gambler who almost sells off his adopted daughter. She is saved by Ramlee after a fight. With true village humility, Ramlee says that does not want to fight with an older man but circumstances force him take the necessary action. He then delivers a short sermon and the man repents, realizing the result of his evil ways. Ramlee's images of the Malay on screen were those of ordinary men and women caught in situations in the city that they were unable to negotiate. In the process, they discarded their traditional identity. In his paper, '*Not Just a Movie*': *The Historical Context of P. Ramlee and his Films*, Timothy P. Barnard opines that Ramlee saw modernity as causing Malays 'to be manipulative, untrustworthy and insensitive towards traditional culture' (2005, p. 190). Though P. Ramlee was more realistic in his treatment of the Malay and his milieu, many of his characters were stereotypes and his depiction of their milieu sometimes bordered on the idealistic. In another article, *P Ramlee, Malay Cinema and History*, Barnard notes: "(P. Ramlee's) representation of the village lifestyle, as if it is authentic, was an imitation of the colonial construction." (2006, p. 170).

But if P. Ramlee was idealistic in his treatment, it was probably as a means to achieve his ends. He believed that the Malays were essentially good. He was calling for change but it was not directed at the powers-that-be but at the Malays themselves; that the more important struggle was in changing their attitudes and outlook. This was what was obstructing their progress. They could do better and in striving to do so, could cope with whatever challenges that lay ahead of them. However, the Malays in the film industry must also be seen to be subjected to forces outside their control. Hamzah Hussin, an Executive Producer with Cathay-Keris in 1960s Singapore, states that to the Chinese producers, anything that was detrimental to their business objectives was to be avoided. And so, right from the start, the film directors were warned to stay away from politics and any anti-colonialist sentiments (Personal Interview, 2005). Even if they had indulged in it, the Head of the Censor Board (a Britisher),

would have dealt with it in no uncertain terms. The Malay workers apparently had no objection to the producers' directive since it tied in with their traditional and cultural upbringing. They were not to easily forget the oft-quoted Malay phrase, *Di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung* (accept unreservedly the norms of the place that you find yourself in). The Malay audience, too, did not question the kind of representations about themselves on screen. Toby Miller remarks in his Introduction to his essay, *The Historical Spectator/Audience*, "...(in this sense), the audience is artificial, the creature of various agencies that then act upon their creation" (2000, p. 337). It appears then that the audience of the 1940s and early 1950s was indeed an artificial one; a combined creation of the capitalist Chinese producers, the foreign directors, and the state (British colonial) ideology. The film texts went into the collective memory of the audience, reinforcing a conventional way of making sense of their world that was consonant with their culture. The texts were not intended, nor did they inspire them to new and different ways of thinking about themselves and their future.

This was the scenario in Malay Cinema in Singapore. The image of the Malay in narrative films was one that was constructed to fit the demands of the script - and its producers. Would a more authentic picture of the Malay then appear in factual (documentary) films in Malaya?

The Documentary Scene in Kuala Lumpur

The Malayan Film Unit (MFU) was set up in Kuala Lumpur in 1946. This was to be the first self-contained information unit in the British colonial territories (Hassan Muthalib & Wong Tuck Cheong, 2002, p. 309). British army personnel seconded to the British Military Administration set about training the locals to handle equipment and taught them the rudiments of documentary film production. While the locals in Singapore were picking up the trade working alongside the Indian, Filipino and Chinese professionals, the locals in Kuala Lumpur learnt by working alongside the British. Hard-working and alert, many of them went on to become accomplished film directors and technicians.

The documentaries of the MFU were screened in cinemas and through mobile units around the country. Many of the documentaries were teaching films aimed at improving the lot of the populace. Subjects ranged from giving tips on how to avoid disease and improve drainage to how to increase paddy yield. Such films, though propagandistic in nature, showed the British as being genuinely interested in the welfare of the

populace. In the early 1950s, film newsreels of the Malayan delegation on its mission to negotiate Independence for the country showed the pomp and gaiety of the occasion. Tunku Abd. Rahman, the leader of the delegation, and later to be the first Prime Minister of Malaya, appeared in documentaries being received and treated as a guest in London in a very dignified manner. He presented a very professional and cultured front. This manner of depiction in the British-made documentary films was, in reality, an orchestration (through skillful film editing), to create a benign picture of the British masters while portraying the image of the Malay as being one who was happy with his lot and seen to be progressing under colonial rule. Three of the MFU's films – *Abu Nawas*, a feature and two documentaries, *Hassan's Homecoming* and *Mission to Merdeka* – will be analysed to see how this happened on the screen.

