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**MALAY CULTURE & MINORITY  
CULTURES: Performing Malay on  
*Senario***

LUQMAN LEE

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD/MPhil

2017

Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies  
SOAS University of London

### **Declaration for SOAS PhD thesis**

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## Abstract

The thesis examines the articulations of a dominant interpretation of Malay identity as observed within the Malaysian Malay situation comedy (sitcom) *Senario*, produced from 1996 to 2013. As the longest running sitcom in Malaysian broadcast history, *Senario*'s performance of a specific interpretation of Malayness embodies, among other things, the nuances of critical social and political issues across a period of 17 years, thereby providing an understanding of the relationship between Malay nationalist ideology and Malay social desires. While other episodes are referenced, primary to the discussions are eight episodes ranging from 1997 to 2011: *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, *Kantoi*, *Gong Xi*, *Ta Ti Tu*, *Salah Sangka*, *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*, and *Bina Semangat*. The thesis begins by charting the evolution of the Malay primacy narrative, its conflation with Malay Islamic discourse from a socio-political dimension, and their impact on Malay gender relations. The focus then shifts to developments within the broadcasting sphere where the bearing of the Malay and/or Islamic primacy narratives towards the development of national television is examined. Theoretical ideas and frameworks that will direct the close textual reading of the sitcom are then discussed. This is followed by the three chapters of analysis which will address in turn the themes of Malay nationalism and ethnic stereotyping, Islamic didacticism and Pan-Malay identity, and Malay gender relations. The conclusion discusses the overarching problematics of Malayness identified on *Senario* when located within a contemporary and globalized, 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysian society.

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## List of Abbreviations

BN	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> (National Front)
CMA	Communications and Multimedia Act 1998
FINAS	<i>Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional</i> (National Film Development Corporation)
FTA	Free-to-Air
JAIS	<i>Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor</i> (Selangor Islamic Religious Department)
JKIM	<i>Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia</i> (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
JAWI	<i>Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan</i> (Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department)
KKMM	<i>Kementerian Komunikasi dan Multimedia Malaysia</i> (Ministry of Communications and Multimedia)
LPF	<i>Lembaga Penapis Filem</i> (Film Censorship Board)
MAIS	<i>Majlis Agama Islam Selangor</i> (Selangor Islamic Religious Council)
MCMC	Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Commission
MPB	Media Prima Berhad
MRCB	Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad
NCP	National Culture Policy ( <i>Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan</i> )
NEP	New Economic Policy ( <i>Dasar Ekonomi Baru</i> )
NSTP	The New Straits Times Press
RTM	Radio Televisyen Malaysia
TV3	TV- <i>Tiga</i> (television station)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation



## Glossary of Malay Terms

<i>adat</i>	Malay customary law ( <i>beradat</i> – one who ‘has’ <i>adat</i> )
<i>Ahmad Spaner</i>	Ahmad, with the spanner
<i>akal</i>	reason, or sense
<i>akhlaq</i>	(Islamic) encompassing all which governs one’s disposition, behaviour, attitudes, actions, and values
<i>alim</i>	religious, or pious
<i>bangsa</i>	race, or nation
<i>bohsia</i>	girls with moral laxity
<i>bumiputera</i>	sons of the soil, or literally, prince of the earth
<i>encik</i>	mister
<i>ilmu</i>	knowledge, cultural and spiritual
<i>kampung</i>	village, rural
<i>ketuanan</i>	primacy
<i>latah</i>	Malay cultural elaboration of the startle reflex involving pathomimetic behaviour
<i>mak</i>	mother
<i>makcik</i>	aunty
<i>Melayu</i>	Malay
<i>Melayu Baru</i>	New Malay
<i>Minah Karan</i>	Electronic Lady
<i>nafsu</i>	desires or passion (associated with lust)
<i>nenek</i>	grandmother
<i>santun</i>	respectable, decent, well mannered, or conforming to accepted standards of what is proper
<i>semangat</i>	spirited, motivation
<i>tok</i>	grandfather
<i>wanita</i>	woman

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*Of course to forget the past is to lose the sense of loss that is also memory of an absent richness ... the art is not one of forgetting but letting go. And when everything else is gone, you can be rich in loss.*

*Rebecca Solnit (2006, 23)*

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

This thesis examines the articulations of a dominant interpretation of Malay identity as observed within the Malaysian Malay situation comedy (sitcom) *Senario*, produced from 1996 to 2013. While the work intersects with both the fields of Malay studies and television studies, the primary focus will be on *Senario*'s reproduction of Malayness.<sup>1</sup> Identity is a contentious issue in an ethnically diverse Malaysia and tensions are further compounded by the ethnicized nature of interfaith relations. Inter-ethnic and inter-faith conflicts have a long history that can be traced to colonial Malaya.<sup>2</sup> More contemporarily, the rhetoric of Malaysian social actors such as politicians, religionists, and ethno-chauvinist non-governmental groups, is increasingly polarized along ethnic and religious boundaries (Dahlia 2012; Daniels 2013; Farish 2001; 2002; Liew 2008; Lopez 2008; Ting 2009; Wong 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Yeoh 2010).<sup>3</sup> While the corpus of academic work on Malaysian and specifically Malay identity is vast, the breadth of work on Malaysian television is comparatively small. To date, there is no critical work that addresses these issues and the representation of Malay identity within television sitcoms.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis seeks to address this academic lacuna. By providing a critical study of *Senario*, Malaysia's longest-running sitcom, I aim to reveal how the constituents of a dominant form of Malayness are reconstructed televisually and how they further encapsulate nuances of critical social and political issues. A close textual reading of *Senario* here yields an understanding of the relationship between Malay nationalist ideology and Malay social desires. While I identify these

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<sup>1</sup> I employ the term 'Malayness' as defined by Anthony Milner to mean the entirety of tradition, culture, customs, ritualisms, religion, social order, and state of being involved in being a Malay (Milner 2011, xi-xii, 16-17). I thus use 'Malayness' interchangeably with 'Malay identity'.

<sup>2</sup> As suggested by Collin (2011, 52-53), Khoo G.C. (2006, 85), Reid (2006, 14-18), Shamsul (1996b, 17-19; 2006, 136), Shamsul & Athi (2015, 267, 269, 271-273), Syed Hussein Alatas (2006, 166-169), and Vickers (2006, 26, 28-29).

<sup>3</sup> Instead of a family name, Malay last names are patronymic. I will therefore cite Malay names under their given names rather than their father's name. This follows in the tradition of the works of many scholars of Malaysia like Edmund Terence Gomez (2008), Khadijah Khalid (2008), Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006), Marzuki Mohamad (2008), Maznah Mohamad (2002, 2004, 2011), Meredith Weiss (2015), and Shamsul A. B. & Athi, S. M. (2015), among others.

<sup>4</sup> The television sitcom genre will be discussed more critically in Chapter 4.

televisual manifestations of Malay identity and explore the potency of their articulations as the dominant national culture, I simultaneously foreground the associated political expediencies of the state's interpretation of Malay identity.

The objectives above are largely motivated by the various polemics driving contentions over the fluidity of Malaysian identity. While Malay culture has been the determinant for a national identity since the National Culture Policy of 1971, both Chinese and Indian socio-political actors have continued to challenge the fundamental assumptions legitimizing the Malay-bias (Ting 2009, 39, 44-45, 47). Further, developments within the Malay sphere itself have seen the emergence of subaltern cultures; "Other Malays" (Kahn 2006), "New Malays" (Collin 2011; Foo 2004; Halim 2000; Khoo G.C. 2006), and/or "hybrid Malays" (Kahn 2006; Khoo G.C. 2006), whose existence pose a challenge to the nationalist imaginary of Malay nationhood. One response has been a heightening of national Islamization efforts (e.g. legislation) that increasingly encompass all Malaysians regardless of their beliefs (Gomez 2008; Hussin 1990, 1993; Liow & Afif 2015; Ting 2009). Timothy Daniels observes succinctly that Islamic proselytizers – Muslim nongovernmental organizations, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS, *Parti Islam SeMalaysia*), and the UMNO<sup>5</sup>-led government – have exerted a major influence in the public sphere (2013, 105). However, political or religious discourse within the national and socio-religious framework is inadequate by itself in exerting dominance over multiple trajectories that emerge from the quotidian. Instead, the *Barisan Nasional*<sup>6</sup> government has in the past five decades used its available resources, including its influence on media, to ensure its continuous domination of the nation's cultural and political milieu (Foo 2004, 26). Malaysia's media and broadcasting facilities have consequently been steered by proxy owners who are closely linked to the political parties of the ruling coalition (Foo 2004; Mohd. Sidin & Amira 2010; Wang 2010).

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<sup>5</sup> The United Malays National Organisation, is the dominant Malay political party in the government's ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* (National Front). UMNO was formed in 1946 and has been in power since Malaysian independence in 1957.

<sup>6</sup> "The National Front", is the ruling coalition led by UMNO. It includes other smaller Chinese and Indian ethnic-based component parties.

Malaysian free-to-air (FTA) stations are all owned directly or indirectly by the government and UMNO. The non-commercial stations TV1 and TV2 for example, are operated by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) and are part of the Ministry of Information. All Malay, English, and Chinese-language, commercial FTA stations are fully owned by the media investment group, Media Prima Berhad (MPB)<sup>7</sup> (Media Prima Berhad Annual Report 2015, 49). MPB also owns three radio stations as well as 98% equity interest in The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad<sup>8</sup> (NSTP) (Media Prima Berhad Financial & Business Review – 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2012, 4). MPB in turn, is owned by UMNO (“No decision yet”, 2007). Including the state-run TV1 and TV2, this monopoly of Malaysia’s commercial mass media landscape by MPB in effect, places all terrestrial or FTA channels under direct or indirect control of the government, and specifically UMNO. Additionally, while there is strong viewership for all television stations, Malay-language stations consistently draw the largest audiences (Foo 2004; Mohd. Sidin & Amira 2010; Wang 2010; Mohd. Azlanshah 2012). UMNO’s monopoly on broadcasting thus situates television as a potential site for normalizing state-determined nationalist narratives. This can result in a totalizing discourse, foreclosing any possibility of alternative interpretations to this constructed imaginary.

Academically, UMNO’s direct and tangential ability to determine Malay, and by extension non-Malay, narratives has been widely documented in scholarship on Malaysian Malay films.<sup>10</sup> While much has been written about Malaysian film and cinema, there has been comparatively little focus on textual analyses of contemporary Malaysian television, with almost none on Malaysian sitcoms.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> MPB-owned television stations are TV3, 8TV, ntv7, and TV9. These stations broadcast in different languages. TV3 is a Malay channel, 8TV is a Chinese/English channel, ntv7 is a Malay/English channel, and TV9 is a Malay channel with Islamic content. There are no dedicated Indian-language FTA channels.

<sup>8</sup> NSTP is Malaysia’s largest publisher which publishes three national newspapers; the English language *New Straits Times* (NST), and the Malay language *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* (Media Prima Berhad Financial & Business Review – 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2012, 4). As an English daily, NST also has the widest circulation in Malaysia.

<sup>10</sup> Khoo Gaik Cheng’s (2006) book *‘Reclaiming Adat’* is one example.

<sup>11</sup> With the exception of Abdul Ghani bin Ahmad’s (2009) study on *Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu*, a Malay Malaysian sitcom that was produced by RTM for 15 years from 1985-1999. However, Abdul Ghani’s focus is on the sitcom’s stage management, discussed through his personal involvement in the production as stage manager. As such, it does not have relevance to our focus.



This does not in any way imply that works engaging with Malaysian television do not exist. Of note are works by Edmund Terence Gomez (1990, 1999), R. Karthigesu (1986, 1991, 1994), and Zaharom Nain (1995, 1996, 2000). However, their focus has primarily been on the medium's economy of production or historical developments. Earlier studies on actual content focus mainly on Malay television dramas and musical entertainment, due perhaps to both genres' early proliferation since the 1970s (see for example, Juliana, Wang, & Sharifah 2013; McDaniel 1994, 122-124; Noor Bathi 1996; Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 160-161). More recently, Malaysian reality television programmes have attracted some attention (Juliana 2010; Rosya 2011; Rosya & Morris 2013). When scholars do speak of Malaysian sitcoms, however briefly, they tend to simply give an overview of the content produced in the 1980s and 1990s (Khoo G.C. 2006, 110; Noor Bathi 1996).

There is at least one presumptive reason that the scholarship on Malaysian sitcoms that does exist, focuses on content from the 1980s and 1990s. This period marked a significant engagement between the state and television towards engendering a closer assimilation of its plural citizenry in its nation building exercises.<sup>12</sup> Sitcoms such as the short-lived *2+1* (Othman 1991), *Baba & Nyonya* (Noor 1990), and *Jangan Ketawa* (Cheong & Harith 1991), and the longer-running *Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu* (Othman 1991) are examples of the nation-building discourse that emerged from this period (Noor Bathi 1996). Despite these sitcoms' proliferation on Malaysian television however, the pronounced brevity of available scholarly engagement has consequently privileged other television genres in scholarly discourse. From the comparatively small number of available works that attempt a full or partial textual analysis on Malaysian television in general, I have found the work of Rosya Shamshudeen (2011), Rosya Shamshudeen & Brian Morris (2013), Timothy Daniels (2013), Mohd Azlanshah (2013), and Mohd. Muzhafar, Ruzy Hashim & Raihanah M. (2014) to be informative.

Rosya (2011), and Rosya & Morris (2013) engage with reality and talent shows,

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<sup>12</sup> I discuss some of the key initiatives in Chapter 2.

while Daniels (2013) explores Malay religious dramas. Research by Mohd Azlanshah (2013) interrogates soap operas, while Mohd. Muzhafar, Ruzy & Raihanah (2014) focus on Malay drama. In all instances, these studies locate their relevance within the descriptors of the Malay cultural and religious status quo through either a mixed audience reception and textual approach, or a textual analysis. When viewed collectively, two dominant overarching thematic structures emerge. I propose that these can be thematically categorized as ‘*adat*<sup>13</sup> and Islam’, and ‘patriarchal primacy’.

In examining the talent and reality components of the popular show *Akademi Fantasia* (Fantasy Academy), Rosya (2011) and Rosya & Morris (2013) found that viewers were reliant on cultural norms in their consumption of the text. While *Akademi Fantasia* (AF) was a milestone success in 2013, Rosya & Morris note that it initially garnered criticism from the authorities and civil society who viewed it as “potentially detrimental to the country’s moral values” (2013, 143). AF as a popular cultural text catalyzed a wide range of debates about national and ethnic Malay identity. For the traditional Malay chauvinists and religionists, Rosya & Morris observed that AF further epitomized “Western cultural values” and specifically, the “glorification of celebrity [culture], glamour and competitiveness” (2013, 143). All these were construed to be a threat to local cultural standards that would eventually result in a host of detrimental social effects. By the third season however, the researchers noted a change in this official perception. Viewers were consistently voting for contestants who idealized traditional cultural norms over those who were better performers but considered too liberal. Encapsulating this audience preference was the contestant Mawi who was presented as a “humble, religious, conservative Malay *kampung* (village) man strictly adhering to Islamic norms of personal behaviour, even when thrown into the world of glamour and celebrity” (Rosya & Morris

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<sup>13</sup> *Adat* literally means (traditional) customs. *Adat*’s centrality to the Malay community is described by Milner as being a “secret code” that bonds the village community, and a set of guidelines that determines “correct behaviour” (2011, 236). Zainal describes it as the “collective mind of the Malay peoples” and an “expression of [their] fundamental unity” (1997, 111). A brief outline of *adat* provided in the Singaporean ‘culture pack’ - ‘Gateway to Malay Culture’ (2013), is descriptive of traditional Malay social etiquette, rituals, crafts, and living environs (Milner 2011, 6-7) and is projected as a host of essentialist values. Syed Hussein Alatas calls it “customary law” that denotes the values “common to the Malay world” (2006, 136).

2013, 143). Mawi's popularity reached an unprecedented level in viewer support. This was a phenomenon that recurred across all subsequent seasons where contestants who remained true to what viewers perceived to be their Malay cultural roots were favoured by the voting public.

The researchers found that audiences enjoyed the “‘possibilities of identification’ with the ordinary people participating in these shows” (Rosya & Morris 2013, 144). Further, it was noted that audiences were actively engaged in the practice of “identification and distancing as they (per)form preferences” for certain contestants that invariably were those who were “genuine, relatable and authentic” (Rosya & Morris 2013, 144). As observed earlier, this viewer cultural negotiation was determined by the show's and more specifically, the contestants' cultural propriety. This complex viewer televisual negotiation implies a structured and pre-adjudicated cultural map that allowed Rosya & Morris to understand Malay audiences' perceptions of their own cultural identity, and the categories they regarded as representing ‘Malayhood’ (2013, 145). The researchers found that audiences were rejecting televisual practices deemed to be incompatible with “Islamic norms of modesty” and values, and were accepting towards those that represented a localized notion of Malay cultural and Islamic values (Rosya & Morris 2013, 148).

Not dissimilar in findings was Mohd Azlanshah's investigation into rural (*kampung*) Malay women's consumption of Asian<sup>14</sup> soap operas.<sup>15</sup> Azlanshah

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<sup>14</sup> Azlanshah does not explicitly name the Asian countries that are included in his sampling nor does he name the programmes that his interviewees refer to. Based on his discussions in other sections of this work, we can assume that ‘Asian’ here refers to Japan, Korea, Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines (2013, 649-650).

<sup>15</sup> Azlanshah is problematically liberal with his use of the category ‘soap opera’ for some local Asian formats that should more correctly be called television drama; for example, those from Japan. He goes to great length to provide the etymological roots of the term ‘soap opera’ and its relational identity to detergent manufacturers, including its historically gendered format (Mohd Azlanshah 2013, 647-648). Therefore, we can only presume he is referring to genuine open-ended soap operas, or telenovelas, while also including Asian television dramas into the same category. Within our context, I refer to the Latin American “serial melodramatic” telenovelas (Acosta-Alzuru 2003, 270) that have been dubbed in Malay. Telenovelas feature a “finite number of episodes (120-200)” that typically run longer than ‘regular’ television drama (Acosta-Alzuru 2003, 270). This differs from soap opera that is a “serial form which resists narrative closure” (Brown 1987), for its storyline has an “infinitely extended middle” with “no ending” to be anticipated by viewers (Fiske 2011, 182).

found that these *kampung* Malay women were thinking, intelligent viewers with sophisticated “viewing tactics”, who operated within their sociocultural boundaries (2013, 649). While soap operas have traditionally been regarded as a format highly subversive to the patriarchal social order, he notes that his interlocutors still subscribed to the “dominant ideological discourses of *adat* and Islam” and adhered to the dictates of Malay culture (2013, 649). Further, he found that these women were able to invoke the ideological discourses of *adat* and Islam as their cultural referents in rejecting influences that transgressed local cultural norms (Mohd Azlanshah 2013, 649-650). Even on notions of beauty, he posits that these *kampung* women subscribed to a traditional definition of “beauty as a *santun*<sup>16</sup> who is a devoted wife and mother” (Mohd Azlanshah 2013, 655). From this perspective, Azlanshah’s findings on the tactical negotiation of televisual text through an interpretive cultural and religious lens, are similar to those of Rosya & Morris with respect to *AF*.

What is interesting to note though, are the polemics directed against these *kampung* women. Television dramas from Japan, Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines were initially imported and promoted by the Malaysian government under the Look East Policy<sup>17</sup> of the early 1990s. Azlanshah notes that they were initially viewed as appropriate vehicles for modernizing the “mindsets and attitudes of the masses” (2013, 649). But when they became popular amongst women, he observes that this generated anxiety over their potential threat to the “cultural values of Malay women” (Mohd Azlanshah 2013, 647). Officially, he observes that these programmes were regarded as a threat to the “‘purity’ of Malay cultural identity”, and there were concerns that they would incite Malay women to transgress bonds of local culture and identity (Mohd Azlanshah 2013, 648). In particular, there were fears that Malay women would deviate from the “social norms of Malay *adat* and Islamic faith, two important elements that define Malay culture and identity” (Mohd. Azlanshah 2013, 649).

*Puteri* UMNO (the women’s youth wing of UMNO) urged the government to

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<sup>16</sup> Respectable, decent, well mannered, or conforming to accepted standards of what is proper.

<sup>17</sup> Part of Mahathir’s modernization effort that viewed modernization efforts in Japan, Korea and other Asian countries as being more compatible with Malaysia, than modernity in the West.