Abu Nawas, Malaya's first Feature Film

General Sir Gerald Templer arrived in Malaya from London in 1952 to take charge of operations against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The MCP had, in fact, collaborated with British forces against the Japanese occupiers during the Second World War. After the Japanese surrender, the MCP made demands for the country's independence. The British rejected it and subsequently banned the MCP. The MCP's members then went underground and began their terrorist activities against the British by threatening their economic interests. Templer believed that to win this 'undeclared war' (dubbed The Emergency), the support of the people was paramount. John Nettleton, a former Director-General of MFU, told this writer that Templer formulated a psychological warfare to be conducted by the police and army and psychological operations to be conducted through the media so as 'to win the hearts and minds of the people' (Personal Interview, 1991). The MFU was one of the agencies roped in to produce documentary films that would help to achieve his aims. In its efforts to reach out to the public more effectively, and especially to the Malays, the MFU began production on the first feature film in Kuala Lumpur in 1954 called *Abu Nawas*. The script for *Abu Nawas* (the name of the main male character in the film), was written by an American, Tom Wood, and the film was directed by Cyril Randall, a director on contract from London.

No feature film had ever been made in the Peninsula and reference was needed. The writer looked naturally to the Malay Cinema of

Singapore. In the 1950s, almost every film had songs, especially after the first minute of screen time (most of the time, without narrative motivation). Taking this cue, MFU brought in two well-known Singapore musicians, Wandy Yazed and Zubir Said, who had numerous film music and songs to their credit, to write and compose three songs for the film. Two popular singers from Singapore, Nona Asiah and Ismail Mukassim, were recruited to play the lead roles. Hamzah Hussin notes that getting the two singers was a coup of sorts as Shaw Brothers in Singapore had never been able to get them to act in their productions (Personal Interview, 1999).

MFU's films were aimed at the three major ethnic groups: Malays, Indians and Chinese, and were in line with the British policy of identifying the three main races by their economic functions: the Malays with agriculture, the Indians as rubber tappers or manual labourers, and the Chinese with business. Jim Baker notes in his book, *Cross-roads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore* (2005, pp. 195-197), that British policies 'were meant to preserve the Malay way of life' and that the history of British policy in the peninsula was one of keeping the Malay population on the farm. He quotes Sir Hugh Clifford, a colonial administrator, who was of the same opinion: 'The goal of preserving the culture of the Malays was not at odds with improving their economic position. The answer: make Malays better and more efficient farmers'. He further quotes Sir Frank Swettenham, another colonial administrator, as saying: 'Education was to make the Malay children better farmers rather than offer them any wider views of life. And so in *Abu Nawas*, British policy was extended to the screen in the representation of the Malay and his 'destined' vocation. The stereotype that was created was not only in the minds of the colonials but was extended to their annual reports about the country and its people.'

Abu Nawas tells a story of how communist terrorists kidnap a Malay family to extort information about a map lost by one of their own men when he visited their house to procure rice. With the help of Abu Nawas (played by Ismail Mukassim), and the police, the communist hideout is raided and the family freed. The film begins with a young girl in school uniform sitting beside a paddy field (signifying that in spite of her education, she will ultimately be relegated to working in the paddy fields). The scene then switches to Nona Asiah (who plays the role of a teacher and the daughter of a paddy planter), hanging out her washing. She sings a song about how good life is in Malaya.

The scenario is one that totally mirrors the Malay Cinema of the early 1950s. In a typical Malay film, there would invariably be a happy song after the first minute of screen time after an idyllic scene has been set up. *Abu Nawas* was structured in the same mold so as to appeal to the Malay audience that was already familiar with such a treatment. A typical Malay film of two hours' duration would have at least six songs. *Abu Nawas*, being less than one and a half hours long, had only three. The first was a solo by Nona Asiah (signifying the individual in Malaya); the second, a duet between her and Ismail Mukassim (family / community), and the third, a group song as both of them march together with the Police Field Force (signifying the nation and its people), after the successful vanquishing of the communists. Malays were seen as supporting the British (the good guys), in the fight against the communists (the bad guys), so that the Malays and other races could continue their peaceful way of life. It was propaganda cinema at its best, and to cap it all off, the two lead stars, Asiah and Mukassim fell in love on the set and eventually got married. Even the British couldn't have thought of a better happy ending!

Representation of the Malay in *Hassan's Homecoming*

Hassan's Homecoming was helmed by director/cameraman, Mohd Zain Hussain (who was to become the most famous documentary filmmaker of MFU, and ultimately its Director-General). Shot in a very classical style and using the story treatment, it tells of Hassan, the eldest son of a paddy planter, who returns to the village after working in the city. He arrives to find his father on his deathbed. His family has brought in a local medicine man to tend to him instead of a doctor. Hassan is upset but it is too late. His father succumbs to his illness. Immediately after the burial, the relatives start to quarrel over the division of the ancestral land (a very frequent malady in traditional Malay society). Disgusted, Hassan decides to leave but is persuaded by his sister to stay. Hassan works the land but finds it hard going. He borrows money from the village shopkeeper but it is a hard bargain. He ends up with hardly anything for his efforts. A chance meeting with the village headman has Hassan finding out about the village cooperative that had been set up. Hassan is now able to borrow money with easy repayments. He and his family now have enough to eat and are able to live comfortably.

Hassan's Homecoming and *Merdeka Mission* are interesting studies of the use of Joseph Campbell's theory of 'The Adventure of the Hero' as propounded in his seminal 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Since then, Christopher Vogler (in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*) and Stuart Voytilla (in *Myth and the Movies*), have applied Campbell's theories successfully to the structuring and analysis of narrative film. Campbell's fundamental belief was that man's (spiritual) journey was a search for the basic, unknown primal force from which everything originally issued from. This primal force continues to exist in everything in the present and, eventually, everything will return to it. Man's salvation was actually within himself. All he needed was to embark on a (physical or psychological), journey and the experience would make him a better man.

Campbell provides a paradigm for the journey thus: A hero receives the call to go forth to adventure; initially there is a refusal of the call; his journey is then filled with trials, obstacles and enemies; he will meet the mentor who would offer him advice; the hero applies the knowledge gained and a decisive victory is won; the hero then returns from the journey with a reward or with the power to be of benefit to his fellow man. By applying Campbell's mythic structure to the story structure of *Hassan's Homecoming*, a similar pattern can be seen:

- **The call to adventure** – Hassan returns from the city to assume responsibility as head of the family after his father dies.
- **Refusal of the call** – he decides to leave, upset about the wrangling over the division of the ancestral land.
- **Trials, obstacles and enemies** – Hassan tills the land with great difficulty. He is forced to borrow money to buy seedlings from a scheming shopkeeper, and his ailing mother needs nourishing food.
- **Meeting with the mentor** – in a chance meeting, the village headman tells him of the village cooperative.
- **The reward / bringing benefits** – Hassan succeeds in making the land bountiful and reaps a good harvest. His mother recovers from having the right food and his family becomes well off.

In terms of narrative structure, *Hassan's Homecoming* is not much different from that found in early Malay Cinema. The Malay protagonist is identified with the economic function of the Malays (agriculture). The visuals emphasize his traditional role as a man tied to the land (paddy planting). When he sells his rice, it is to a Chinese middle-man in the

town (who will make more money than Hassan by selling it to retailers). The image of the Malay in *Hassan's Homecoming* is of one who must work hard to be able to put food on the table (as seen in the final scene when he and his family enjoy a dinner). Malay villagers gather to help Hassan harvest the paddy but the Chinese middleman is never part of the scenario. Similarly in Malay Cinema, the Chinese were never seen to be involved in the problems of the Malays and were usually seen to be shopkeepers or pawnshop operators to whom Malays would go as a last resort to hock their jewellery.

However, the structuring of Mohd. Zain Hussain's images were done in a manner never seen in Malay Cinema. Low angle, close shots of Hassan give him a heroic image as he struggles to till the land. Gilles Deleuze describes such shots as 'affection images', i.e., an image expressing an affective quality or power (1986, p. 97). For the traditional Malay, land was an important part of his life. If he failed to make it in the city, he would always have his land to come back to. Consistently repeated, and with a clear sky as background to signify divine blessing, these affection images of Hassan were designed to affect the audience so as to create empathy with him. The effect that is produced is consonant with the Brechtian premise of 'an emotional response of the emphatic type that requires the spectator to mistake the representation for reality' (Murray Smith, 1996). The objective clearly was to present the world not as it really is, but as it ideally ought to be. Malayan documentary films, like the social realist films of P. Ramlee, tried to play the same role – that of exhorting a change in the attitude of the Malays. But in trying to do so, they were unaware that they were promoting the image of the Malay that was artificial and one that was just a screen image.