“curb the addiction to soap operas which deviated from the Islamic faith or propagated new ideas to do wrong, practice free sex or damage society’s norms and social fabric” (Mohd. Azlanshah 2013, 649). UMNO’s youth wing added that the soap operas would compromise “religious faith, cultural values and domestic duties of Malay women” (Mohd. Azlanshah 2013, 649). With these developments, Azlanshah observed that Malay women emerged as the prime target of the state’s “cultural and moral anxieties” in the nation’s “encounter with modernity” (2013, 648). It would seem ironic that the same government that promoted the importation of these cultural texts are now significantly vehement in what they perceive to be the effects.

These programmes were therefore not only sites for a negotiation of modernity for Malay women. They also became a site of contestation against a patriarchal force whose polemics are culturally and religiously accepted as the normative.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that this culturally and religiously constructed position of fragility and susceptibility to hedonistic transgressions did not extend to Muslim Malay males. Furthermore, what remains unarticulated within the research is the implication that Muslim Malay males were widely regarded as being better positioned to negotiate the indigenization of modernity. That this was unarticulated within the findings of the researcher - who is male Malay - perhaps implies the extent of which patriarchy has been stabilized as a religio-cultural norm.

Thus far, we have seen how the themes of ‘*adat* and Islam’, and ‘patriarchal primacy’ have governed the negotiation of Malay viewers’ consumption of televisual cultural texts. We have also seen how these themes form the rubric for an essentialist notion of ‘Malayhood’ that function as a moral or cultural high-ground. Furthermore, it was observed that this rubric provides a basis for an articulation of the hegemonic norms of Islam and Malay *adat*. More importantly, Azlanshah’s, Rosya’s, and Rosya & Morris’ research confirm that Malay viewers are largely consenting towards these hegemonic norms on the basis that these

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that this idea of the crisis of modernity, and the tendency to put fears about moral change to women is not unique to Malaysia. This similarly occurs in Indonesia, for example.

are unquestionable cultural and religious dictates. The works of Daniels (2013) and Mohd. Muzhafar, et al. (2014) engage more directly with these notions of power and *adat* within the televisual context. While Daniels' research is focused explicitly on Islamic Malay drama and Mohd. Muzhafar et al. interrogate the notion of power through *adat* in Malay drama, both explore the articulation of power. It appears that the same polemics, discourses, and positionality of viewers are consistently reproduced within all the works and related programmes mentioned thus far.

Engaging with television from a different perspective, Foo Tee-Tuan (2004) viewed the production of local dramas through a political economy approach in which he reified the links of politics to media and the resulting effect on the nation state and national identity. These links undergird his questions on the role and motivations of Malaysian television's gatekeepers and the veracity of their decisions. With a grounding in the policies governing the media industry, Foo interrogates the federal media controls that have been enacted by state institutions such as the Ministry of Home Affairs and RTM.

My thesis diverges from this corpus of work very simply in that no other study provides a close interrogation of *any* Malaysian sitcom, much less in locating Malayness within it. Moreover, while existing works seek to understand ethnic, socio-political, and religious structures through genres other than sitcoms, they largely do so through methods of audience reception (eg. Mohd Azlanshah 2013), focus group interviews (eg. Mohd Azlanshah 2013; Rosyah 2011; Rosyah & Morris 2013), political economy (eg. Foo 2004; Karthigesu 1986, 1991; Zaharom 1996; Zaharom & Mustafa 2000), and as consequences of historical processes (eg. McDaniel 1994; Lent 1977, 1978; Karthigesu 1994), all of which do not locate their focus critically on the televisual text itself. Most significantly, while *Senario* has been in production for 17 years – the longest of any Malaysian sitcom in history – no studies on the programme currently exist at any level.

My critical examination of *Senario* thus makes three important contributions to the existing intersecting scholarship on Malaysian television and in the field of

Malay studies more generally. This thesis is the first major study of a Malaysian sitcom and the first ever to provide a close textual reading. To date, this is also the only study ever undertaken on the longest running Malaysian sitcom (*Senario*) in the history of Malaysian television. More broadly, this thesis represents the first critical textual study of how a statist Malay identity can be constructed on Malaysian television which, as a framework, is transposable to similar studies of other Malaysian screen media. The findings of this study will therefore provide critically needed insights that will contribute to our understanding of Malaysian sitcoms, and the wider ideological processes of Malaysian television in general.

Presumably, the length of *Senario*'s production lifespan totalling 17 years is not incidental. The broadcaster's relationship to the dominant political coalition and the sitcom's ability to capture the essence of Malayness as understood within Malay popular consciousness – both cultural and religious lived experience – are variables that may explain its longevity. Notwithstanding the reasons for its longevity, what were, if any, *Senario*'s contributions to the discourse of 'Malay'? How did *Senario* encapsulate the general ideas and meanings of Malay identity of its demographic for which it was produced? Perhaps more importantly, how much of this encapsulation of identity was determined through political will? Before we even begin addressing these questions in the subsequent chapters, we first need to begin to understand what is *Senario*.

The following sections will provide an introduction of *Senario* that centres on the sitcom as it was conceptualized, as it was performed and received, and its many associative developments. Since no scholarship on *Senario* exists, the following literature is based primarily on information from interviews and/or conversations, observations from archival tapes of relevant episodes at TV3, and data from both TV3's Research Department and Media Prima's Resource Centre. While I spoke with many individuals about *Senario*, this section is primarily informed by my interview with Hisyam,<sup>19</sup> a former long-serving member of

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<sup>19</sup> The name Hisyam is a pseudonym. Hisyam does not say anything that is critical of his/her employer, or of the institutions that he/she operates within. Nonetheless, I have chosen to

*Senario*'s team who was involved with *Senario* for many years. My interviews and conversations with Hisyam took place between October 2015 and June 2016.

*Senario* is the title of a Malay-language situation comedy that was produced and telecast on Media Prima Berhad's station TV3, from the years 1996 to 2013. It began with the seven participants of the 1995 television talent show *Sinaran Pasport Kegemilangan* ([Spot]Light, the Passport to Glory) that was produced and aired annually by TV3 from 1994-2002 (Hisyam, personal communication, October 10, 2015; *Senario* in Person, 1999). Due to the talent displayed during the competition, the seven participants were given an opportunity to produce a television program of their own (*Senario* in Person, 1999). In June 1996, an introductory four-episode sitcom *Senario* started its broadcast on Media Prima's Malay channel, TV3. The original cast of *Senario* were Shamsul Ghau-Ghau, Mazlan Pet Pet (Lan Pet Pet), Farouk Hussein, Wahid Mohammad, Ilya Buang, Hamdan Ramli, and Azlee Jaafar.<sup>20</sup> The cast changed several times between the years 1997 to 2001, and by 2002, Wahid, Lan Pet Pet, and Azlee were the only three remaining core members on the show. They would be joined by other non-core members until the end of its production in 2013.

One meaning of the Malay word *Senario* is '*rangka lakon*' (acting framework/outline) or '*ringkasan plot*' (plot summary). *Senario* is also a portmanteau of the words '*senang riuh*' (easily boisterous) and presumably a play on the English word 'scenario', which references the scenario or situation-based comedy performed on the show. Hisyam recalls that the name *Senario* was initially suggested by actor Shamsul Ghau-Ghau during a brainstorming session (personal communication, October 10, 2015). While *Senario* was primarily meant for the title of the show, it also subsequently became the name of the

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anonymize his/her identity which also means I will not provide specific information regarding the time period of his/her involvement with, and his/her role on, *Senario*. While I may refer to Hisyam as male in the text, it is merely to facilitate our discussions. All ethical considerations have been respected and Hisyam is fully aware of my research focus. He/she has also agreed to be directly quoted in this thesis.

<sup>20</sup> Based on the archived episodes reviewed at the Resource Department's Ingest Room 1, Sri Pentas, TV3, between the periods of October 2015 and February 2016.



group when the cast released a music album alongside the sitcom. The group's first album sold approximately 300,000 copies, which in 1999 was among the top 10 highest grossing albums in Malaysia. This led to several other albums, and numerous live music performances and concerts in Singapore, Brunei, and many parts of Malaysia in subsequent years (*Senario in Person*, 1999). A subsidiary of Media Prima Berhad, *Ambang Klassik*<sup>21</sup> (established in 1995), was responsible for the management of *Senario*'s creative content distribution, sales, talent coordination, and events (Hisyam, personal communication, October 10, 2015). In the following excerpt, Hisyam provides a glimpse into *Senario*'s popularity at the time.

*Orang yang tengok recording macam tengok konsert Britney Spears. Serius. Zaman tu lah. Serius tau. Orang bergaduh-gaduh nak masuk sebab dia percuma. Pintu semua pecah sekali. Berlaku di Sri Pentas 2, recording tu. Pintu semua pecah sekali. Semua orang nak masuk. Senario tu memang best-lah, havoc gila masa tu. Sangat best, memori sangat best. Dia boleh muat dalam ... seating tu baru, dalam berapa... 300, 400 orang. 500. Tapi orang... gila punya tau. You tengok dalam ini kan, terpaksa pasang skrin dekat luar untuk orang recording sekali tau."*

The people who came to watch the recording were [behaving] like [they were] attending a Britney Spears concert. Serious. During that time lah. Serious, you know. People were fighting to get in because it was free. The doors were all broken once [or broken as well]. [It] happened at Sri Pentas 2. The doors all broke. Everyone wanted to get in. *Senario* was just amazing, it was havoc then [in popularity]. [It was] just the best - the best memory. It could fit ... seating was only, how many ... 300, 400 people. 500. But people ... [it was] crazy, you know. You watch inside [the studio] isn't it, but we had to install a screen right outside for them to watch the recording as well.

–Hisyam (personal communication, October 10, 2015)

Given these realities, at the height of its popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s, *Senario* was not just a television sitcom. Rather, it was synonymous with an entire spectrum of entertainment that ranged from radio music, television music (many music videos were produced), television sitcom, movies,<sup>23</sup> music concerts, and event performances, to national and regional road shows. In other

<sup>21</sup> *Ambang Klassik* ceased operations in 2002.

<sup>23</sup> *Senario* spawned 10 feature films – *Senario The Movie* (Aziz, & Aziz, 1999), *Senario Lagi* (Shamsul, Aziz, & Aziz, 2000), *Lagi-Lagi Senario* (Ahmad, Nor Aliah, Johari, & Aziz, 2001), *Lang Buana* (Johari, Lazizah, & Mamat, 2003), *Senario XX* (Ahmad, Lazizah, & Aziz, 2005), *Senario Pemburu Emas Yamashita* (Puad, & Aziz, 2006), *Senario The Movie: Episod 1* (Teo, & Ahmad, 2008), *Senario The Movie Episod 2: Beach Boys* (Teo, & Ahmad, 2009), *Senario Asam Garam* (Teo, & Hatta, 2010), and *Senario The Movie Ops Pocot* (Teo, & Ismail, 2011).

words, as a Malaysian entertainment group in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Senario* was institutional.

From the perspective of genre or format, *Senario* does not feature recurring narratives, characters, or locations unlike a conventional sitcom. There are occasionally two-part episodes but these, like other single episodes, are self-contained.<sup>24</sup> While TV3 promotes *Senario* as a sitcom that is performed live with a studio audience,<sup>25</sup> Hisyam suggests that stage comedy is a more accurate description (personal communication, October 10, 2015). In this respect, the wide range of narratives and characters also means that the type of humour employed from episode to episode varies. Then assistant manager of TV3's entertainment department Tan Guat Eyu (*Senario in Person*, 1999) observed that the non-recurring format for *Senario* was chosen at the time because it was a concept that was new to Malaysian television. With several other sitcoms and comedy sketches that were already popular with viewers on Malaysian television, the team was aware of the challenges that a new comedy series<sup>26</sup> would face in attracting the attention of viewers. Tan therefore reasoned that part of the strategy was to feature a myriad of scenarios – the 1950s, 1960s, and situations in old folk's homes. These were intended to “explore all the ‘different levels’ for a broader viewer appeal which would range from children to the elderly”.<sup>27</sup>

Speaking on the success of *Senario* in 1999, veteran Malaysian actor Aziz Sattar<sup>28</sup> (*Senario in Person*, 1999) observed that *Senario*'s<sup>29</sup> style of “overacting” was especially popular with children (*anak-anak kecil*) who were drawn to the

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<sup>24</sup> The only exception is the series from 2011 which had the title '*Misteri Bamboo*'. The narrative of *Misteri Bamboo* stretched across all 13 episodes of the series.

<sup>25</sup> Towards the end of its production (2012-2013), *Senario* featured several episodes that were recorded on location, mostly in rural locations.

<sup>26</sup> In this instance, the use of the term 'series' refers to a production title with episodes that may or may not run sequentially across a period of time.

<sup>27</sup> Translated by the researcher from the original, “*Dia menjelajah pada semua peringkat. Bila begitu jadinya, kita punya audience pun, daripada pelbagai peringkat. Kita dapat secara tidak langsung. Daripada kanak-kanak sampailah kepada orang tua*” (*Senario in Person*, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Aziz Sattar is known for his roles in the early black and white Malayan films in the 1950-1960. He is an actor, comedian, singer, and director.

<sup>29</sup> Here Aziz is referring to *Senario* the sitcom, their films, and the performing group, since there is also a little acting in their road show performances.

exaggerated, over-excited characters. This, Aziz reasoned, is why *Senario*'s movie spinoffs for example, had an overwhelming response from the public. Every single child who watched the movie, Aziz asserted, was accompanied by both parents leading to an exponential increase in ticket sales. In this sense, he suggests that '*Senario*'s success lies in its ability to capture the hearts of the children'.<sup>30</sup>

More than 629 episodes<sup>31</sup> of *Senario* were produced between 1996 and 2013.<sup>32</sup> While *Senario* is no longer produced, TV3 nonetheless still telecasts re-runs of old episodes. In 2014, *Senario* was awarded the *Anugerah Komedi Sepanjang Zaman* (Award for [Best] Comedy of All Time) at the *Anugerah Lawak Warna* 2014 (The 2014 Colours of Comedy Awards). As of June 2016, the remaining three members<sup>33</sup> of *Senario* are reportedly working on *Senario* Toons, an animated cartoon series slated to air on TV3 at an undetermined date (Siti Athirah, 2014). It is instructive that with *Senario* Toons, the primary demographic is now firmly identified as children.

The observed stress on children is important. Besides *Senario* Toons' obvious demographic, both Tan's and Aziz's accounts for example, reference 'children' as a section of the target demographic for *Senario*. This is curious, for based on my watching of *Senario*'s episodes, most of the jokes and dialogues do not seem to be targeted for the consumption of children – at least not those young enough to warrant the presence of parents at the cinema. Yet, these are the children referred to by both Tan and Aziz. The effects of media's influence on children within domestic and social environments, have long been the focus of scholars of media, among others.

Within the context of television sitcoms, studies about sitcom's effects on

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<sup>30</sup> Translated by the researcher from the original, "*Inilah keuntungan Senario, kerana banyak memikat hati anak-anak*" (*Senario* in Person, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Based on archival data at Media Prima's Resource Centre.

<sup>32</sup> On average, this equates to a total of 37 episodes produced annually for 17 years. A typical season contains anywhere from 13-22 episodes.

<sup>33</sup> Wahid, Lan Pet Pet and Azlee, are the only members who will be featured in '*Senario* Toons' (Siti Athirah, 2014).

American families have existed since at least the 1960s. More recent studies such as works by Judy Kutulas (2005), Laura Linder (2005), and John O’Leary & Rick Worland (2005) centres on sitcoms’ role in reframing the family. Through these studies, we observe the roles of mothers, fathers, and children being rearticulated in an exhaustive number of configurations of a household or family unit. Transcending generational levels, these idealized narratives of American sitcoms provide defining contexts that engender stability to the roles of each family member as determined by the American domestic and social status quo. On this basis, it would be natural to question how this same process works to instil Malay identity in the young with respect to messages/signs that are normalized within *Senario*’s text.

A similar area of scholarship that relates to children in Malaysia focuses on the embedding of dominant Malay ideology within the Malaysian national school curriculum. These demonstrate that within the Malaysian context, ideological links to the young do also exist.<sup>34</sup> Helen Ting’s work for example, proposes that Form Three and Form Five<sup>35</sup> history textbooks, among others, continually work to delegitimize the positions of non-Malays and non-Muslims as equal citizens while simultaneously constructing these communal groups as threats to an autochthonous Malay community (2009, 39; 2014, 200-213).<sup>36</sup> In this respect, both the question of *Senario*’s effects on the young and the related discourse of national curriculum is ideologically similar to the stabilization of household roles identified by Kutulas, Linder, and O’Leary & Worland above.

Hisyam explained that *Senario*’s stories during the time of his involvement were based on true life stories scripted from the writer-director’s conversations with friends, family, and also life experiences (personal communication, October 10, 2015). Nanovil Roy, who was then General Manager of Strategy and Business Development for Media Prima in 2004, recounts that *Senario*’s team was heavily

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<sup>34</sup> Another related discourse is the contribution of vernacular schools, national schools, and Islamic schools, to the increasing polarization within Malaysian society. These narratives however, go beyond the scope of our discussions.

<sup>35</sup> Form 5 is when the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) examinations are held. SPM is the Malaysian equivalent of GCSE ‘O’ Level.

<sup>36</sup> See Ting (2009, 2014, 2015) for detailed discussions.

influenced by local Malay pop culture at the time, for example the popular Malay cartoon magazine *Gila-Gila*<sup>37</sup> (Crazy-Crazy) (personal communication, October 24, 2015). Both Hisyam's and Roy's accounts reveal that while *Senario*'s themes are based on lived-experiences, and if Hisyam is to be believed, large sections of its dialogue did occur in real life, its fictionalized re-enactments on *Senario* necessarily conform to the genre's convention of stereotypes and preferred meanings.

There is a degree of creative causality in the producer's authorial power over socio-cultural and/or religio-ethnic myths within *Senario* that shapes the account. This is primarily due to its construction by the circular movement of producing Malayness for the consumption of Malay viewers, by Malay subjects constituted through a prior consumption of Malayness (their lived experiences). It is through this self-perpetuating cycle that myths are able to turn the fabricated into naturalized 'truth' that results in making the dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes, and beliefs seem natural, normal, self-evident, and consequently, an objective and 'true' reflection of reality (Barthes 1974, 206; 1977, 45-46).<sup>38</sup>

In this sense, the connoted ideological experience-vision of the text can be ascriptive. Without exception, it may assign and entrench essentialist interpretations to the Malay belief and value systems and fix them as truth. Its deployment on children should therefore not be overlooked. The ability of such myths in effecting the construction of Malay subjects in minds as young as children can have concerning results. In any case, given *Senario*'s popularity during the 1990s-2000s and the diversification of the franchise into a number of different media, it is evident that its potential to reach young fans was recognized by Media Prima Berhad. One reality foregrounded by the preceding discussion is the close-intertwined nature of *Senario* with popular Malay

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<sup>37</sup> American *MAD* magazine is perhaps the nearest Western equivalent to the Malay-language *Gila-Gila*. This Malay magazine was printed on newsprint paper, and featured black-inked illustrations within cartoon panels. *Gila-Gila* was very popular in Malaysia during the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>38</sup> The notion of myths and myth-making will be discussed in Chapter 4.

consciousness within a specific point in time. Like most constituents of popular culture, the nature of this relationship places an importance on understanding what it is that *Senario* communicates to its demographic. In interpreting the (sub)textual meanings of *Senario* that are communicated, I however, do not dismiss the relevance of my own positionality.

I am a Malaysian Chinese who was raised in an environment of Chinese culture and faith.<sup>39</sup> The year 2017 will however, mark my 14<sup>th</sup> year as a Muslim living within a Malay cultural environment. As such, I straddle a position between both cultures and faith while simultaneously not fully identifying with, nor accepted by, those with prevailing rigid notions of either. In this respect, I locate myself within the discourse of Malaysian identity, approaching it with an idealistic aspiration for a genuinely hybrid and organic national culture. This likely accounts for my detached appreciation of both Malay and Chinese culture and faith. This detachment however, does not mean that effort has not been invested in learning both.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, simultaneous to an understanding of both cultural and religious positions, I also regard their positions as tautological whereby these positions exist only because of individual and communal decisions that sustain them. I state these points not merely to clarify my position within this research, but also to explain my motivations in problematizing the re-constituted televisual performances of identity that provide a certain rigidity to perceived Malayness.

With these subjectivities in mind, I ask three broad questions pertaining to *Senario*'s performance of Malay identity that forms the basis of inquiry for this thesis:

- (1) What dominant narratives of Malay identity are performed on *Senario*;

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<sup>39</sup> I refrain from naming a specific 'Chinese religion', though here I am in fact referencing both Taoism and Buddhism. As practiced in Malaysia, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism have syncretized other, and each other's, systems of belief. Further, it is not uncommon to simultaneously subscribe to portions of several or all these religious teachings, since their syncretic nature allows for each to be complementary to others.

<sup>40</sup> I make the distinction between learning, and practicing or 'doing' culture and faith. The distinction lies in the difference between mimicry and understanding, the latter of which results from a period of learning.

- (2) Who are exteriorized through the differences hierarchized by *Senario* and how does *Senario* (re)construct this hierarchy of difference;
- (3) How does this affect the fixity of state-defined configurations in the nationalist Malay narrative?

At its core, this thesis seeks to identify at a textual level, the methods by which *Senario* encodes the dominant tropes of Malay identity. Taken together, these questions seek to unpack *Senario*'s role as a site that aims to affirm and resolve ambivalences within the process of identity formation by the Malay community. This is framed through the nation's power structure embodied by the dominant Malay political party UMNO. By focusing primarily on *Senario*'s significations of dominant and subversive meanings of Malayness as understood through corresponding political and popular civic pressures of the time, an understanding of the Malay imaginary as staged televisually, can be gleaned.

From a methodological perspective, the analysis of this thesis engages directly and strictly with the televised content itself; in other words, as seen by a viewer on a television set. For this reason, while I do include interviews with the producers in other aspects of the thesis' discussions, I have consciously excluded their input in my actual analysis of the television text. This process by which I interpret ethnic, religious, and political structures simply as they are writ-large on-screen is important, for it stresses the text's polysemic potential, allowing for a wider thematic exploration of textual meanings. Moreover, while the fore-knowledge of producers' intent is certainly insightful, it does not guarantee that these same meanings will be 'decoded' by the viewers' subjective viewing experiences. The additional ambiguity of relying on a producer's memory to recall their intention across what may at times be a gap of 19 years, certainly does not strike me as ideal. Finally, a focus on the text's polysemy of meanings also makes it easier to avoid considering only the interpretation of the producer or viewer. To this end, I have discriminately applied much of John Fiske's and John Hartley's methods of analysis that are outlined largely in the key works *Television Culture* (Fiske 2011) and *Reading Television* (Fiske & Hartley 1985). This is further complemented by applicable models of representation and

signification by theorists such as Stuart Hall, Levi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes. There is also a considered deployment to selected parts of Slavoj Žižek's (1989) transposition of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory that are appropriate to the Malaysian context of identity politics and *Senario*. These theories will be discussed more critically in Chapter 4.

The primary material on which my analysis is based – the *Senario* episodes – is sourced from Media Prima's archival department at *Sri Pentas* in Bandar Utama, Selangor, Malaysia where TV3 is headquartered. The content was accessed at this site between mid-November 2015 and late-January 2016. Based on archival data provided by Media Prima's Resource Centre in December 2015, there are more than 629 episodes of *Senario* that were produced between 1996 and 2013. The total number of episodes is presumably higher since there are gaps in the system's record log, notably between 2002 and 2006. This is to be expected since most of the content was recorded on analogue media. Their availability on the digital server is therefore dependent on the inherent difficulties in the task of digitizing an entire catalogue of episodes numbering in the hundreds. My access to the catalogue of work on *Senario* was also limited by the availability of the Resource Centre's already short-handed manpower as well as the availability of the viewing stations, of which there were only two.

While I could not make any copies of the content viewed at Media Prima,<sup>41</sup> I have since obtained copies of all but one of the episodes referenced in this thesis; the exception being the 2007 episode *Bina Semangat*. The episodes that are not sourced from YouTube are however, strictly meant for personal reference. While these challenges in accessing episodes have had an arguably limited bearing on the outcome of the thesis, it should nonetheless be mentioned since a conscious effort was made to restrict my discussions to the episodes that could be referred to and re-watched repeatedly during the period of my writing. This ease of access to the episodes during my formulation of the three chapters of analyses is an important factor, since a close reading of the significations meant that some

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<sup>41</sup> The chargeable fee of Malaysian Ringgit 600 per episode (pricing for educational purposes) meant that making copies of the episodes from Media Prima was not an option.



of the episodes' meta-narratives were always not obvious or understandable even after several rounds of viewing and note-taking. This is presumably attributed to my non-Malay upbringing and acculturation, for when cursory questions about certain Malay cultural references in *Senario* were posed to the Malay Resource Centre officers<sup>42</sup> who were tasked with assisting me, they could invariably provide a form of explanation.

66 episodes of *Senario* were viewed in total, translating to roughly ten percent of the system's log of total content produced. 42 episodes from the years 2001 to 2013 were viewed at Media Prima while a further 24 episodes that ranged from the years 1996 to 2000 were viewed on numerous YouTube channels online. Detailed information regarding the episodes watched is contained in Table 1.1. Since the total number of episodes (629) available was simply too large for even a quick viewing, the preliminary selection of 66 episodes was based entirely on a cursory reading of each episode's synopsis extracted from the server's archived metadata. While this is not necessarily ideal, it nonetheless allowed for a shortlist based on an approximation of content contained in each episode that might explicitly relate to themes of Malay tradition-culture, Islam, gender, and socio-political developments within their corresponding periods. A first viewing of these 66 episodes was conducted with a view to reducing the list to ten episodes based on three broad themes; four episodes on the theme of 'Malayness' for Chapter 5, three on 'Islam' and its conflation with 'Malay' for Chapter 6, and three on Malay 'gender relations' for Chapter 7.

The final decision on which episodes to include in the analytical chapters, evolved without any rigid predetermined objective aside from the criteria of adherence to the loose themes of 'Malayness', 'Islam' and conflation with 'Malay', and 'gender'. In short, the structure and content for the final three chapters of analysis would only become clear once I knew at a sub-textual level, what the episodes naturally articulated about the broad themes above. This seemed ideal given that I was to identify what *Senario* was contributing to the discourse of Malayness and how it did so.

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<sup>42</sup> There were observably no non-Malay officers at the Resource Centre.

Site	First airdate	Episodes viewed	Episode Titles
YouTube	1996	2	<i>Rajin Adik Rajin, Negara Chekpa Merdeka</i>
	1997	5	<i>Wad Kemalangan, Mesti Jadi Punya, Ta Ti Tu, Kubu Askar, Tandas Awam</i>
	1998	5	<i>Gua Tempurung, Raya ... Raya ... Raya, Ibu MertuaMu, Warong 60-an, Jejak Karun</i>
	1999	6	<i>Babak Sebak, Bayi Ajaib, Hait Nippon Hait 1 &amp; 2, Kelas Pengacara 1 &amp; 2</i>
	2000	6	<i>Gong Xi, Muzium, Pendekar 1 &amp; 2, Sedar Tak Sedar 1 &amp; 2</i>
Media Prima	2001	6	<i>KeranaMu Malaysia, Hijrah 1 &amp; 2, Fantasia, Semangat Yang Hilang 1 &amp; 2</i>
	2007	4	<i>Bina Semangat 1 &amp; 2, Siapa Sedap 1 &amp; 2</i>
	2008	6	<i>Jalak Senteng 1 &amp; 2, Hero 1 &amp; 2, Terdesak 1 &amp; 2</i>
	2009	7	<i>Wakil Kampung 1 &amp; 2, Samseng Kampung Dusun 1 &amp; 2, Siapa Besar 1 &amp; 2, Rezeki Melayang</i>
	2011	8	<i>Kantoi 1 &amp; 2, Dalam Hati Ada Taman 1 &amp; 2, Salah Sangka 1 &amp; 2, Kuat 1 &amp; 2</i>
	2012	7	<i>Kepercayaan Karut, Berpacaran, Nasib Si Anak, Madu 3, Anakku Bapaku Atokku Sazali, Penipu Zaman Berzaman, Warung</i>
	2013	4	<i>Puteri Gunung Stong, Sayang Anak, Cucu Cicit Tok Pagor, Be With You</i>

Table 1.1: List of *Senario* episodes viewed for research

It was obvious right from the first viewing that both *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and *Ta Ti Tu* needed to be included in the thesis. Both are very early examples of *Senario*'s blatantly didactic stance on the themes of Malay nationalism (*Negara Chekpa Merdeka*) and Islamic practice (*Ta Ti Tu*). This was significant since both themes were also fundamental to many different contemporary articulations of Malay primacy. *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* was selected due to its encapsulation of much of the discourse surrounding Malay identity between the period of 1980s and 1990s. The urban-rural and modern-traditional binaries, and the subtle hints of a "Malay colonialism" mindset, undergird the episode's narrative. Upon closer examination, episodes from 2011 were significantly more strident in their ethnic and religious chauvinism. As a result, three two-parter episodes from that year alone, *Kantoi*, *Salah Sangka*, and *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* were selected for

Chapters 5, 6, and 7, respectively since each of these episodes exemplified much of each chapter's thematic direction. The initial envisioned number of episodes-per-chapter for analysis was eventually revised. While other episodes are often referenced to nuance certain arguments, the core episodes that facilitate the discussions in Chapters 5 to 7 are *Negara Chekpa Merdeka, Raya ... Raya ... Raya, Kantoi, Gong Xi, Ta Ti Tu, Salah Sangka, Dalam Hati Ada Taman*, and *Bina Semangat*.<sup>43</sup>

The chapters of this thesis are thematically organized into three parts. The first, Chapters 2 and 3 review the literature and key arguments on Malay identity and discuss key details of the Malaysian broadcasting industry to provide the context for the later analysis of *Senario*. In Chapter 2, I track the evolution of the Malay primacy narrative, its conflation with Malay Islamic discourse from a socio-political dimension, and the developments to Malay gender relations that they effectuated. The focus shifts to corresponding developments within the broadcasting sphere in Chapter 3 where the bearing of the Malay and/or Islamic primacy narratives towards the development of national television is examined. The second part of the thesis, Chapter 4, is theoretical where the ideas and frameworks that will direct the close textual reading of the sitcom are discussed. The third part of the thesis comprising the three chapters of analysis, Chapters 5 to 7, will each address in turn the themes of Malay nationalism and ethnic stereotyping, Islamic didacticism and Pan-Malay identity, and Malay gender relations. The analysis in these three chapters draws primarily on existing studies of Malay identity, Malaysian inter-ethnic dynamics, and historical-contemporary socio-political developments. The conclusion in Chapter 8 discusses the overarching issues of Malayness that are identified on *Senario* when located within a contemporary and globalized, 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysian society. Possible extensions to this research that, among others, may move broadcasting policies toward greater assimilation of cultures are also suggested.

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<sup>43</sup> Full references will be provided in the chapters of analysis and the bibliography.

## CHAPTER 2

### Constituting 'Malay': Race, Politics, and Islam

*Biduk lalu, kiambang bertaut*

*As the boat passes, the water lettuces part only to rejoin*

–Malay Proverb

The forging of a national narrative is complex and nations continually work to integrate their people in an effort to construct a shared imaginary of nationhood. Within this process of nation building, Malaysia has had to contend with the melding of diverse ethnic communities and their heritages. The pivotal status and position of the Malaysian Malays<sup>44</sup> has since been enshrined in the Federal Constitution, paving the way for Malay socio-economic development as the primary national agenda. It is however, a position that is historically associated with the prevailing national atmosphere of inter-ethnic tension.

Works by scholars such as Timothy Daniels (2005), Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006), Anthony Milner (2011), Anthony Reid (2006), William Roff (1967), Shamsul A. B. (1996a, 1996b, 2006), Syed Hussein Alatas (2006), and Adrian Vickers (2006) trace these inter-ethnic tensions to colonial Malaya. This suggests that struggles for Malay identity (which extend to rights) have always imbricated the identities and rights of Malaysia's ethnic minorities. While the outcome of the contestations over Malaysian identity have since clarified with the nationalization of Malay culture in 1971, both Chinese and Indian socio-political actors have continued to challenge the fundamental assumptions legitimizing the Malay bias (Ting 2009, 39, 44-45, 47).<sup>45</sup>

Within political frameworks, national identity often results in ethnic/interest groups trying to control the state in order to render themselves as the reference point for the nation's cultural foundation (Williams 1989). This chapter will thus

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<sup>44</sup> Hereafter referred to as Malay/s. While there may be similarities to Malays elsewhere in the world, I refer contextually to the Malays in Malaysia unless specified otherwise.

<sup>45</sup> Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious nation comprised primarily of three major ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese, and Indians.

track the strategies deployed by the state to legitimize Malay primacy as a form of Malay identity. Of particular interest is the rhetoric of Islamism<sup>46</sup> and its eventual political conflation with the *Melayuisme*<sup>47</sup> nationalist framework. This overview of the state's influence with respect to both spheres of identity, is not merely essential to our discussions of Malaysia's broadcasting infrastructure. Its effects on quotidian Malayness are also key to our interpretations of *Senario's* subtext in the three chapters of analysis.

The first section of this chapter will delimit the Malay category by exploring its two broad sub-categories as constructed through official state lexicon. This will be followed by an exploration of the Malay primacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) position and its residual effects on inter-ethnic relations. Competing non-essentialist Malay identities, both envisioned officially and emerging from the periphery of social spaces, will be discussed in the proceeding third section. The developments catalyzed through both state-funded and non-governmental Islamic constituents will be the focus of the fourth section. The fifth section will explore how these issues – Malay identity politics and its close relationship with Islam – have impacted Malay gender dynamics. The developments identified in these five sections will finally be broadly theorized through the notion of 'Otherness' in the sixth section.

### *Categorically Speaking*

The academic literature on what comprises the Malay category is vast, and many in-depth studies grounded in both historical and contemporary contexts, have explored different variations of the questions of "Who is a Malay?" (Roff 1967, 244), "What is Malay?" (Daniels 2000, xx), "who are 'the Malays'" (Milner 2011, xi), and "What is the meaning of Malay?" (Barnard & Maier 2006, ix). Many scholars have similarly explored contending projections of inclusive and exclusive counter narratives of nationhood (for example, Farish Noor 2001,

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<sup>46</sup> Liow & Afif define 'Islamism' as a political ideology premised on the primacy of Islam as an organizing principle for government (2015, 50).

<sup>47</sup> Ting quotes scholar Ariffin Omar who defines *Melayuisme* as "the belief that the interests of the *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race) must be upheld over all else" (2009, 35). She refers to Mohammad Yunus Hamidi who in 1961, noted that UMNO's founding president Dato' Onn Jaafar said, "UMNO did not adhere to any ideology other than *Melayuisme*" (2009, 35).

2002, 2010; Joel Kahn 2006; Reid 2006; Shamsul 1996a, 1996b, 2015; Vickers 2006). In understanding the discourse on Malay primacy, two categories are important – ‘Malay’ and ‘*bumiputera*’ (sons of the soil<sup>49</sup>). While they can and do include other ethnic groups,<sup>50</sup> both are key in legitimizing Malay ethnic spaces within the national narrative to exclude those who are regarded as not Malay.

Malay is defined in Article 160(2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution, as a “person who professes the religion of Islam, who habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom” (2013, 152). This definition is made necessary since there are many sections within the constitution that deal with special Malay rights. Presumably because this constitutional definition does not address the criteria of ancestry – potentially admitting a person who is non-Malay at birth – there is a non-constitutionally defined category widely associated with Malaysian Malay called *bumiputera*. The category or term *bumiputera* has a largely ambiguous scope that revolves around debates over its inclusion or exclusion of indigenous<sup>51</sup> people and/or Malays. Since there is no genuinely conclusive or official definition to the term, the fluidity of its boundaries needs to be identified for us to understand how it functions as a socio-political instrument in indicating Malay socio-economic spaces.

Daniel Goh & Philip Holden makes a distinction between the Malay category and the wider *bumiputera* category by referring to Malaysian Malays as “*bumiputera* Malay” (2009, 8). Vijay Devadas alludes to a more limited definition when he describes *bumiputera* as the “majority, dominant Malay community” (2009, 86), which implies that Malays are the *bumiputera*. He repeats this distinction when he writes “*bumiputera* and other indigenous populations” (2009, 88). Aihwa Ong

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<sup>49</sup> ‘*Putera*’ is more accurately translated as ‘prince’.

<sup>50</sup> For example, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia’s definition of ‘Malay’ does not address ancestry.

<sup>51</sup> The indigenous people of Malaysia are the natives of Sarawak and Sabah and their offspring. The Federal Constitution in Article 161A(6) and 161A(7) provides a list of Sarawak and Sabah *Orang Asli* (Original People) tribes that are included in this legal category. This definition is needed since Article 153 provides a long list of privileges that are available only to those defined as Malays and/or indigenous. While Article 160(2) defines the peninsular *Orang Asli* as aborigines, they are excluded from Article 153. Their special rights are mentioned instead in Article 8(5) and Article 45(2). Informally, *Orang Asli* refers to both the indigenous people of Sarawak and Sabah, and the peninsular aborigines.

employs the term in a similar scope when she describes *bumiputeraism* as a form of “pastoral power that has been employed on behalf of the Malay” (2006, 80). Edmund T. Gomez’s usage would agree with Goh & Holden’s wider definition when he makes a distinction between “Sabah’s rural Muslim Bumiputeras” and “the peninsula’s rural Malays” (2008, 6, 7).

The ambiguity in the scope of the *bumiputera* category – whether it includes only peninsular Malays, or also the indigenous groups – can best be understood from the tenuous Malay assertion of indigeneity. Milner describes the origin of the term *bumiputera* as being unofficially formulated by the UMNO<sup>52</sup> elites in the 1960s to differentiate ‘Malay’ (who were Muslims) from *bumiputera* (the indigenous peoples) (2011, 160), though this did not preclude the Malays from being in the supra-*bumiputera* category. Mahathir argues that Malays are also considered *bumiputera* because the aborigines who were the “definitive people” did not set up states in Malaya, but the Malays did and thus “defined the core culture and set the conditions by which subsequent migrants were admitted” (Reid 2006, 18).

Vickers observes that in this sense, “Malay is meant to be coterminous with *bumiputera*”, denoting the “indigenous status of the Malays” (2006, 27), while Khoo G.C. notes that it also refers to “several other indigenous groups” (2006, 13). With the dual definitions of constitutional Malay and unofficial *bumiputera* each reaffirming the other, we can infer that this complex ethnic rubric has created an exclusive socio-political and economic space for the Malays that can potentially exclude even the indigenous *bumiputeras*. This is implied when Khoo G.C. writes that *bumiputera* was created “under the aegis of the NEP to reassert *Malay* dominance and privilege” (2006, 13)(emphasis added). Reid similarly alludes to an instrumentalization of this distinction between two intra-*bumiputera* categories when he notes that Mahathir finally opened up UMNO’s membership to non-Malay *bumiputeras* in 1994 (2006, 18).

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<sup>52</sup> UMNO - United Malays National Organisation, is the dominant Malay political party in the government’s ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* (National Front). UMNO was formed in 1946 and has been in power since Malaysian independence in 1957.

It is clear the category of *bumiputera* makes the distinction that while anyone can potentially become constitutionally Malay, only born-Malays and *Orang Asli* can be *bumiputera*. Moreover, the term itself – sons of the soil – implicitly holds the assertion that Malays are indigenous to the land, even if it is contradicted by the acknowledgement of being preceded by the *Orang Asli*. This sophistic emphasis on nuancing Malayness has, from as late as the 1960s, manifested into a variety of communally self-formulated categories ranging from *Melayu* (Malay), to *Bumiputera* (Sons of the soil), *Bumiputera Melayu* (Malay sons of the soil), *Melayu Muslim*, *Muslim Melayu*, and now simply as Muslim (Anisah, 2015; Milner 2011, 163, 209, 215-218, 220-223, 230; Roff 1967, 97, 109, 151, 183, 220, 244).

This range of categories can be regarded as symptomatic of the ambivalence over Malay identity, especially with the inconsistent specificities about Malayness from the state. However, it can also be argued that the state's authoritarian position in this context (even if the state's stipulations themselves flounder longitudinally), is made more relevant as the prevailing voice of 'clarity' in popular discourse.<sup>54</sup> This need for a range of identities – or more specifically, for a continual re-nuancing of Malay identity – is a fundamental assertion of Malay difference. As will be observed, this assertion undergirds the various performances on *Senario* that subtextually communicate communal anxiety over the position of Malay identity. Most significantly, this assertion of difference is the central overarching rationale for many (if not all) of the state's strategies for Malay exceptionalism, as distilled into the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay primacy).