Representation of the Malay in *Merdeka Mission*

Merdeka Mission was a record of the delegation headed by Tunku Abd. Rahman, Chief Minister of Malaya, to London in 1956. A 'narrative' structure was created to present the story of the mission to appeal to a Malayan audience that was used to such formats of presentation. In reality, it was a propaganda exercise. The finished film gave a clean-cut, positive depiction of the delegation's mission and the subsequent negotiations that were shown to be amicably conducted. It culminated in the eventual signing of the agreement to grant independence (Merdeka) to Malaya with both sides congratulating

each other in great camaraderie. As in *Hassan's Homecoming*, the paradigm of The Hero's Journey was employed:

- The hero leaves on the mission to the distant land.
- The nation sends him off, full of hope
- The hero confronts the 'antagonists.'
- He presents his case and is victorious.
- The hero returns from the mission with the reward.
- The nation exalts and honours him.

Merdeka Mission has many affection images carefully chosen and assembled on the editing table. The film begins with the Malayan flag (representing the nation), fluttering gracefully in the wind. Juxtaposed with this image is that of Tunku Abd. Rahman (the leader chosen by the nation). He is given a tumultuous send-off with flag-waving and cheering (anointing of the hero by the nation). The Tunku (Malay for Prince), is consistently seen in many affection images similar to the ones of Hassan in *Hassan's Homecoming* – low angle, close shots and being framed against the sky. No other figure is depicted in this manner, not even the British leaders in London. In fact, images of the Tunku in close shots were juxtaposed with that of Lennox Boyd, the principal negotiator on the British side, who was framed in loose shots. The spatial relationships favoured the Tunku, enhancing his image cinematically. Consequently, the image of the Tunku as a heroic figure came to the fore though he was surrounded by the colonial masters. His return to Malaya after successfully gaining independence for the country is greeted rapturously by huge crowds. He is driven in a car past cheering crowds in the manner of an ancient hero being paraded in a chariot. He is then garlanded by a non-Malay, a traditional Indian gesture that also signified the acceptance of a Malay leader by the non-Malay community.

Such images of the Tunku were consistently repeated in other documentary films, indirectly signifying the British colonialists' acceptance of the Tunku as their choice for leading the nation. As always, a voice-over on the soundtrack would describe and comment on the visuals. And as always, only a positive picture was painted. These 'constructed' images went into the collective memory of the populace, both Malay and non-Malay. The conferment of the title of Father of Independence upon the Tunku further enhanced his image among the multi-racial populace, raising his status to that of an almost mythic figure.

Epilogue

In 1957, the year of Independence, the stewardship of the Malayan Film Unit passed from British to Malayan hands. With the country now free, one would assume that a truer and more realistic image of the Malay would emerge rather than a colonialist construct. A look at an MFU film, *Mandi Safar* (Safar Month Festival), produced in 1962 and directed by Mohd. Zain Hussain, however, reveals a surprising picture.

The Safar month is deemed to be a month of bad luck among the Muslims. As such, many Muslim would write Qur'anic verses, immerse it in water and bathe so as to avoid any bad luck befalling them. Others would head for the nearest beach, run into the sea holding the leaves and bathe thoroughly, enjoying themselves in the process (this has since been discontinued as it was regarded to be unIslamic). *Mandi Safar* was a record of one such happening at a popular beach in Malacca. As in many earlier films, a storyline was constructed to make the documentary more interesting. Two groups of young people, male and female, from different parts of the country, head for the beach. The young men are in a car while the girls ride quaint bullock carts that move in a procession. It is an idyllic scene, one more suited for a film on tourism. At the beach, one of the young men is seen as being attracted to one of the girls. Scenes of the beach and the market that has sprung up to cater for the visitors are intercut to show the gaiety. At night, there is a dance. The girls dance with each other while the men watch. The two lovers sing, playfully teasing each other in carefully-worded love quatrains.

Elements of Malay Cinema of the 1950s run through this documentary: there is song and dance; a love story; Malays are again identified with agriculture and life is seen to be idyllic. The director, Mohd Zain Hussain, told this writer that the procession of bullock carts was specially set up for the shoot. So was the 'climactic' dance sequence (Personal Interview, 1977). The procession heads for home towards the end of the film and the girl is seen seating at the back of one of the carts, gently beating a drum. As the group of young men drive past, the male lover jumps off, gets on the bullock cart and takes over the beating of the drum from the girl. A wide shot shows paddy fields in the background just as the opening shot showed a traditional Malay house set amongst paddy fields.

Mandi Safar, purporting to be a document of a popular festival, was in reality, a construct in the colonialist mold. The Malay was being seen

through an Orientalist gaze, becoming, in the opinion of Christopher E. Gittings: 'an entertaining spectacle, exotica, that must be traversed, denigrated, manipulated to further the ends of empire' (2002, p. 8). But with the end of empire and Independence for Malaya, nothing much had changed. The master was new but representations of the Malay were still the same. The ideological state apparatus continued the tradition of promoting an image of the Malay and his milieu according to its own construction.

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References

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