### *Rise of Malay Primacy*

While the categories of *bumiputera* and constitutionally-defined Malay largely reflect the state's identity structure, a concept widely referred to as *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay primacy) undergirds their constructions. In this section, we will be engaging with the literature of three central developments commonly

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<sup>54</sup> Khoo Gaik Cheng's (2006) book *Reclaiming Adat* is one of many that specifically address this ambivalence of post-independence Malay identity..



identified by scholars as being pivotal in the rise of Malay primacy – the 1969 race riots, the introduction of Malay affirmative action policies, and the nationalization of Malay culture. *Ketuanan Melayu* is ideologically described by Ting to be variously understood as “Malay hegemony, Malay political primacy, Malay sovereignty [*kedaulatan Melayu*] or Malay dominance” (2009, 34). Mohd. Azizuddin (2009, 87) refers to this as “Malay supremacy” while Joseph Liow (2009, xi, 44, 244) defines this as “Malay primacy”. These notions of racial supremacy specifically undergird Malay-Chinese bicultural tensions and are in fact, a recurring feature in *Senario*’s episodic subtexts. It is therefore necessary for us to understand the history of these bicultural developments, and the role of UMNO in extending these bicultural tensions.

Several scholars of post-independence Malaysia are of the opinion that the tense relations between the Chinese and Malays are a consequence of constructed differences encouraged by the colonial administration at the time (Collin 2011, 52-53; Khoo G.C. 2006, 85; Reid 2006, 14-18; Shamsul 1996b, 17-19; 2006, 136; 2015, 267, 269, 271-273; Syed Hussein Alatas 2006, 166-169; Vickers 2006, 26, 28-29). Further, many view the race riots of 1969 as a culmination of these constructed differences (Case 2015, 40-42; Khoo G.C. 2006, 65, 86; Rosya 2011, 32; Sam 2010, 57; Shamsul & Athi 2015, 273-275; Yeoh 2015, 250-251). Ting in particular, proposes that the 1969 racial riots is one of two events (the other being the Islamization policies of the 1980s) that are key to the development of national identity in contemporary Malaysia (2009, 31, 33-34).

The May 13, 1969 racial riots between the Malays and Chinese can be attributed to the existence of several deep-rooted differences. Foo Tee-Tuan notes that Malay special privileges instead of a meritocracy-based policy system was one contention (2004, 82-83). Shamsul observes that the Malays viewed the Chinese as exploitative and instrumental to Malay economic backwardness by virtue of their monopoly on the banking industry and the country’s economy (1996b, 27). Reid observes there was the pervasiveness of the colonial Chinese stereotype of “inherently dedicated to making money by any means possible” (2006, 14-15) that underscored these dissatisfactions. Ting noted that these served to heighten

communal consciousness against the non-Malays for their “ungratefulness”, for not “knowing their place” and not knowing how to “give-and-take” (2009, 37).<sup>55</sup>

James Baker (1999, 333), Foo (2004, 83), and Ting (2009, 37) describe the 1969 general elections as the catalyst to the violence. The resultant riots lasted for a week, and were key to validating two consequent hegemonic national policies that were implemented in 1971; the New Economic Policy (NEP),<sup>56</sup> and the National Culture Policy (NCP)<sup>57</sup> (Hooker 2006, 150; Khoo G.C. 2006, 85; Marzuki 2008, 28; Sam 2010, 57; Ting 2009, 31).

Recognizing that “Malay socio-economic discontent” and “Chinese political and economic arrogance” had led to the race riots, Khoo G.C. (2006, 14) and Shamsul (1996b, 27) explain that the NEP’s primary goal was to redress the Malay economic position through an increase in public expenditure on special Malay programmes. Malay quotas were instated in all critical areas of economic activities including employment (Halim 2000, 139; Shamsul 1996b, 28; Ting 2009, 38) and higher education (Halim 2000, 139; Shamsul 1996b, 28), with the goal of achieving a 30% Malay equity in existing and future wealth (Halim 2000, 139). As Thomas Williamson observed, almost every aspect of public life “took on an NEP dimension, from university admissions to hawker licenses to home mortgages” (2002, 407).

The true impact of the NEP as a national policy for poverty alleviation – specifically for the wider Malay community – is widely debated. In assessing its

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<sup>55</sup> Chinese and Indian communities have settled in the Peninsula since the 6<sup>th</sup> century and more predominantly in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and are hybrid communities (the Straits Chinese, for example). When Malays reference the Chinese in Malaysia, they are generally referring to the significant number of Chinese migrant labourers who were brought in by the British administration, and for a variety of reasons, became more economically successful than the ‘indigenous’ Malays. These Chinese who had been domiciled in British Malaya for decades were eventually recognized as citizens with the nation’s independence (see Enloe 1967, Milner 2011, and Roff 1967, for detailed accounts).

<sup>56</sup> The New Economic Plan (NEP) or *Dasar Ekonomi Baru* was mooted as part of the Second Malaysia Plan of 1971-1975, and lasted for 20 years. The NEP is also popularly referred to as the *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) policy (Shamsul 1996b, 27-28) since it was primarily seen as an ethnic preferential policy.

<sup>57</sup> The National Culture Policy (NCP) or *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* of 1971 was implemented with the aim of creating a national culture through the assertion of Malay cultural and religious primacy (Ting 2009, 38).

results and political motivations, Gomez contends that the NEP was part of UMNO's hegemony, and its implementation was meant to introduce affirmative action in Malaysia based on an "ethnicised dimension of resource allocation by the government" (2008, 6). Resultantly, Rosya Shamshudeen notes that the "dramatic socio-political restructuring" led to "Malay dominance and widespread privatisation" (2011, 33). Ting reflects on the NEP's success in transforming Malay socio-economic conditions within a generation, but asserts that its logic of ethnic preferential treatment at the state and political level, served to entrench the notion of Malay 'special position' as a birthright among its beneficiaries (2009, 38). Shamsul though, questions if some non-Malays did not also benefit from the NEP, and considers the lack of scholarship in this area a result of an ethnicized production of knowledge (1996a, 492-493). Ultimately, it was clear that the NEP constructed a fundamentally contradictory framework where the policy aimed at de-ethnicizing economic function, by ethnicizing nearly all facets of it. The state's Malay bias was again reaffirmed by a second policy in that same year – the 1971 National Culture Policy (NCP).

The 1971 NCP sought to homogenize the socio-cultural terrain by nationalizing Malay culture. Both Khoo G.C. (2006, 32) and Ting (2009, 38) agree that its implementation guaranteed the preservation and hegemony of the Malay language, Islam, and the monarchy as the head of *adat*<sup>58</sup>. Further, Robert Milne & Diane Mauzy (1978, 370), Donald Horowitz (1989, 261), and Kua Kia Soong (1990, 230) note that its arbitrary enforcement by related state agencies with their own ideas of implementation, provoked incidents of protest and discontent from non-Malays. Rosya notes that in its stipulations, "even while underscoring indigeneity as a claim over other non-Malay races, the policy placed Islam as the foundation of national culture, thus essentially privileging the Malay Muslim

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<sup>58</sup> *Adat* literally means (traditional) customs. It is described by Milner as being a "code" that bonds the village community, and a set of guidelines that determines "correct behaviour" (2011, 236). Zainal Kling describes it as the "collective mind of the Malay peoples" and an "expression of [their] fundamental unity" (1997, 111). A brief outline of *adat* provided in the Singaporean 'culture pack' - 'Gateway to Malay Culture' (2013), is descriptive of traditional Malay social etiquette, rituals, crafts, and living environs (Milner 2011, 6-7) and is projected as a host of essentialist values. Syed Hussein Alatas calls it "customary law" that denotes the values "common to the Malay world" (2006, 136).

majority and marginalising non-Muslim Malays”<sup>59</sup> (2011, 34). This key stage within the nation as represented by the dual policies of 1971, was described by Shamsul as marking the transformation from “Malay dominance” to “Malay hegemony” (1996b, 29).

In the same year that the NEP and NCP were launched, UMNO published a book titled *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution). Communicating the central premise of a Malay society that was backward, lackadaisical, oppressed, and exploited (by other races), the book aimed at changing the “thought, view and attitude” of the Malays towards the “requirements of the age” to “acquire progress in all fields of life” (Syed 2006, 147). One of the sternest criticisms of *Revolusi Mental* came from the prominent scholar and member of the National Consultative Council,<sup>60</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas. He criticised the book’s deployment of the colonial construction of the Malays towards what he viewed as the self-serving interests of UMNO (2006, 147-185). Citing its “inaccuracies”, “lack of intellectual depth”, “ridiculous conclusions”, and “contradictory statements”, Syed Hussein Alatas noted that the Malays were characterized “in negative terms unexcelled in the history of colonialism” (2006, 150). He chastised UMNO for operating with “colonial categories” of “property, income-tax, business institution and the state” despite their “anti-colonial pronouncements” (2006, 154). These assessments led him to question UMNO’s “vested interest” in degrading the Malays (2006, 154). Syed Hussein Alatas proposed three explanations, the most elaborate being to justify the use of public funds for an improvement of the Malays that ultimately will only be beneficial to some Malays in power (2006, 154-155). Further, he suggests that the degradation of *Revolusi Mental* prepared the climate for *The Second Malaysia Plan’s*<sup>61</sup> eventual failure. In that instance, the government would be absolved from all blame, and the blame would be on this

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<sup>59</sup> It is instructive that Rosya takes issue with the re-affirmation of the Malay-Muslim exclusion of non-Muslim Malays, but not the marginalization of non-Malay Malaysians. Further, the polysemic category of ‘non-Muslim Malay’ is employed, though she does not explain its polysemy.

<sup>60</sup> The National Consultative Council was part of the National Operations Council (NOC). These two councils were established at the end of the 1969 riots as a national emergency plan to formulate and study proposals to resolve the issues that led to the riots. During their operations, parliament’s executive power was suspended and handed to the NOC (Sam 2010, 57).

<sup>61</sup> *The Second Malaysia Plan* (1971-1975) aimed at creating a Malay entrepreneurial class in 20 years’ time, when 30% of the nation’s business and industry would be owned and run by Malays (Syed 2006, 180). The NEP and NCP were part of this plan.

constructed Malay character instead (2006, 180-181). Such criticisms were similarly directed toward the arguments proposed by Mahathir Mohammad in his 1970 book *The Malay Dilemma*.

Mahathir Mohammad is Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister who held office for 22 years from 1981 to 2003. Written a decade prior to his premiership, the book was regarded by Syed Hussein Alatas as a belligerent attempt at explaining the subordinate position of the Malays (when compared to the Chinese). Mahathir's arguments are predicated on an innate biological or hereditary Malay weakness which was construed by Syed Hussein Alatas to be more extreme than *Revolusi Mental* in its degradation of the Malays (2006, 155). While Syed Hussein Alatas admits that the arguments in *The Malay Dilemma* represents a "reasoned defence of the constitutional protection of the Malays", it nonetheless constructs a Malay character similar in tone to that contained in *Revolusi Mental* (2006, 159).

Drawing similarities to *Revolusi Mental*'s stress on the predicament of the Malays to legitimize elementary colonial capitalist ideology, Syed Hussein Alatas suggests that Mahathir also sought to validate the advancement of some Malays who were in power and Chinese businesses that were closely associated with the Malay governing elite (2006, 155, 163). His accusation of Mahathir has since been supported by more contemporary scholars of post-NEP Malaysia such as Edmund Gomez (1990; 1999; 2008), Edmund Gomez & Jomo K. Sundaram (1999), and Shamsul (1996b), to name but three. This notion was further strengthened by Mahathir's support for feudalism and feudal leadership in his book, both of which he proposes can engender an "orderly law-abiding society" that responds well to "dynamism at the top" (leaders) (Syed 2006, 163). Syed Hussein Alatas' responses to Mahathir's book were prescient. Under Mahathir's premiership, the fundamental top-down leadership and colonial capitalist framework would later be mirrored in national projects like the Malaysia Incorporated initiative,<sup>62</sup> and the corporate ownership structure of the

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<sup>62</sup> Discussed later in this chapter.

television station TV3.<sup>63</sup> This framework was similarly observed in many corporations during the national privatization policies that started in the 1980s, all of which were identified by, among others, Gomez & Jomo's (1999) study of Malaysia's political economy.

Curiously, Milner writes about the same 1971 *Revolusi Mental* in his book *The Malays* (2011) without addressing Syed Hussein Alatas' insightful and structured criticisms nor does he mention its reflection of colonial legacy, or any relational conceptual link to 'The Malay Dilemma' (2011, 207). Instead, Milner implies that the 1971 ruling class' initiatives are a legacy of 7<sup>th</sup> century Sri Vijaya<sup>64</sup> and old Melaka<sup>65</sup> ideological leadership (2011, 207-208), perhaps qualified by Mahathir's fixation on feudal leadership. What both Syed Hussein Alatas and Milner agree on though, is that the Malays have for centuries been subjected to this form of ideological engineering (Milner 2011, 207-209; Syed 2006, 166-169).

Thus far, the literature suggests several things about the ideological leadership of UMNO and the national constructions of Malay identity. The UMNO-dominated ruling class is described as having retained the colonial trajectory of governance in Malaysia, including an advancement or extension of the colonial enactments of Malay special rights.<sup>66</sup> Malay privileges were not a new phenomenon introduced by the NEP or UMNO. Shamsul, Roff, Collin, Reid, and Syed Hussein Alatas all note that they have existed since British Malaya.<sup>67</sup> Further, with the exception of Roff, whose work was published prior to the NEP, all describe the results as being longitudinally detrimental for the Malays in that they either constricted an otherwise natural evolution of economic communal

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<sup>63</sup> Discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>64</sup> Sri Vijaya was a Hindu empire that held sway in parts of the Malayan Peninsula and Sumatra during the 7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries (Milner 2011, 25).

<sup>65</sup> Milner notes that the 15<sup>th</sup> century sultanate of Melaka was a renowned entrepot in the Peninsula and is often viewed as the "golden age of Malay consciousness" (2011, 26).

<sup>66</sup> In its implementation, colonial enactments and the retention of Malay rights did not necessarily translate to a marked improvement in communal conditions for a variety of reasons (see Milner 2011, and Roff 1967).

<sup>67</sup> Examples are The Malay Reservation Enactment 1913 (Collin 2011, 35; Reid 2006, 15; Shamsul 2015, 271), the Malay schooling scheme that established the Kuala Kangsar Malay College in 1909 (Reid 2006, 15; Roff 1967, 100-101,104) and the 1910 'Scheme for the Employment of Malays' (Roff 1967, 104).

growth, or that they distorted the nature of the Malays (Collin 2011, 34-35; Reid 2006, 14-15; Shamsul 2006, 137; Syed 2006; Shamsul & Athi 2015, 271-273). Syed Hussein Alatas, who was closely involved in formulating post-1969 legislation, suggests that the UMNO government, in deploying reinterpreted colonial policies and categories, did so for self-serving interests at the expense of further emancipating the Malays.

Milner suggests that the assertion of Malay primacy and the need to preserve the definitive traits of Malay identity, reflects an anxiety about the community's potential disappearance from the world (2011, 15-16, 131-132, 186, 220, 237-238). If this is true, it is a condition that is not exclusive to the Malay community. Khoo Boo Teik's (2013) analysis of Chinese politics within Southeast Asia uncovers similar anxieties mobilising Malaysian Chinese interest in politics. As such, both Milner's and Khoo B.T.'s findings underscore Enloe's observation that both ethnic groups formulate their political goals on the basis of their anxieties regarding the potential political aspirations of the Malay Muslims (1967, 51).

What are the political aspirations of the Malay Muslims, and have they translated to the quotidian? As we have explored previously, developments motivated by irredentist or ethnic aspirations are not new to the socio-political milieu in Malaysia. There are however, recent examples of political rhetoric in the quotidian that are potentially indicative of these ethnicized aspirations. A most exemplary case is the protectionist trajectory invoked by incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak who declared on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2015, "[w]ithout UMNO, the Malays will be the bastard (amongst other races). I cannot imagine the fate of Malays without UMNO".<sup>68</sup> Prime Minister Najib repeated the sentiment on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2015 ("Jawatan PM, Presiden," 2015), and again on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2015 ("Orang Melayu akan," 2015). A similar rhetoric was echoed by UMNO Supreme Council member Ismail Sabri Yaakob on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2015, who reminded the

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<sup>68</sup> Translated from "*Kalau tiada Umno maka 'terbangsat' lah bangsa Melayu. Saya tidak dapat bayangkan nasib bangsa Melayu tanpa Umno*" ("3 juta ahli," 2015). *Bangsat* is a crude word which usually means 'bastard', though it can also mean 'downtrodden', 'backward', or 'destitute'. The addition of '*ter*' can either mean 'highly'/'very' *bangsat*, or a passive meaning where *terbangsat* means 'bastardized'.

Malays and *bumiputeras* to keep UMNO in power if they did not want others<sup>69</sup> to rule the country (“No choice but Umno,” 2015).<sup>70</sup>

These are very explicitly expressed, yet old, recursive strategies designed as reminders for UMNO’s role in prioritizing Malay interest, presumably evidenced through the outcomes of the NEP, NCP, and UMNO’s suppression of other claimants to primacy. As demonstrated, paternal UMNO’s self-constructed position as the protector of Malay rights, identity, and status is anchored by its successful repression of other claimants to primacy. The promise to preserve Malay rights, identity, and position, translates to a guarantee for communal entitlement to privileges accorded in the Federal Constitution, the entrenchment of the Malay tenets, and the right to further the Malay cause at the expense of minority groups.

#### *Urbanism, Modernity, and the New Malays*

The leadership of ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad in the 1980s and 1990s was largely characterized by a national push towards industrialization and modernity that came in the guise of the 1983 Malaysia Incorporated Policy. The developments of this period are important to our analysis not least because *Senario* was founded during this period. Furthermore, *Senario* achieved its peak popularity during the Mahathir years, and thus a large number of episodes were produced during this period. Many of the themes discussed in this section, including gender relationships, are thus present in the episodes of corresponding years.

The 1983 Malaysia Incorporated Policy, or “Malaysia Inc.” as it is popularly known, is described by Williamson as fundamentally a program of corporate nation building that achieved a form of non-indigenised economic nationalism

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<sup>69</sup> Presumably other races.

<sup>70</sup> These are all referenced from news reports since I have yet to encounter these specific declarations in current academic discussions. There is partisan bias with media channels, but a politician/individual’s right of reply does counter any such bias. “The Sun apologizes,” (2014), and “Under-fire Hamid,” (2014) are two such examples where socio-political actors have publicly challenged the accuracy of news reports, or for quoting them out of context. Furthermore, as an indicator of communal mindset, these are better examples of the prevailing quotidian discourse, and how UMNO shapes its discursive terrain.



that momentarily transcended ethnic boundaries (2002, 409). William Case (2015, 43), Williamson (2002, 407-408), and Yeoh Seng Guan (2015, 251) note that though it was not entirely supraethnic, Mahathir's rhetorical strategy was focused on the ideological construction of a new nation or a national 'race'. This new *Bangsa Malaysia*<sup>71</sup> would include the re-imagining of the Malays as modern *Melayu Baru*<sup>72</sup> (New [modern] Malay) in the nation's development map towards *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020); a vision of an industrialized, urbanized, and modern Malaysia (Case 2015, 43; Kahn 2006, 90; Lopez 2015, 333; Milner 2011, 161, 208-210; Williamson 2002, 403, 410-413; Yeoh 2015, 252-257).

Williamson views *Bangsa Malaysia* as having galvanized immense support from all ethnicities since "in place of politics, the defining quality of Bangsa Malaysia is prosperity and the affluence of Malaysia in 2020" (2002, 412). He suggests that it provided the basis for a national identity that could be founded on a "shared destiny, common identity, and resilience" (2002, 412). By contrast, Mohd. Marzuki, Devadas and Ting contend that the rhetoric of a national modernization effort that was un-indigenised, had no real political volition. They argue that in reality, the hegemonic UMNO-*bumiputeraism* machinery was still active in the practice and assertion of ethno-communal primacy that went unabated, simultaneously with the national initiatives of modernization (Devadas 2009, 90-91; Marzuki 2008, 35-36; Ting 2009, 39-40, 44-45).

Greg Felker (2015, 138) and Williamson (2002, 410-411) regard the (arguably) remarkable success of Malaysia Inc. and *Bangsa Malaysia* as being partly attributable to the Asian economic boom of the 1990s. Further, they observed that it quickly fell apart in the period of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (Felker 2015, 138; Marzuki 2008, 35; Williamson 2002, 415). In the aftermath of the economic meltdown, Felker noted that part of the government's post-crisis

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<sup>71</sup> While *Bangsa Malaysia* has been translated in a variety of ways, the translations all share a core concept. Some of these translations are "a united Malaysian nation" (Shamsul 1996a, 484), "a Malaysian People" (Williamson 2002, 403), "a Malaysian Race" (Williamson 2002, 411) and "an ethnically inclusive, united Malaysian nation" (Ting 2009, 39-40).

<sup>72</sup> The 'New Malay' was antithetical to the traditional Malays; a modern Malay. The New Malay was envisioned to be more entrepreneurial, assertive, less tradition-bound and "less inclined toward the type of self-effacing, deferential behaviour that can lead to easy domination by other ethnic groups" (Milner 2011, 208).

strategy involved the relaxing of ethnic share-holding quotas which allowed for Chinese businesses to acquire major *bumiputera* corporations (2015, 143). The years 1997–2000, Marzuki observed, were marked by a resurgence of ethnic dissatisfaction for the relinquishing of these *bumiputera* assets, Mahathir’s obduracy in the nation’s recovery strategy, and the clash with his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim (2008, 35-41). Further, Marzuki (2008, 35-41), Wong Chin Huat (2014c), and Case (2015, 43) suggest that consequent to these developments, and especially after the political tsunami<sup>73</sup> of the 2008 general elections, UMNO once again reasserted with increased intensity, its old trajectory of communalist ethno-nationalism for political legitimacy. Mohd. Azizuddin’s findings suggest that this led to an increase in “hate speech” – racialized language against non-Malays that is inflected with primordialist terms like *pendatang* (newcomer/immigrant)<sup>74</sup> (2009, 87), employed by UMNO to consolidate control on the Malays.

Several key vectors to the ethno-nationalist identity discourse can be attributed to developments that occurred between the 1980s and 1990s. One is the emergence of the *Melayu Baru* as conceptualized by Mahathir; a modern Malay who is entrepreneurial, assertive, and less tradition-bound (Milner 2011, 208). Kahn, in quoting Patricia Sloane’s 1999 anthropological study, observes that the *Melayu Baru* signals a break from several different Malay pasts: (1) ““naïve kampung past” of poor Malay peasants”; (2) “retrogressive, anachronistic society envisaged by fundamentalist Muslims”; and (3) “a recent NEP past rife with patronage, Malay elitism and feudalism” (2006, 90). Further, Kahn notes that most who saw themselves as *Melayu Baru* were critical of the fatalistic *mentaliti kampung* (village mentality) that relied on *takdir* (fate) and *rezeki* (livelihood,

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<sup>73</sup> Case notes that UMNO’s renewed burst of communalism after the 2004 general elections intensified to a point where the “suspicions of the Chinese were reawakened”, “driving them back to the opposition” and eroding support for the ruling coalition component party MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) (2015, 43). At the 2008 general elections, *Barisan Nasional* leaders were “stunned by the extent to which the Chinese voters deserted to the opposition” comprising the Islamic PAS, the predominantly Chinese DAP and Anwar’s new vehicle, PKR (Case 2015, 43). MCA lost half of its 32 parliamentary seats, retaining only 15.

<sup>74</sup> The *pendatang* polemic activates the primordial perception of Malaysia’s autochthonous people allowing unappreciative non-Malay immigrants to attain citizenship. It is meant to be a term of insult and national exclusion, for as previously mentioned, these non-Malays are citizens and many have been in the Malay Peninsula for generations.

wealth-allocation) (2006, 90). For the successful *Melayu Baru*, Kahn observed that *adat* “is not merely ignored, but consistently devalued” (2006, 90).

While *Melayu Baru* was to be modern and less tradition-bound, it was not, rhetorically at least, a decisive departure from Malay values and tradition. Mahathir was, in the 1990s, overtly critical of Western pluralist democracy’s emphasis on excessive individualism and its predisposition towards predatory interest-group politics (Connors, Davison & Dosch 2004, 141-143; Milne & Mauzy 1999, 138-142). His foreign policies tended towards what M. Connors, R. Davison & J. Dosch observed was an oppositional “Asian values position” that prioritized communitarian Asian values and culture<sup>75</sup> (2004, 142). This Asian values discourse was thus propounded by Mahathir as the mediating framework through which his understanding of ‘Western modernity’ – a broadbrush conflation of everything from the ‘West’ – and its values could be made applicable in an Asian (and Malay) context. This was a relativist reinterpretation that still prioritized Malay communitarianism over individualism, the function of societal discipline for the common good and what Carolina Lopez (2008, 56) observed was deference to authority.<sup>76</sup> Both these state discourses on New Malay and Asian values were variously reimagined as urban-rural or modern-traditional dichotomies that are a major part of *Senario*’s subtextual didacticism.

The *Melayu Baru* identity was further complicated by the return of NEP beneficiaries who had been educated abroad. Together with the mixed-race Malays, Khoo G.C. categorizes these two groups as the “hybrid-Malays” (2006, 66). Drawing from diverse sources, Khoo G.C. describes several facets to the hybrid-Malays: (1) the *bumiputeh*<sup>77</sup> (2006, 66); (2) the Malay embodying

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<sup>75</sup> It is intrinsically paradoxical that simultaneous to Mahathir’s advocacy for a progressive Malay category, he was also advocating a set of traditional ‘Asian values’ in opposition to the West, which by its traditional legacy would be fundamentally antithetical to the former, regardless of how ‘relativist’ the interpretive framework.

<sup>76</sup> Regionally, these developments were not unique to Malaysia. For instance, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, similarly deployed the Asian values rhetoric to justify their government’s authoritarianism as an Asian brand of democracy (Ng, Maznah, & Tan 2006, 140).

<sup>77</sup> Portmanteau of the words *bumiputera* and *Orang Puteh* – white man. Refers to Malaysians of mixed Malay/Caucasian heritage who qualified as *bumiputeras*. In relation to the NEP, it typically refers to the offspring of Malays who had married Caucasians when they were studying abroad, and have returned to live in Malaysia.

“hybridized or alternative modernity” – a localized interpretation of Western culture and modernization (2006, 125); and (3) the Malay embodying a local culturally-hybrid Malaysian identity, or *kebudayaan rojak* (salad culture) (2006, 72-73), constituting a “hybrid national subject” (2006, 61) embodying a “unity in diversity” form of nation-building (2006, 73). Khoo G.C. quotes Mandal (2001) in asserting that these expressions of a “newer, more fluid, cross-ethnic hybrid form of pluralism” originate from the NEP Generation (2006, 223).

These alternate narratives form the basis from which other notions to intra-communal identities have since emerged. Jerome Collin for example, broadly ascribes the categories of New Malays or Other Malays<sup>78</sup> to the queering of Malays, that includes both the LGBT Malays as well as the non-traditional Malays (2011, 49-54). While Khoo G.C. suggests that the hybrid-Malay or New Malay is important because it attempts to deconstruct “the stereotypes of Malay identity and to problematize borders that separate ethnicities” (2006, 72), these new trajectories do not constitute a fully formed alternative to the nationalist narrative, primarily because they are not sanctioned by political powers.

Lopez observes that the UMNO ideological model often stages the “virtuous” nation-state in juxtaposition with the “evil other”<sup>79</sup> of the West. With UMNO’s rhetorical self-positioning as the “protector of local virtue” – Asian values, morality, and universality of human rights (as opposed to Western rights), – she observes that it contrasts itself with the decadent West; the anti-values, oppressive and democratically hegemonic ‘other’ (2008, 57). In this manner, UMNO’s chauvinist groups have staged these alternate identities against the nationalist ‘Malayhood’ into urban-rural, modern-traditional dichotomies. With these types of strategies, traditionalism and Islamism, and the conflated ideological framework of *ketuanan Melayu* and *ketuanan Islam*, have remained

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<sup>78</sup> Other Malays is a broad category that refers to Malays who do not conform to the rigid nationalist conception of Malay. It is employed by Kahn (2006) to refer to Malays living in Malaysia, but with non-peninsular roots like those from Indonesia, who are different in attitude and are still practising their own heritage and culture.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Otherness’ will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

dominant within the nation, and has largely been reproduced – perhaps unwittingly – as a central part of *Senario*'s subtext.

### *Islamization*

A key implement of UMNO's Malay nationalist narrative is political Islam, which Arnold Puyok describes as referring loosely to the “promotion of Islam and Islamic symbolism by political leaders and the institutionalization of Islamic religious beliefs to justify the right of the Malay-Muslim population to power and dominance” (2015, 63). Farish (2004, 18), J. Liow & P. Afif (2015, 53-54), and Milner (2011, 219-221, 226, 239) note that the rise of modern political Islam was mainstreamed by the efforts of the Islamist political party, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS - Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party). Islamic *tajdid* (revival), in this instance characterized by the PAS religio-political power dynamic (Case 2015, 42; Milner 2011, 221, 223, 226), has historically been involved in the production of a discursive terrain that is bounded within the rubric of *daulah Islamiyya*<sup>80</sup> (Islamic sovereignty) (Ting 2009, 34, 48).

Hussin Mutalib suggests that in recognizing Islam's potency in mobilizing traditional Malay sentiments, Mahathir introduced the Islamization Policy in 1983 to counteract the religio-political force of PAS (1990, 1993). Ting notes that it aimed to “inculcate Islamic values in the administration of the government” and to “Islamize the state institutions” (2009, 39). This animated political Islamism of PAS and UMNO was observed by Liow & Afif to have resulted in growing Islamic consciousness and piety, and the emergence of a range of Islamic civil society movements further fuelling Islamist discourse in the nation today (2015, 50). They contend that under the federal system of government, Islam is policed by a bureaucratic infrastructure of state authorities, and *Syariah* (Islamic law) is foremost in the state's management of the personal affairs of Muslims (Liow & Afif 2015, 50).

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<sup>80</sup> Its political application would endeavor to render Islamic principles as the encompassing reference for governance (Ting 2009, 34).

One consequent development is the establishment of a bureaucratic Islamic authority in every state of Malaysia. Furthermore, not one but two Islamic state authorities exist both in Kuala Lumpur (JAKIM and JAWI)<sup>82</sup> and Selangor (JAIS and MAIS).<sup>83</sup> Non-governmental religious groups also proliferate alongside, such as *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia - ABIM), and *Ikatan Muslimim Malaysia* (Malaysian Muslim Solidarity - ISMA), to name but two. Given these developments under UMNO and their religious state apparatuses,<sup>84</sup> we now see an ideological shift from Islamic *ijtihad* (individual judgement) to *taqlid* (unquestioning acceptance of [Islamic] authority).

The consequent rise of *dakwah* (Islamic mission) in almost every facet of daily life has resulted in a changing emphasis on individual identifiers of Malay which have led to a strident increase in assertions of Islamic piety in the last two years (2015 and 2016).<sup>85</sup> An August 2015 Merdeka Center<sup>86</sup> report reflects this shift where 60 percent of Malays now identify themselves as Muslims first, 27 percent as Malaysians first, while only 6 percent as Malays first – the last being a drop from 2005’s 11 percent (Anisah, 2015). The increase in the policing of discursive, behavioural and sartorial boundaries has led to attempts at delineating the margins of where Malay ends and Muslim-Malay begins, often extended to include other communities as a diametric force to define Muslim-Malay boundaries. It will become clear in Chapter 6’s analysis that this national shift is perfectly encapsulated in the subtexts of two episodes; a 1997 episode

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<sup>82</sup> *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) and *Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan* (Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department).

<sup>83</sup> *Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor* (Selangor Islamic Religious Department) and *Majlis Agama Islam Selangor* (Selangor Islamic Religious Council).

<sup>84</sup> Officially recognized under these state authorities as of October 2016, are approximately 15,000 *imams* (prayer leader at a mosque who also gives sermons) and approximately 16,000 *Bilal* (man who gives the calls to prayer and worship) (“Salient points of,” 2016).

<sup>85</sup> While this refers to the years 2015 and 2016, what I call to attention is the trajectory of this shift which presumably stems from at least the 1980s when the Islamization policies were first introduced. While national statistics from the same period as *Senario* do provide data on the size of ethnic groups and their faiths, they do not reveal how individuals identify themselves.

<sup>86</sup> The Merdeka Center is self-described as “an opinion research firm” comprised of social scientists, engaged in the independent gathering of public opinion and “expressing them through survey results, analysis and position papers” (Merdeka Center, 2007). This report is only indicative of a possible trend, for their research methods and sample sizes are not usually revealed. Notwithstanding its accuracy, of more significance is the publication of these findings by news media channels nationally. Since reports such as these are featured as credible and authoritative by news media, they contribute to prevailing positive/negative societal assumptions about Malay identity of the time.

titled *Ta Ti Tu* that features the clear didacticism of the *dakwah* movement, and a 2011 episode titled *Salah Sangka* that presumes the religious foreknowledge of viewers.

One consequence of the *dakwah* movement is the fear of heresy that prevents critical questioning of anything deemed to be Islamic. For example, while *fatwas* are fundamentally just opinions by religious scholars (Ahmad 2009, 162), little constructive debate from the Muslim community at large attends their enactment. The widespread acceptance of Islamic *taqlid* (unquestioning acceptance of [Islamic] authority) and the seemingly immutable nature of these official interpretations of Islamic law have led to more conservative *fatwas* and Islamic legislation. The lack of significant critical opposition from the wider Muslim populace qualifies the state's presumption that the Malay-Muslim subject is incapable of critical judgement, and needs to be instructed and policed to be truly Islamic. This Muslim character typified by the voluntary relinquishment of individual agency seems aligned to Azhar Ibrahim's (2014) description of the 'traditionalists' category.

Azhar's (2014) analysis of Islam's role within the Southeast Asian region focuses on the discursive formations of religion and social movements influencing the trajectories of Islamic discourse. One of the earliest religio-political Islamic archetypes identified by Azhar is the 'traditionalist' whose character seems consonant with the Muslim ideal encouraged by Malaysian religious authorities (2014, 1-90). In the Malaysian context, the traditionalist appears to be motivated by demands for increased protection of Muslim-Malay rights premised on alleged infringements on Islam that erode Muslim faith. Muslims sensitivities have supposedly been affected from things as mundane as (1) an image of a Hindu deity as a factoid on Malaysian Indians (featured on a commercial product), and the naming of a ketchup as 'Church'<sup>87</sup> to (2) the social articulations of non-Muslims that Muslims disagree with,<sup>88</sup> (3) imagined plots against Islam and Malays that involve opposition parties, Christians, Jews, Israelis, and/or

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<sup>87</sup> On Hindu deity mineral water bottle, see "Consumer group wants," (2014). On fried chicken sauce, see "TCM: 'Church' dipping," (2015).

<sup>88</sup> On Halloween's ploy, see Syed Jaymal (2014). On Oktoberfest, see "Oktoberfest hype," (2014).

liberals,<sup>89</sup> to (4) threats against other Malay Muslims for not being Islamic enough.<sup>90</sup> These demonstrate a wide range of issues that can be perceived as infractions against, or deviations from, the Islamic *taqlid* paradigm. The opposition to self-determination through logical thinking and intellectualism<sup>91</sup> is perhaps best encapsulated by the Perak *mufti*'s declaration on 4 August 2015 that intellectualism and logic should be avoided since it is governed by desires and thus susceptible to the devil ("Avoid intellect," 2015).

The strident increase in conservative Islamic expression in the last decade has however, led some scholars like Mohd Azizuddin (2014) to interrogate the notion of religious freedom in Malaysia when considered against the country's religio-politics, constitutional stipulates, and Malay cultural-traditional legacies. He concludes that "[r]eligious expression is allowed only if approved by the state and religious authorities", and that "[t]he government, on one hand, tries to maintain political stability and racial harmony but, on the other, attempts to maintain the status-quo especially with regards to understanding Malaysia as an 'Islamic state' and to imposing Islamization policies" (Mohd Azizuddin 2014, 26).<sup>92</sup> While his findings only serve to strengthen the foregoing discourse on UMNO's role within Malaysia's Islamic primacy paradigm, his discussions also reveal – among others – the reasons why Malaysia is neither fully a secular state nor an Islamic state. The country's constitutional structure allowing for an Islamic law system to exist alongside a civil law system is one primary reason for the nation's indeterminate trajectory. Mohd Azizuddin therefore suggests that the appellation of 'hybrid-state' might be more apt (2014, 9). Even though it is

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<sup>89</sup> On Christmas and New Year's plot, see Chi (2014), Joseph (2014). For K-pop agenda, see "After BigBang show," (2015). On Jews' plot, see "Infidels backed by," (2015). On Israel, see "NGO coalition alleges," (2015). For *jihad* on liberals, see "In Friday sermon," (2015).

<sup>90</sup> See "JAWI to seek," (2015), Sukumaran (2015), and Zurairi (2014).

<sup>91</sup> Azhar notes, traditionalists viewed modern Western knowledge as "profane" and "devoid of 'Islamic spirit'" (2014, 11), while revivalists had an "intellectual indolence and disrespect for the intellectual and scientific endeavours of others" (2014, 51).

<sup>92</sup> The need for this precarious balance between racial harmony and Islam is ironic. It was the UMNO government under then Prime Minister Mahathir that declared that Malaysia was an Islamic nation – a declaration that Azizuddin's analysis reveals as unconstitutional. Furthermore, it was Mahathir who introduced the Islamization policies in the 1980s (Mohd. Azizuddin 2014, 8, 13; Ting 2008, 84; 2009, 34). Both Azizuddin (2014, 13) and Ting (2008 84; 2009, 34) have proposed that these developments are politically motivated as a counter-strategy to PAS, rather than an expression of Islamic piety.



unarticulated in his study, the extent of UMNO's involvement is clear. This dual constitutional structure was made possible only through the constitutional amendments of then Prime Minister Mahathir's administration in 1988 as part of the nation's Islamization initiatives (Mohd Azizuddin 2014, 7-12).

Mohd. Azizuddin is one of many providing some semblance of balance to this site of Malay-Muslim discursivity, albeit academically. Notwithstanding their political agendas, other Malay-Muslim socio-political actors who have been publicly vocal with their alternate Islamic views include opposition party members Mohammad Sabu (see Shazwan 2015 for example) and Khalid Samad (see Syed 2015 for example),<sup>93</sup> Perlis *mufti* Mohd. Asri Zainul<sup>94</sup> (for examples, see Rahimy 2016; "Refrain from calling," 2016), and groups such as G25 (eg. Boo 2016) and Sisters in Islam (eg. Boo 2015). They are however, a minority voice when compared to UMNO's overbearing state-Islam that, within a framework of political Islam, is further strengthened by opposition party PAS' Islamic conservatism (eg. Norshazlina 2016; Shazwan 2016).

We have previously observed the rise of Malay primacy as a central component of statist Malay identity. We have now summarily outlined the numerous ways that Islam is deployed within the quotidian to guarantee Muslim primacy. Islam's potency in mobilizing traditional Malay sentiments is evidenced by its popular deployment by politicians, especially when *ketuanan Islam* is conflated with the ideological framework of *ketuanan Melayu*. In the following section, the discussion will shift to a focus on the state's interpretation of Malay gender relationships as framed through both '*ketuanan*' ideologies.

### *Female and Malay*

UMNO's dominance over the discourse of Malayness has inevitably led to their ability to dictate Malay-Muslim gender roles. In this respect, the complex

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<sup>93</sup> The former is Parti Amanah Negara's president while the latter is presently the party's communication director.

<sup>94</sup> A *mufti* is a Muslim legal expert empowered to give rulings on Islamic matters. In Malaysia, this empowerment is state-sanctioned through either the monarchs or federal religious authorities. Mohd. Asri is the only state *mufti* in the country who is consistently vocal against Islamic actions, behaviours, and views construed as 'extreme' in a multi-faith society.

relationship between Malayness and Islam in determining the specificities of Malay and Muslim female identity is succinctly reflected in the political domain. From this perspective, the works of scholars such as Ayse N. Narli (1984), Cecelia Ng, Maznah Mohamad, & Tan Beng Hui (2006), Nik Safiah (1990), Helen Ting (2008), and Wazir Jahan Karim (1992) suggest that UMNO's attitude towards the established hierarchy of gender is one of ambivalence, pragmatically motivated by political need.

This section will thus locate the shifting roles of Malay-Muslim women as determined by state policies that largely conflate the interpretations of Islam and Malayness. We will first review the prevalent hierarchies of genders found in the Malay social structure, followed by an overview of several socio-economic and political developments that undergird re-evaluations of gender roles, as well as the responses they elicited. Several key groups and organizations aimed at equalizing gender relationships will also be identified, as well as the subsequent effects on the social expectations of women caused by their struggles.<sup>95</sup> These are intended to provide a general understanding of Malay-Muslim gender relationships in Malaysia. Much of the fundamental dissonance resulting from opposing ideologies between Malay and Muslim men vs Malay and Muslim women are not unique to Malaysia. Most societies, if not all, are grappling with these same fundamental concerns resulting from what is essentially a patriarchal socio-political structure.

Ng et al. (2006), Safiah (1990), Ting (2008), and Wazir (1992)<sup>96</sup> all agree that the post-independence construct of a woman within the Malay social hierarchy is one who is subordinated under a socio-political structure that prioritizes men. This stems from the view that male dominance is 'natural' (Wazir 1992, 218), since it is supposedly pre-determined in specific interpretations of Islam (Wazir 1992, 163). Both these presumptions about male dominance are centrally

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<sup>95</sup> The areas of gender relations, women's rights, and feminist movements in Malaysia each represent established disciplines of study. This section is not meant to be an exhaustive review of the topic; that would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, it is meant to provide an overview of the trajectory on Malay-Muslim women's rights and their position in Malaysia.

<sup>96</sup> However, Wazir contends that this subordinate role is constantly being contested through new forms of identifications.

reproduced on *Senario*. A primary reason for this viewpoint's resilience in contemporary Malay social systems is presumably the revived Islamic fervour that started in the 1980s (Islamization period).

The conflation of both Malay and Islamic identity during the nation's Islamic revivalism resulted in what Wazir calls the "*adatization of Islam*" or the "*Islamization of adat*" (1992, 16). The subsequent ability of state religious authorities to vocalize their positions on matters involving Muslim women and domestic life is in effect qualified by this Islamization of *adat*. With UMNO's delicate negotiation between their Islamic credentials and Malay interests, it became expedient for the party's state assemblymen to locate their positions on issues of women's rights and protections roughly in alignment with the religious authorities (Ting 2008, 85-86, 89). Part of this compliance was the fear of being branded by opposition Islamic party PAS as "being 'un-Islamic' or of violating or misrepresenting the conventional understanding of Islam" (Ting 2008, 86, 89). Regardless of their personal stance, what followed from cases cited between 1984 and 2005<sup>97</sup> was a more pronounced articulation of resistance to legislation that aimed to offer more protection to women in the areas of polygamy, divorce and marriage, and domestic violence including marital rape<sup>98</sup> (Maznah 2002, 233; Ting 2008, 86; Zainah 2001, 237). One concern often proffered as grounds for opposing these pro-women initiatives is that the proposed legislation would be too restrictive of Muslim men's rights (Aishah 1992, 198-201; Zainah 2001, 233, 238) though the diametric assertion of encroachment on Muslim women's rights remains unproblematic.

Wazir notes the dissonance between the constructs of women in early and contemporary social structures. It is therefore ironic that she seems to qualify this inequality by citing examples that she suggests demonstrate a mediation of this unequal gender responsibilities through what she regards as 'opportunities'

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<sup>97</sup> One example is the enactment of the 1984 Muslim Family Law Act for Federal Territories. Two other examples are the approval of the Domestic Violence Act in 1994 that was only finally gazetted in 1996, and the 2005 proposed revisions to the Islamic Family Law.

<sup>98</sup> Ting notes that the resultant exclusion of marital rape from the definition of domestic violence in the Act means there is some margin for justifying "conditional beating, should a Muslim woman refuse to have sexual intercourse with her husband" (Ting 2008, 86, 95).

for women to organize themselves (Wazir 1992, 220). Within a socio-religious context, Wazir suggests this is observed in the mobilization of women for the organization of feasts that accompany Islamic ceremonies like *do'a selamat* (prayer for giving thanks) and *tah'ilil* (recitation of verses that worship/praise God) (Wazir 1992, 220-221).<sup>99</sup> However, she curiously does not problematize the parallel between the notion of a subordinated role of women as domestic homemakers, and their extension as 'homemakers' for the Islamic community at the wider societal level. Wazir alludes to a resumption of this dynamic herself when she states that husbands "who attend do not have any ritual function and only come to partake of the feast" (Wazir 1992, 221). Unmentioned is also the reality that at events such as *do'a selamat* and *tah'ilil*, the main congregational prayers are still led by men, which would affirm the patriarchal structure.

Politically, Wazir extends this argument to UMNO's women's wing, *Wanita UMNO*, which she regards as allowing for women to organize and assert their political relevance. However, the works of Manderson (1980), Narli (1984), Ng, Maznah, & Tan (2006), Nik Safiah (1990), and Ting (2008) provide an account of *Wanita UMNO*'s struggles that is less optimistic than Wazir's assertion. Ng et al. (2006, 21), Nik & Rokiah (2003, 94), and Ting (2008, 77-82) note that since the 1970s, *Wanita UMNO*'s ability to formulate and to pass legislations on women's rights has invariably depended on the women leaders' ability to leverage on, and work within the patriarchal political structure. In effect, Manderson seems to echo my earlier observation about female domesticity when he writes that *Wanita UMNO* is:

... a group subordinate to the parent party, as women were to men. The members of the section were nurturers in the public area as in their own homes, they supported rather than led, deferring to the wisdom of the party and the state.

–Manderson (1980, 192)

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<sup>99</sup> These Islamic events usually comprise of the primary religious component of congregational praying, supplications, and recitations of passages from the Quran. This will be followed by a communal feasting component.

There were two noteworthy political developments on women's affairs that occurred in 2001; the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Family Development and the introduction of an additional UMNO women's wing called *Puteri* UMNO (Ting 2008, 90-91). *Puteri* UMNO differs from *Wanita* UMNO in that it only admits women who are below 40 years of age. While the image of a "new Malay woman" was subtly and unofficially introduced through *Puteri* UMNO initiatives like Malay novels, films, and media interviews (Maznah 2004, 139; Ting 2008, 91-92), this was merely to construct the image of a woman that contrasted with the conservative female ideal of PAS.

Curiously, none of the scholars mention the debilitating nature of *Puteri* UMNO's name since *puteri* translates as princess which can allude to a specific sexist stereotype. This irony in naming extends to the Ministry of Women and Family Development. Notwithstanding the ministry's belated founding – 44 years after independence – the name of the ministry itself seems regressive since it ideologically sutures 'women' to the discursive field of 'family'. This seems to echo the previously unarticulated yet implicit assertion by Wazir that the central domain of a woman is found within the rubrics of domesticity and family. The ministry's regressive attitude towards women's rights and affairs is perhaps best epitomized by the statement of its first Minister Sharizat Abdul Jalil, where she reportedly said that an area of focus for the Ministry was to "reinforce women's basic and traditional functions such as cooking and caring for the household" (Maznah 2002, 372; Ting 2008, 90). It will become clear in the later chapters that this conventional concept of women's relational identity to domesticity and the 'naturalness' of the proposition, are in fact key overarching themes in *Senario's* subtexts.

From a socio-economic perspective, one of the most significant changes in the social status of Malay women occurred in the years between 1970 and the late 1980s. This period was marked by a substantial increase in foreign investments leading to immense growth of the industrial manufacturing sector (Ng et al., 2006, 67; Stivens 1996, 41-42; Ting 2008, 82; Wazir 1992, 196-200). With a 30 percent *bumiputera* workforce ensured through the NEP in 1971, about 80,000

village girls of ages 16 to mid-20s (presumably mostly Malay) had relocated to urban centres by the late 1970s as factory workers (Ng et al., 2006, 67; Stivens 1996, 98, 260; Ting 2008, 82; Wazir 1992, 196). The subsequent economic improvements to the households of these girls/women were accompanied by an enhancement of female socio-economic status within the nation that accorded them with relative freedom, mobility, and some autonomy (Ong 1995, 176; Stivens 1996, 228; Ting 2008, 83-84; Wazir 1992, 198-199, 201). This would contrast with the dominant conservative construct of Malay-Muslim women who were thought to be defined by their roles within the family unit, a point that would later allow for blame to be laid at their feet on the issue of eroding familial bonds.

Both Narli (1984, 130) and Nik Safiah (1990, 85, 87) noted that by 1984, these women had to contend with conflicting social expectations of their roles even as they were themselves rearticulating their newfound, evolving female identity. The state regarded this modern role of women as being able to “pull their families out of ‘backwardness’ and as housewives (*seri-rumah*) who could inculcate ‘progressive’ values in their children” (Ong 1995, 173-174, 181, translation in original). This is consonant with what we have observed of the government’s ‘revolutionizing’ initiatives of the time (such as New Malay). However, the emerging Islamic discourse on “Muslim womanhood” (Ong 1995, 181) brought forth by the reinvigoration of Islam meant that these Malay factory women were eventually blamed for an erosion of familial relations and the emergence of other domestic ills (Ong 1995, 174-184; Ting 2008, 83-84; Wazir 1992, 201-202). Most significantly – and perhaps most damagingly – this revived religious conservatism entrenched the notion that the ‘traditional’ role of women in society and domestically, is aligned with the stipulations of Islam (Ng et al., 2006, 102; Ong 1995, 177-180, 185-186; Ting 2008, 84; Wazir 1992, 165-170, 175-180).

It is interesting that our discussion on Azlanshah’s findings in Chapter 1 regarding Malay women’s consumption of ‘Asian soap operas’ reflect similar concerns. While Azlanshah’s studies were conducted in the 1990s – around a

decade later, which coincides with the Asian values discourse and the emergence of the *bohsia* girls<sup>100</sup> (girls with moral laxity) – the anxieties over a potential erosion of women’s Malay cultural values and faith were uncannily similar to the blame that accompanied their new socio-economic status in the 1980s. This would suggest an almost unchanging persistence in UMNO’s (and by extension, the Malay-Muslim society’s) ideological attitude to the hierarchical nature of gender relations across a decade.

There were at least two negative stereotypes of women that emerged from this period of industrialization in the 1980s, and the period of economic recession that started from the mid-1990s. The first was *Minah Karan* (Minah, the Electronic Lady), as these factory girls came to be known. Their newfound economic and social status within the city was accompanied by the freedom of being away from the communal restrictions of a close-knit village or *kampung* society. Their relations with men in the city, subsequently earned *Minah Karan* synonymity with “wantonness and promiscuity” (Wazir 1992, 201). The second stereotype of *bohsia* girls (girls with moral laxity) emerged much later in the mid to late 1990s, and involved “heterosexual teenage girls and young women” who were believed to indulge in similar promiscuous activities (Ng, Maznah, & Tan 2006, 141; Peletz 2009, 198).

It bears pointing out that *Minah Karan*’s male counterparts – both in their move from the *kampung* to the city, and their sexual improprieties – were called *Ahmad Spaner* (Ahmad, with the spanner)(Wazir 1992, 201). However, while the men constituting the *Ahmad Spaner* category often formed sexual liaisons with the *Minah Karan*, they were not viewed pejoratively (Wazir 1992, 201-202). In fact, while the *Minah Karan* were subsequently unable to find suitable marriage partners, the *Ahmad Spaner* were still viewed as suitable candidates by mothers seeking husbands for their daughters in the *kampung* (Wazir 1992, 201-202). These differing communal standards of moral evaluation suggest that, regardless of the underlying reasons, the male-privileging cultural mindset is prevalent as lived-reality amongst the community.

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<sup>100</sup> *Bohsia* girls will be discussed later in this section.

The works of Maznah (2004, 136), Ng et al. (2006, 72-76), Tan & Ng (2003), and Ting (2008, 75, 86-90) overarchingly suggest there was a significant political emphasis on women's rights in the period leading up to the 1999 general elections. While women's advocacy groups have been lobbying since the 1980s,<sup>101</sup> it was during this period that pro-women initiatives achieved much progress (Ng et al., 2006, 74-75; Ting 2008, 88-90). However, Ng et al. (2006, 75-76) and Ting (2008, 88) observe that UMNO's pivot on the issue of women's rights was merely a political response to the massive public support of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim who was imprisoned by then Prime Minister Mahathir on charges of sodomy in 1998.

One Malay-Muslim non-governmental organization (NGO) that became more vocal during this period of the 1990s is Sisters in Islam (SIS). SIS has been consistently contentious with state religious departments over women's rights since 1993 (Ng et al. 2006, 98). Spurred by their concerns over the "injustice [to] women" under *Syariah* law, SIS has challenged many official prescriptions of Islamic law which it views as symptomatic of a "process of interpretation and codification" that is "dominated by male jurists and scholars" (Ng et al. 2006, 98). This has consistently positioned them squarely against the official Islamic bureaucracy<sup>102</sup> (Azza 2016, 67, 107-108, 113-115, 137-140, 171; Ng et al. 2006, 99, 101). More recently, their adversarial stance has resulted in the Selangor Islamic Religious Council's (MAIS) *fatwa* branding SIS as a deviationist group (Bedi 2014). It is presumably this institutional view of SIS's 'un-Islamic-ness' that has polarized the Malaysian Muslim community's opinions about the group, which includes opposition from some Muslim women themselves (Azza 2016, 21-22, 169, 171; Ng et al. 2006, 101).

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<sup>101</sup> For example, Violence Against Women, Citizens Against Rape, All Women's Action Society, and Women's Development Collective (Ng et al. 2006, 69-71).

<sup>102</sup> One of SIS's three female founders is Marina Mahathir, daughter of former Prime Minister Mahathir who instituted the nation's Islamization policies. This is most ironic, for SIS has consistently been embroiled in contests over women's rights with these same institutions that were established by Mahathir's Islamization efforts. However, Marina's involvement with SIS is arguably one primary reason (daughter of a Prime Minister) that the organization survived for as long as it did. This last observation is similarly alluded to in Ng et al. where it is noted that SIS "implicitly receives the backing of the country's highest leadership", thus "they are relatively well protected from the wrath of Islam's extremist factions" (2006, 99).



The discussions in this section suggest that the female Malay-Muslim is an active subject who is consistently negotiating between the narrow dictates of an evolving self-conceptualized identity and the rigid, largely unchanging strictures represented by communal patriarchal interpretations to *adat* and Islam. As we have seen in the case of Sisters in Islam, the 'Asian soap opera' female viewers in Chapter 1, and the independent women that came with the industrial boom in the 1980s, any perceived deviation from this doubly-reinforced rubric is translated as an erosion of Malay identity and Islam. This is not dissimilar from our earlier discussions of UMNO's strategies in both the ideological terrains of Malayness and Islam. Within our context of state-determined identity, this institutionally entrenched prioritization of men's rights over those of women has become ideologically more compelling since its conflation with the dictates of Islam. Women's groups may struggle against this statist interpretation, though the deployment of the dual reasoning – God-sanctioned fixity of gender roles, and female domestic responsibilities required by *adat* – may possibly motivate compliance from comparatively more women who may not agree with these two rubrics but nonetheless aspire to be 'socially acceptable'.

#### *Constituting Sameness and Difference: Stereotypes and Others*

Much of what has been written in this chapter reveals that the juxtaposition of 'us' against 'them' is a central tenet of UMNO's ideological leadership that focuses on 'demarcating' political, religious, and social space.<sup>103</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in our earlier observation of the evolving categories of *Melayu* (Malay), *Bumiputera* (Sons of the soil), *Bumiputera Melayu* (Malay sons of the soil), *Melayu Muslim*, *Muslim Melayu*, and *Muslim*. It is therefore clear that UMNO's national initiatives, political rhetoric, and the resulting discourse of Malayness are fundamentally divisive in nature.<sup>104</sup> Given the consistency of this strategy, it is relevant to introduce the notions of Otherness and stereotypes, both of which I will discuss primarily through Homi Bhabha's (1994) readings.

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<sup>103</sup> As mentioned in the preceding section, I view Malay gender relationships as being a constituent part of religious and socio-cultural dynamics.

<sup>104</sup> From an ethnic-relations perspective, the economic nationalism of Malaysia Incorporated was arguably the least divisive. Though one can contend that it was marked by class divisions.

These concepts not only undergird Malaysia's political and social discourse, but are also present in *Senario's* subtexts.

Bhabha's (1994) interpretations of both the 'other' and stereotypes are grounded in his dissection of colonial discourse as an apparatus of power. As such, this will provide some insight into UMNO's supposed adoption of colonial trajectories as well as the prevailing stereotypes of non-Malays and non-Muslims that seems to be encouraged by the Malaysian state. What is key to the discursive power of both 'other' and stereotypes is the concept of 'difference' and the ability of dominant powers to recognize dissimilarities of race/culture/history while simultaneously disavowing their differentiations (Bhabha 1994, 96, 101, 107, 110). This can be observed in Malaysia's assertion that it recognizes the diverse cultures, ethnicity, and faiths while simultaneously nationalizing Malay culture and language as a form of unofficial criterion of nationality. This paradox is in fact the underlying process of ambivalence that produces contradictory modes of cultural knowledge or sets of normatives.

Since this strategy operates on 'difference', it becomes necessary to produce a social reality in which an 'other' – that which departs from what has been deemed as the dominant normative – is made clearly visible (Bhabha 1994, 101). This would explain the prevailing 'colonial stereotype' of the Chinese within the Malay social mindset (and the Malays within the Chinese mindset) as discussed previously. Within the Malay context, the underlying contradiction of aspiring towards progress yet bounded by a traditional feudal rubric, seems to encapsulate the internal communal ambivalence of Malayness.

This othering is further associated with the production of stereotypes (for example, the 'colonial Chinese stereotype' or the 'stereotype of the lazy Malay'<sup>105</sup>), which Bhabha regards as a central discursive strategy for entrenching the "concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (Bhabha 1994, 94-96). Stereotypes thus ensure that the boundaries between norms and otherness are maintained as rigidly unchanging. This 'concept of

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<sup>105</sup> The 'lazy Malay' myth was in fact, the motivation behind Syed Hussein Alatas' book in 1971.

fixity' is the reason for the earlier paradox of ambivalence that undergirds the strategy of 'difference'. For the dominant group must demarcate the difference between 'them' and 'us' as being predicated on some probabilistic historical truth or a notion of traditionalism that imbues this difference with its 'fixed' or unchanging quality (Bhabha 1994, 105-106, 213). Within Malaysia, this would of course include Malays – such as the women's rights groups – deemed to be deviating from the norms established by the dominant order.

In effect, this demarcation is the displacement of the dominant group's anxiety onto the 'other' (Bhabha 1994, 213) through the production of a Foucauldian regime of truth, where 'truth' is produced, sustained, valorized, and regulated by a series of mechanisms, techniques, and procedures that are political in nature (Foucault 1976, 14). Since this 'truth' is produced by the dominant group, it can therefore be deployed across time, resulting in the *same* stereotype or 'other' being recurrently reproduced or sustained by the dominant group (Bhabha 1994, 95-96, 106, 108) for maintaining the identities of both 'them' and 'us'. This is observed in the prevailing Chinese-Malay bi-cultural tensions that have remained largely unchanged since Malaysian independence. In this respect, as a form of identification, otherness similarly defines that which it differentiates against, for the identity of 'us' is often defined by what is not 'us'. This seems evident in the evolving categories of Malayness, since the need to continually demarcate Malay identity is motivated by citizens progressively identifying with the national identity. This is the underlying ambivalence, where Malay culture and identity must be nationally adopted, while simultaneously establishing a distinction between those who are 'true' Malays (*Melayu jati*) and those who do not share Malay ancestry.

In more than one respect, Bhabha's reading of otherness thus occupies a similar ground with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theorization of the Other that was introduced with the Mirror Stage in 1949.<sup>106</sup> Lacan's diametric positions of Self and 'other' demonstrate to some degree, the 'other's elementary self-definition

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<sup>106</sup> Lacan is in fact liberally referenced by Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

which in turn provides identity to the Self.<sup>107</sup> The fundamental Lacanian (1989, 1-7) human condition refers to the formation of the subject around an impossibility, which is the absolute disjuncture between the ego's symbolic system and the material real. The ego's first identification with its imaginary 'other' (what it sees as a reflection of itself) crystalizes its cognizance as being separate from its material environment. This imaginary identification is subsequently organized by the entry of the symbolic 'Other' (laws, language, structures of culture and so forth) which establishes a worldview that structures the ego's imaginary perceptions and in the process, constitutes their meaning. But a gap between the symbolic and the real is revealed when the symbolic Other generates the desire to act on the materially real without elucidating how to achieve the object that is desired.

Let us discuss this in less abstract terms by framing it through the Malay condition. By transposing this framework with Malay 'other' (or 'authentic' Malay) as the object of desire, the ideological fantasy of a homogenous Malay Malaysia becomes the determinant for the state's ethno-nationalist trajectories. Subjects are taught "how to desire" through this fantasy for it co-ordinates the frame of our desire. Therein lies its paradox – for desire is productive of fantasy, which in turn is deployed as a screen to conceal the gap revealed by the performative demand of the 'other' (Žižek 1989, 132). In this sense, "*desire itself is a defence against desire*" is tautological (Žižek 1989, 132); a homogenous irredentist Malay nationhood exists only insofar as it is tautologically sustained by the Malay community's vested belief in it. This is productive of the gap between the symbolic discourse of *ketuanan Melayu/Islam* (Malay/Islamic primacy) and the increasingly globalised realities of urban 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysia.<sup>108</sup> However, this gap can never be closed, for the fantasy conceals the irreconcilability of both and is productive of the fantasmatic myth that an irredentist, racially pure Malay category existed before British Malaya, and is

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<sup>107</sup> In our discussions on Bhabha, the Self would be the dominant power.

<sup>108</sup> I refer to the public discourse on wider democratization and other secular-liberal ideas from socio-political vectors within the nation.

therefore a condition that is re-attainable by the Malays.<sup>109</sup>

This is a myth of “historical origination” – an irredentist, racially pure Malay – that functions to “‘normalize’ the multiple beliefs and split subjects” that constitute the dominant discourse (Bhabha 1994, 106). Within the context of ethnic identification, the production of a non-Malay stereotype or ‘other’ thus “impedes the circulation and articulation” of “‘race’ as anything other than its fixity as racism” (Bhabha 1994, 108). However, I suggest that the image of the stereotype can also be applied to the dominant, for it similarly needs to simplify its identity for it to be adopted. However, “its image *as* identity” is “always threatened by ‘lack’” (Bhabha 1994, 110). This is the Lacanian gap between the symbolic and the real, for this identity is a simplification not because it is a false representation, it is instead, an “arrested, fixated form of representation” of identity (Bhabha 1994, 107) that does not address the realities of the present. The stereotype therefore epitomizes the “desire for an originality” but is constantly “threatened by differences of race, colour and culture” (Bhabha 1994, 107). The inherent ambivalence – the vacillation between what is normative (the rigid ‘fixity’) and the paradoxical repeatability of this essentialism in multiple forms – is fundamental to the ‘other’s and/or stereotype’s discursive discriminatory power (Bhabha 1994, 94-96). Let us now review how several other scholars have applied this framework to the Malaysian context.

In attempting to rationalize the riots and the hegemonic nature of the NEP, Khoo G.C. (2006) employs the Lacanian big Other as a framework to understand their bearing on contemporary Malaysian politics. Lacan’s symbolic order or the big Other, is predominantly language, and secondarily, the whole social network of laws, ideologies, and linguistic communication that socializes individuals” (Evans 1996, 136; Khoo G.C. 2006, 17). In her political context, this refers to Malaysians living under policies that were implemented by Mahathir, as well as the heavy reliance on the “very language that conveys and supports the fantasy structure meant to neutralize and incorporate the impossible trauma of May 13,

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<sup>109</sup> Milner (2011), Reid (2006), Roff (1969), and Vickers (2006) are but several who note that from as early as 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Malayan Peninsula was heterogeneous in ethnic composition.

1969” (Khoo G.C. 2006, 17). Central to Khoo G.C.’s theory is the proposition that the riots represent “an eruption of the Malaysian traumatic Real that cannot be symbolized” (2006, 85). Here, the Real as postulated by Lacan, is that which is outside of language and inassimilable to symbolization. The Real’s ‘trauma’ therefore, is its impossibility of being integrated into the symbolic order (Evans 1996, 135). Khoo G.C.’s deployment of the Lacanian Real in this context, is attributed to the violent return of the ‘repressed’, i.e. the race riots, which is the “‘social antagonism’ between the Chinese and Malay that traverses, constitutes, and simultaneously negates Malaysian society” (2006, 85). Khoo G.C.’s use of “social antagonism<sup>110</sup>” draws upon Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe’s (1985) postulate where the “socio-symbolic field is conceived as structured around a certain traumatic impossibility, around a certain fissure that cannot be symbolized” (Žižek 1990, 249), i.e. the Real.

From this perspective, Khoo G.C. views the NEP as an attempt to incorporate the Real of May 13 into the symbolic order to neutralize and avert any potential recurrence of racial violence. She argues that the consequent illegality of questioning Malay special rights through the legal strictures of NEP policies for one, is an example of the official ‘language’ supporting the “fantasy structure” that neutralises the national trauma (2006, 85). Therefore, this subsequent internalized ideological notion of economic disparity between the Chinese and Malays works to legitimize the hegemony of the NEP. The locus of Khoo G.C.’s ‘Other’ as the symbolic order, is its utilization as a tool of repression and censorship legitimized by the supposed inoculation of violence in society. The real achievement of hegemony is crystallized in this concept of ‘social antagonism’. This suppression-repression facilitated by the symbolic order is key to understanding the state-defined Malay identity as a racially exclusionary narrative that suppresses the emergence of alternative communalist interpretations that may subvert its power structure.

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<sup>110</sup> Laclau & Mouffe’s notion of antagonism is the limit of all objectivity (the reformulation of Lacan’s idea of the Real as impossible) (Žižek 1990, 249). Antagonism is thus conceived as a traumatic kernel around which the order is structured (the socio-symbolic field), i.e. the social.

According to Lacan (1977), this outward projection of aggression (the act of demonizing) and the formation of the 'other' is caused by the failure of the symbolic's (the Other, the law) mediation. Through the context of our previous transposition, the Malay 'other' (for example, that of a 'true' Malay) is again the object that is desired by the Malay subject who is located within the symbolic order (that represents the Laws). The failure of the symbolic to mediate this desire when obstructed, is productive of the destructive drive that manifests as violence and aggression. In this sense, Bhabha views the dominant's aggression as always accompanying this form of Lacanian identification (1994, 110). As observed in this chapter, the aggression that accompanies the demonization of what is un-Islamic and un-Malay has led to tensions between Islamic authorities, their religio-chauvinist partners and supporters on one side, and Hindu, Christian, and Chinese-religion adherents on the other.

In providing an overview of interfaith conflicts that occurred in the last two decades, Carolina Lopez observes that the juxtaposition of 'us' with a monolithic 'other' has become the socially constructed narrative of a default Malay 'race' whose religion Islam, provides legitimization for political and economic interests to use at will (2015, 327). Lopez lists several key examples to the inter-faith tensions, some of which are the 2001 *Kampung Medan* incident<sup>111</sup> (2015, 328), the 2009 'cow head-Hindu temple' incident<sup>112</sup> (2015, 328), the *Alkitab* contentions in 2010<sup>113</sup> (2015, 327), and the 2014 JAIS raids on the Bible Society of Malaysia<sup>114</sup> (2015, 330). Some of these incidents, like the contentions between

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<sup>111</sup> 8-11 March 2001, Malay-Muslim and Indian-Hindus clashed with 6 deaths and 40 injured.

<sup>112</sup> July 2009, a cow's head – the cow being sacred in Hinduism - was brought from a mosque to the state office where it was stomped on and spat at. This was a show of Muslim dissatisfaction at the construction of a Hindu temple in their area. Legitimizing their act, the construction of the temple was cancelled.

<sup>113</sup> Malay-language versions of the Bible were seized on grounds that they were used to proselytize to Muslims or confuse them. Malay-language Bibles have been in use since 1612, especially in Sabah and Sarawak which have a large number of Malay-speaking Christians. These bibles are also regularly used by Indonesian Christians in Malaysia who do not speak English.

<sup>114</sup> In January 2014, JAIS raided the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM) and seized 320 copies of Malay-language bibles, and 10 copies of Iban-language (indigenous) bibles. The contention here is that JAIS has no jurisdiction over non-Muslims, nor did the accompanying police officers have a legal warrant. This raid was consequently qualified by authorities on grounds of protecting Muslims.

Christians and state-Islam<sup>115</sup> stemming in part from the 2014 JAIS raids, are as yet unresolved (for example, see “High Court sets,” 2016).

From a broadly similar perspective, Farish Noor employs Julia Kristeva’s logic of oppositional dialectics that shares a broad basis with Lacan’s ‘other’ (2001, 6). The excluded Other is viewed as a constitutive component of the Self, where the identities are always relational. But the relationship between these relational identities of the Self and the Other are never truly neutral, nor is it free from the dictates of power or violence. Thus, the Other may be summoned to serve as a counterpoint to the Self, but the entry of the Other is always a disabling (inferior) one. With this lens, Farish contends that the Malay-Muslim reformers and religionists have demonized the non-Islamic Malay past as the subjugated inferior to the Muslim present (2001, 7-8). By constructing a historical timeline of past and present, Farish applies Kristeva’s interpretation of the Other to these historical blocs in describing the exteriorizing of the Malays from their Hindu past, while interiorizing their Muslim/Malay present (2001, 2, 8-25). He proposes that in creating a historical timeline that constructs a discursive cleavage between the Hindu past and the Islamic present, the past in effect, became the inferior Other to the Malays.

### *Conclusion*

Since the nation’s independence in 1957, Malay identity has largely been defined by the UMNO-dominated government. This chapter establishes that UMNO’s success in this regard, is broadly dependent on at least three strategies. The first strategy lies in the potency of UMNO’s religious and ethnic discourse in securing the emotional support of Malay and/or Muslim communalists. This is effectuated through the mobilization of religious and cultural meanings encoded in Malay

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<sup>115</sup> My use of the term ‘state-Islam’ refers to the nation’s Islamic bureaucracy as a category, as achieved through political Islam (a term defined by Arnold Puyok at the beginning of this section). This needs clarification since each state’s Islamic authority is officially autonomous under the state’s sultan, except for Federal states which are under the jurisdiction of JAKIM which reports to the government. Unofficially however, the variables of which are UMNO’s political influence, the correspondingly reduced political powers of the sultans, and the many overlapping areas of Islamic jurisdictions between the religious bodies, means the true dynamics of power is obfuscated. A discussion of these dynamics would exceed the scope of this study. For an example of a specialized study of Islam in Malaysia, see Müller (2014).



historical narratives and race-encoded Islamic prerogatives. The second strategy is the formulation of national policies that privilege these Malay communal priorities at the expense of the ethnic minority citizenry. These national policies consequentially affirm the historical and race-encoded narratives as a truism, and thus legitimate grounds for racial primacy. The third strategy is the consistently ambivalent state rhetoric that obfuscates any clear understanding of Malayness. This subsequently produces contradictory state positions along each end of the modern-traditional binary which increases the general anxiety over Malay identity's position, while simultaneously over-valorizing constructed external threats.

In unfolding the dynamics of these Malaysian Malay identity politics and the accompanying heightening of state and federal-level Islamic conservatism, we also invariably observe their detrimental effects on Malay gender and inter-communal relationships. These wider contests over identity have ramifications on intra-communal expressions and ideas over Malay-Muslim hierarchies of genders. Pro-women actors have continually challenged the dominant hegemony of male privilege, though their successes in obtaining the state's apparent concessions to women's rights is without real political will. Instead, it is evident that these gender struggles were utilized by the administration for partisan agendas, notably to contrast UMNO against the more conservative opposition party PAS. In taking a longitudinal perspective, we also observe that since there was no genuine change in male attitudes on gender issues, the years after 2003 have seen a regressive slide towards the public articulation of conservative gender dynamics framed through Islam and Malayness.

These realities reveal that ultimately, sectarian and inter-communal factions on either side of the liberal-Islamic, traditionalist-revivalist, or moderate-conservative dichotomies are essentially embroiled in contests for the right to decide the nation's Islamic or ethnically-linked economic trajectory. UMNO's three strategies for Malayness are thus articulated to provide the party with its grassroots political legitimacy. As we have observed, this discursive site

continually attempts to (re)determine quotidian Malayness, while simultaneously obfuscating any clear rendering of its meaning.

In taking a wider perspective, it is observed that the contrasting of 'us' with 'them' – 'othering' – is inherently a central component of UMNO's strategy. This recurring construction of 'others' has consistently strengthened the constituents of UMNO's male-privileging Malay nationalist narrative of nationhood as the idealized fantasy of Malay otherness. In this sense, 'other' takes on its duality of meaning. We will see in later chapters that this construction is projected even onto the television text of *Senario* in a variety of ways. For the purposes of our discussions, I will hereafter refer to 'other' as Other, and the symbolic Other as the big Other.

The following chapter extends our discussion of UMNO's political control over Malay identity to the nation's broadcasting landscape where we identify the controls and measures set in place by the administration for an ideological control of Malaysians and specifically the Malays. Furthermore, we will briefly discuss how these have had an impact on the television situation comedy *Senario*.

## CHAPTER 3

### Situating the Malay Narrative on Television

*Radio, film, and television by degrees reduce to a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter ... With the arrival of the new media the form of communication as such has changed; they have had an impact ... more penetrating ... than was ever possible for the press ... In comparison with printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance ... deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree.*

*–Jürgen Habermas (1989, 170-171)*

The state's intervention in Malaysia's broadcast framework is not dissimilar from the broadcasting milieu of many other nations. Primary among the considerations involved in formulating broadcast strategies are national and religio-cultural sensitivities. Within the wider context of national development and national integration, broadcast media and specifically television, is perceived by the state as having a vital role to play (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 152). Elihu Katz & George Wedell have argued that most social planners and government leaders regard mass media as catalysts for national socio-economic development (1977, vi). Zaharom Nain, Mustafa Anuar & Carol Kirton (1995, 120-122), and Zaharom & Mustafa (2000, 152) observe for instance, that the Malaysian model has broad similarities with Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, and Everett Rogers' 'dominant paradigm' perspective that claims a connection between communication and a nation's modernization. Given these notions, it is unsurprising that the Malaysian state has long regarded television as being especially suited for the task of changing the citizenry's anti-development attitudes. These changes would, according to the dominant paradigm, subsequently lead to national integration.

I will demonstrate in this chapter, however, that Malaysian television was not singularly deployed to effect national integration but rather to further the

objectives of UMNO, the dominant Malay party within the governing coalition.<sup>116</sup> First, I will provide an overview of the history of Malaysia's broadcasting legislation, with specific attention to the context of television, before addressing its programming shifts specifically with respect to commercial station TV3, the Malay station on which the situation comedy (sitcom) *Senario* is aired. In the second part of the chapter which examines UMNO's complex television ownership structure, we will observe that two issues related to Malaysian television are of particular interest; the lack of restraint in the state's institutional control, as well as the unmoderated political power of the elites. The third part of this chapter will discuss the ethnicized dimension to TV3's broadcast model yielding a further understanding of UMNO's indirect role in determining television content, as well as its demarcation of ethnic-specific televisual spaces, both of which can be deployed to normalize UMNO's religio-cultural politics.

#### *The State On-Air or How I Learnt to Love Malaysia*

Like the governments of many other nations,<sup>117</sup> the government of Malaysia is the dominant force in shaping the national television landscape. Foremost among the methods employed by the state, is broadcasting legislation. It is however, important to first establish the state's attitude towards television as context for our subsequent discussion of broadcasting laws. With that aim, our discussion will explore the origins of Malaysian television, and the involvement and consistency of the state's influence since its establishment. The primary studies that inform these discussions are by John Lent (1977), Asiah Sarji (1982), R. Karthigesu (1986, 1991, 1994), Drew McDaniel (1994), and Zaharom Nain & Mustafa Anuar (2000).

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<sup>116</sup> For the purposes of expediency, I will only make references to UMNO and the case of Malaysia throughout the thesis. By excluding mention of non-Malaysian examples, I do not imply that this relationship between a nation's broadcast infrastructure with the state, and/or the dominant parties that govern the state, is unique to Malaysia or UMNO. Neither do I seek to imply that UMNO's motivations for control over broadcasting is a unique case.

<sup>117</sup> See Kira Kosnick (2004) for an example of Germany, and Griseldis Kirsch (2015) for an example of Japan.

Historically, the state's control over media was initiated by the British colonial government in Malaya when they established the wireless system in 1921 (Asiah 1982, 150). Lent (1977, 34) and Syed Arabi & Shafizan Mohd. (2006, 86) have observed that by the 1940s, the British colonial administration had established control over Malayan newspapers, radio, and television. State control over mass media continued fluidly through the Japanese occupation of Malaya (1942-45), where it was used in a similar fashion to further the objectives of the Japanese administration (Asiah 1982, 153). Lent suggests that two "post-World War II crises" were central to the formulation of policies and regulations that underpin Malaysia's contemporary media structure (1977, 33-34).

The first crisis was the Malayan Emergency of the 1940s and 1950s. During this period, the threat of communist insurgency against British occupation resulted in a series of government media campaigns (Lent 1977, 34; Syed & Shafizan 2006, 86). Lent observed that private media thus presented news that sought to counteract the activities of Malaya's communist insurgents (1977, 34).

Concurrently, government leaflets, posters and films were distributed in the countryside together with free radio sets to ensure that rural communities had access to these broadcasts (Barber 1972, 270). The Printing Presses Act was also enacted in 1948 to outlaw publications that were deemed 'subversive' by the government (Lent 1977, 34). With respect to media legislation, this Act of 1948 is arguably the most significant development to emerge from this crisis, for it introduced the requirement for an annual renewal of printing permits and licenses of media personnel. Post-independence, the "entire press control apparatus designed by the colonial government", which was "preserved intact and reinforced" was adopted by the Malaysian government (Lowe 1987, 7-53). In its present permutation - the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 - the Act still serves as a dominant print media regulator within the nation.

The second crisis revolved around the Indonesian-Malaysian confrontation that lasted from 1963 to 1966 (Lent 1977, 34).<sup>118</sup> Lent describes the Malaysian

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<sup>118</sup> The Indonesian-Malaysian Confrontation or *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation), stemmed from Indonesia's military opposition to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia (Mackie 1974).

Ministry of Information and Broadcasting as strengthening and expanding the nation's broadcast facilities to circumvent any influence by Indonesian broadcasts during this period (1977, 34). The consequent unification of broadcasting facilities – Radios Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah – resulted in the formation of Radio Malaysia in 1963. Within three weeks of Radio Malaysia's founding, a new radio programme - *Suara Malaysia* (Voice of Malaysia), was created to counter Indonesian broadcasts (Lent 1977, 34). It was under these circumstances that Malaysia's first television channel was also established in 1963 for similar purposes.<sup>119</sup>

While the former two crises were fundamentally important to the founding of Malaysian broadcasting, Lent (1977, 34), Zaharom & Mustafa (2000, 151), and Karthigesu (1991, 190) consider the race riots of May 1969 as the catalyst for contemporary mass media policy. Karthigesu (1991, 190) notes that the Alliance government ceased the printing of all newspapers when a state of emergency was declared in May 1969. Radio and television networks were severely monitored, with operations confined primarily to broadcasts of emergency announcements and statements by the authorities. But the media blackout was disastrous. Without any credible authoritative narrative to account for the unfolding developments of the riots, rampant rumours led to further bi-communal violence, compounding inter-ethnic tensions (McDaniel 1994, 82, 84; Karthigesu 1991, 190). In the riot's aftermath, new mass media policies were introduced by the government to assist in achieving nation-building goals (Lent 1977, 34). Rationalizing these new policies, then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak stated:

This nation cannot afford to perpetuate a system that permits anybody to say or do things which would set one race against another. If the events of May 13 are not to occur again, if this Nation is to survive, we must make sure that subjects which are likely to engender racial tensions are not exploited by irresponsible opportunists. We can only guarantee this by placing such subjects beyond the reach of race demagogues ... and other subversives.

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The Federation of Malaysia was the amalgamation of the Federation of Malaya (now known as West Malaysia), Singapore, and the then British protectorates of North Borneo and Sarawak, collectively known as British Borneo (known today as East Malaysia).

<sup>119</sup> These purposes are discussed later in the chapter.

The authority of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was subsequently centralized and strengthened. All government mass media was channelled through its three departments – the Department of Broadcasting, the Department of Information, and *Filem Negara Malaysia* (National Film Department of Malaysia)(Karthigesu 1991, 135).<sup>120</sup> Five objectives were formulated towards the end of 1969 by then Minister of Information, Hamzah bin Abu Samah. These were adopted as the operational objectives for national radio and television network Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM)<sup>121</sup> (McDaniel 1994, 84; Karthigesu 1991, 190). While the phrasing may differ slightly in each of their three accounts, McDaniel (1994, 85), Lent (1978, 143), and Zaharom & Mustafa (2000, 154-155) generally agree<sup>122</sup> that these objectives were:

1. To explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage, policies and programs of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the people.
2. To stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirements of government.
3. To foster national unity in our multi-racial society through the extensive use of *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian Language).
4. To assist in promoting civic consciousness and in fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture.
5. To provide suitable elements of education, general information and entertainment.

Lent reasoned that these objectives allowed Malaysia to inoculate itself against criticisms or controversies that would divert attention away from the state's supposed focus on socio-economic development (1978, 72). Karthigesu

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<sup>120</sup> These three departments are now under the purview of *Kementerian Komunikasi dan Multimedia Malaysia* (Ministry of Communications and Multimedia), more popularly referred to as KKMM ("Jabatan/Agensi Di Bawah KKMM", 2016).

<sup>121</sup> RTM was the only radio and television network at the time, and operated under the Ministry of Information's Department of Broadcasting. The stations operating under RTM will be discussed in a later section titled 'Television in Malaysia'.

<sup>122</sup> While Lent, McDaniel, and Zaharom & Mustafa list the five objectives in different sequential orders, the first two objectives have consistently occupied the same first and second positions.

observed that the foci of these objectives were Malay nationalism and Malay language, both of which were guided by the post-riot dual policies of 1971 – the New Economic Policy and the National Culture Policy (1994, 94). Zaharom & Mustafa interpreted these objectives to mean that RTM’s function was for the transmission of government policies and programmes and would marginalize views and ideas that were not aligned to the government’s (2000, 155). Drew McDaniel observed, “a higher consideration is that radio and TV motivate the public to respond to the government’s ‘requirements’” (1994, 85). Thematically, these scholars’ views on RTM’s goals would appear to corroborate the purposes of the Ministry of Information at the time. The *Malaysia Official Year Book 1988* states that the Ministry strove to “analyse, plan, coordinate and implement the communication policy of the country so that society, both in the country and abroad, would fully appreciate the policies, programs, and activities of the Malaysian government” (1989, 188).

In all instances, we observe that these developments in national television policy were designed as a safeguard against any encroachment on the state’s power, and as RTM’s objectives reveal, for an amplification of state control. It is notable that this trajectory has remained largely unchanged even after four decades, for these goals are still broadly echoed by RTM (“RTM Vision, Mission & Objective”, 2015), whose present objectives are:

1. *Menyebarkan luas maklumat melalui pelbagai platform siaran.*  
The mass dissemination of information through various broadcasting platforms.<sup>124</sup>
2. *Memangkin pembangunan industri kandungan kreatif negara.*  
To develop the nation’s creative content industry.
3. *Mendukung warisan dan budaya bangsa Malaysia.*  
To uphold the heritage and culture of the Malaysian race/people.
4. *Memperluas jaringan kerjasama dan kolaborasi strategik dalam dan luar negara.*  
To widen the scope of strategic cooperation and collaboration, both nationally and internationally.

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<sup>124</sup> English version is translated by the researcher.



The meaning of 'the heritage and culture of the Malaysian race/people' is unclear. Its vagueness is perhaps deliberate, allowing for varied positions according to political need that shifts from one interpretation to another depending on the identity discourse of the time. From the perspective of programming strategies, RTM's website reasons that alternating entertainment programmes with on-air information is needed since "being laden with too much information creates adverse effects" ("RTM Background", 2015). It is instructive that RTM does not describe what constitutes "too much information" and for whom, nor does it explain what these "adverse effects" are. The ambiguity of the reasoning presumably validates the need for the state's control over information.

There is now support for creative content production within RTM's objectives, though academic findings suggest that creative content development, together with entertainment and education, operate primarily to disseminate information aligned to a state agenda. In 1986 for example, Karthigesu suggested that as a national broadcaster, RTM is central to the promotion of national values and identity. Three decades later, studies by Latiffah *et al.* (2009), and Roslina *et al.* (2013) similarly found that RTM prioritizes local identity and culture. In 2005, Amos Owen Thomas suggested that under government regulations, RTM and other Malaysian commercial stations operated to ideologically effect national integration and economic development (2005, 133). McDaniel (1994), Lent (1977), Foo (2004), Asiah (1982), and Zaharom & Mustafa (2000), share the same view as Karthigesu, Thomas, Latiffah *et al.*, and Roslina *et al.* above.

The most significant acknowledgement of RTM's true role originated from the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in April 2016, who praised RTM's efforts in fostering national development and for cultivating "the image of a government elected by the people" ("RTM Promotes Unity," 2016). Communications and Multimedia Minister Salleh Said Keruak encouraged RTM to continue acting "as the main medium to build the perception of the people and to promote loyalty and love for the country" ("RTM Promotes Unity," 2016). These realities suggest

that notwithstanding the various wordings used on public literature throughout the years, the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government's stance on broadcasting, primarily channelled through RTM, has remained largely unchanged since 1969.

These observations are crucial to our understanding of the dynamics between the BN government and Malaysian television. They reflect the notion that mass media needs to be subservient to the administration. The growth of RTM and Malaysian television more broadly, is accompanied by its role as an intermediary between the government and the citizenry. In almost all cases, RTM has adhered to, and has been praised for, facilitating a positive view and understanding of the BN government to the citizenry. When we consider the events that allowed for UMNO's political dominance,<sup>126</sup> it would not be overreaching to infer that RTM has been operationalized to serve sectional interests rather than Malaysian society at large. Given our focus on Malay identity within the sitcom *Senario*, RTM is of great significance for we will observe in the subsequent section that UMNO-owned TV3 operates with similar operational frameworks.

Thus far, a review of the literature highlights several points regarding the ideological grounding delimiting the operations of Malaysian television. Like their approach to other forms of governance, the BN coalition has retained a colonial trajectory to mass media governance in Malaysia. This includes an advancement or augmentation of these controls after the race riots of 1969. In examining the objectives of RTM and corroborating them with state institutions, we observed that broadcast legislative strategies were aligned and intensified for socio-political control. For the remainder of this chapter, the different legislative strategies established by the BN government governing television broadcasting will be explored in more detail, followed by a discussion on narrowcasting<sup>127</sup> and its implications towards social stratification. However, it is important to first establish the landscape of contemporary television in Malaysia by identifying the 'main players'. I discuss these by first providing an overview of

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<sup>126</sup> Discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>127</sup> Narrowcasting is the practice of streamlining channel content for a specific demographic. Examples of these types of channels are Syfy channel, Cartoon Network, or History Channel.

RTM and its bearing on the commercial station TV3, on which *Senario* was telecast.

### *Television in Malaysia*

Malaya's Department of Broadcasting was established by the British colonial administration on 1 April 1946 in Singapore for the management of all radio services ("RTM Background", 2015). Malaysia's first television channel, Talivishen Malaysia, was inaugurated on 23 December 1963 by then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman (Karthigesu 1991, 130; Lent 1977, 34). By that date, the Department of Broadcasting had moved from its offices in Singapore and was operating from its new premises in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. On 17 November 1969, oversight and regulation of all broadcast operations were incorporated into the Ministry of Information.<sup>128</sup> A department called Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) was subsequently established by the Ministry in the same year for the management of all state-owned television and radio stations. With the establishment of the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia (KKMM) in May 2013 ("Ministry of Communications," 2015), RTM was incorporated into the KKMM where it is still known as the KKMM's Department of Broadcasting Malaysia (*Jabatan Penyiaran Malaysia*) ("Ministry of Communications," 2016).

Wang Lay Kim (2010, 23), and Zainur & Nawiyah (1996, 45) note that RTM's first channel RTM 1, started its telecast on 6 October 1969. A second channel RTM 2, started its telecast on 17 November 1969.<sup>131</sup> On 1 March 1994, RTM 1 was renamed TV1, while RTM 2 was rebranded as TV2 ("RTM Background", 2015). From the outset, both channels operated according to very different rationales where RTM 1 was focused on 'promoting national unity, security and

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<sup>128</sup> This was the post-1969 race riots unification of the Department of Broadcasting, the Department of Information, and *Filem Negara Malaysia* (National Film Department of Malaysia) under the Ministry of Information that was discussed earlier.

<sup>131</sup> Some discrepancies in the names of RTM 1 and RTM 2 exist. An earlier study by D. Guimary in 1977 asserts that the first channel was Network One, while the second channel introduced in 1969 was called Network Two (1977, 161). Zaharom & Mustafa posit instead, that these two channels were Channel One and Channel Two (2000, 159). Furthermore, they note that Channel One was renamed the National Network. RTM's current website gives credence to Guimary's naming as it terms the two channels historically as *Rangkaian Satu* (Network One), and *Rangkaian Dua* (Network Two) ("RTM Background", 2015).

development”, while RTM 2 was given a “more entertainment-oriented role” (Zainur & Nawiyah 1996, 45). This differing operating focus meant that RTM 1 engaged with Malay language content, and was focused on the larger task of national development and national integration. Zaharom & Mustafa notes that the Ministry of Information’s aim to propagate “Malay-centric” opinions led to RTM’s objective of entrenching Malay elements on local television (2000, 159). This ideological directive manifested itself in a wide variety of Malay programmes that Zaharom & Mustafa suggest, were thematically engaged with the promotion of Malay culture (2000, 161).

As a counterpoint to RTM 1’s locally produced content, RTM 2 featured foreign imported programming alongside vernacular content. Latiffah Pawanteh, Samsudin Rahim & Fauziah Ahmad observe that RTM 2’s content was aimed at minority groups and aired in the languages of Tamil and Chinese (2009, 23). Imported English programmes were also included for the English-speaking viewers, though Juliana Wahab, Wang Lay Kim & Sharifah Shahnaz suggest that these were meant to help with the development of local programmes (2013, 169). Between 1969 and 1984, both channels monopolized the nation’s broadcasting milieu. It was the appearance of privately-owned channel TV3 (TV-Three or *TV-Tiga*) in 1984, where the sitcom *Senario* first began to air more than a decade later, that finally introduced a genuinely commercial element in the nation’s programming direction<sup>132</sup> (Zainur & Nawiyah 1996, 45; McDaniel 1994, 151-160; Thomas 2005, 133; Wang 2010, 23).

Zaharom & Mustafa noted that like RTM1 and RTM2,<sup>133</sup> TV3’s ownership structure reveals that it was neither politically nor editorially independent (2000, 165).<sup>134</sup> Any anxieties regarding its autonomy or independence were assuaged by the obvious involvement of the state in TV3 – politically, legally, and economically – right from the outset. Wang (2010, 23) and McDaniel (1994, 149)

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<sup>132</sup> The difference between RTM’s and TV3’s programming is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>133</sup> Note that the rebranding of RTM 1 and RTM 2 to TV1 and TV2 only occurred in 1994.

<sup>134</sup> The laws that govern television and the operating licenses of broadcasters will be discussed in the next section.

observed that the first majority shareholder of TV3<sup>136</sup> was Fleet Group, an investment company owned by UMNO. Gomez (1990, 73; 1999, 114) and Gomez & Jomo (1999, 91) revealed that a 50 percent stake was collectively held between Fleet Group and Daim Zainuddin (40 percent and 10 percent respectively). Daim was incidentally, also the director of Fleet Group and, in the same year that TV3 began broadcasting in 1984, he was appointed Minister of Finance, a post he held for almost a decade. Another UMNO controlled company, Utusan Melayu Press, held 20 percent and Maika Holdings, the investment company of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), another governing coalition party, held a further 10 percent (Gomez & Jomo 1999, 91). Former UMNO politician Syed Kechik, held the remaining 20 percent through the Syed Kechik foundation. This meant that, either directly or by proxy, 100 percent of TV3 shares were effectively controlled by UMNO.

Zaharom suggests that both the successes of Malaysia's privatization policy and the entrepreneurial New Malays were embodied in the ownership structure of TV3<sup>137</sup> (1996, 165). However, TV3's ownership structure clearly reflects an advancement of partisan Malay businesses rather than wider Malay communal interests. As such, the premise for criticisms levelled at both the NEP and Mahathir's New Malay identity – that they primarily enabled influential Malay politicians and businessmen with close links to UMNO leaders to amass wealth<sup>138</sup> – is made manifestly clear in the case of TV3. Given that all of TV3 shares were held either directly by UMNO through ownership or indirectly through politically-connected individuals, the control of all three free-to-air (FTA) stations within the nation at the time lay completely with UMNO. Of foremost importance is TV3's complex interconnected ownership structure, for it reflects the multiple layers of control that goes beyond any simple vertical ownership structure. This, as we shall see in the subsequent changes to TV3's corporate structure, outlines a mechanism where political, business, or communal pressures can be exerted laterally, from different vectors. Within our

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<sup>136</sup> TV3 is sometimes referred to as STMB (Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad), the corporate name of TV3.

<sup>137</sup> Malaysia's privatization policies and the New Malay were discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>138</sup> This was discussed in Chapter 2.

focus, this directly translates to various political and corporate mechanisms being set in place for UMNO to exert its influence over popular discourse on Malay identity.

Operating as a commercial station seeking to attract advertising revenue, TV3's first year of operations resulted in the import of newer and more expensive programmes in both English and Chinese (Thomas 2005, 145). Even as a state-linked station, this practice was misjudged for it eventually elicited public censure for its frequent depictions of what was regarded to be un-Islamic cultural practices (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 172). Within a year of its introduction, TV3 had become a consistent and convenient target for the nation's moral guardians. On July 1985, TV3's general manager, then Mohammad Noor Salleh declared, "No more controversies. It's easier for us to ride on RTM's coat-tails" (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 172). This change in TV3's programming direction underscores the importance of RTM's objectives. For the state broadcaster (RTM) is now at the centre – insofar as compliancy to the state is concerned – from which all periphery broadcast operations are adjudged. With this view, TV3's decision to emulate RTM (TV1 and TV2) was made under the pressures of communal socio-cultural demands that were presumably shaped through decades of social engineering by the administration.<sup>139</sup> The consequent impact on production practices, specifically on TV3's production of *Senario*, will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter.

The environment leading to TV3's programming shift exemplified the rural-urban dichotomy that confronted Mahathir's New Malay identity, now reformulated into a divided viewership, some of whom viewed TV3's liberal inclusion of foreign programming as problematic. Zaharom & Mustafa observed that it was the draconian laws, and an increasingly conservative population socialized through an education and religious value system that preached conformity, which resulted in this 'sensitive' Malaysian society (2000, 173). Within the wider scenario of Malaysian television, this programming shift firmly aligned all three FTA channels of the time with state imperatives.

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<sup>139</sup> This was discussed, in relation to Malay statist identity, in Chapter 2.

The subsequent shifts in UMNO's political leadership in the 1990s led to TV3's 1993 corporate buyout by Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB) (Wang 2010, 23; Gomez & Jomo 1999, 126). Under MRCB's ownership of TV3, four close associates of the then Finance Minister, Anwar Ibrahim<sup>140</sup> – Khalid Ahmad, Mohd. Noor Mutalib, Kadir Jasin, and Ahmad Nazri Abdullah – collectively owned a 49.63 percent controlling stake in TV3 (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 166). Given that these four individuals were senior NSTP (The New Straits Times Press)<sup>141</sup> editors and executives, they were UMNO's channel of control over TV3, for at the time, a controlling 48.01 percent of NSTP shares were held by UMNO (Gomez & Jomo 1999, 68).

After the Asian economic crisis of 1997,<sup>142</sup> MRCB relinquished control of TV3 to its current owner, UMNO's media investment group Media Prima Berhad (MPB), which took over 100 percent equity interest in TV3 (Wang 2011, 23; "No decision yet", 2007). As of May 2016, MPB's senior management includes both the group managing editor and the chief executive officer of NSTP (*Media Prima Berhad Annual Report 2015*, 84-85), while MPB's chief executive officer, Kamal Khalid, was formerly the Head of Communications at the Prime Minister's Department from 2003 till 2009 (*Media Prima Berhad Annual Report 2015*, 83). In a similar rubric to previous iterations of UMNO's control over TV3, the inclusion of NSTP members and former political associates within MPB-TV3's corporate structure is a recurring cross-ownership strategy that augments UMNO's control across the party's media assets. Moreover, MPB's station ownership now extends beyond TV3 to include the channels 8TV, ntv7, and TV9, which collectively accounts for four out of the nation's five commercial terrestrial or free-to-air (FTA) channels (*Media Prima Berhad Annual Report*

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<sup>140</sup> At the time of MRCB's buyout of TV3, Anwar Ibrahim was the Minister of Finance. He was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in 1993, and held both posts until 1998.

<sup>141</sup> NSTP is Malaysia's largest publisher which publishes three national newspapers; the English language *New Straits Times* (NST), and the Malay language *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* (*Media Prima Berhad Financial & Business Review – 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2012*, 4). As an English daily, NST also has the widest circulation in Malaysia.

<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, 1998 was the year when Anwar Ibrahim was formally charged with sodomy. As a company associated with Anwar, MRCB would by then, have presumably fallen out of favour with UMNO.

2015, 49). In addition to television stations, MPB also owns three radio stations, as well as what is now an increased equity interest of 98 percent<sup>143</sup> in NSTP (*Media Prima Berhad Annual Report 2015*, 49).

Malaysia's fifth FTA television station, TV Al-Hijrah, is the latest terrestrial station to be established in Malaysia. It is state-owned and operates under the federal religious authority – the Department of Islamic Affairs Malaysia (JAKIM)<sup>144</sup> ("TV Al Hijrah to," 2010). On 16 September 2009, it started broadcasting as Malaysia's first Islamic television station<sup>145</sup> with the primary objective of "educating, entertaining, and uniting Muslims"<sup>146</sup> ("TV Al Hijrah", n.d.). Given that TV Al-Hijrah operates under JAKIM, it is not associated with RTM, nor is it subsumed under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia (KKMM).<sup>148</sup> Instead, TV Al-Hijrah operates in cooperation with other state and federal Islamic organizations and institutions,<sup>149</sup> in an almost parallel broadcasting eco-system sustained primarily by the nation's substantial Islamic infrastructure.

State influence is however not in question, for JAKIM is a federal-level state agency and TV Al-Hijrah still conforms to national censorship laws and broadcast legislations. Within the wider national broadcasting terrain, the state thus directly controls and owns TV1, TV2, and TV Al-Hijrah. Indirectly through Media Prima Berhad, UMNO has control over all the nation's commercial FTA stations. This once again places all terrestrial or FTA channels – including TV3 where *Senario* is aired – under the direct or indirect control of the government and specifically UMNO, the dominant party within the governing coalition.

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<sup>143</sup> UMNO's equity in NSTP was 48.01 percent during MRCB's ownership of TV3 in the 1990s.

<sup>144</sup> JAKIM was discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>145</sup> Translated from "*stesen tv Islami pertama di Malaysia*".

<sup>146</sup> Translated from "*mendidik, menghibur dan menyatukan ummah*".

<sup>148</sup> As discussed previously, RTM operates as one of the departments under KKMM. To reiterate, the legislations that govern all these broadcasters will be discussed in the following section. This may provide more insight to the national laws that do apply to TV Al-Hijrah.

<sup>149</sup> Presumably for content and religious verifications. In addition to JAKIM's emblem, TV Al-Hijrah's website explicitly features the emblems of state-level religious authorities (JAWI, JAIS, IKIM, JKSM, YWM, MUFTIWP, YAPEIM, YADIM, WZ, MAIWP, JAWHAR), and the Muslim pilgrimage fund Tabung Haji ("TV Al Hijrah", n.d.).



While the scope of this research includes only terrestrial or free-to-air (FTA) channels, an overview of television offerings available on other platforms will nonetheless provide a more complete account of all stakeholders of Malaysian television services. There are now three platforms in addition to Media Prima and RTM's more traditional method of broadcast. The oldest of the three is the satellite digital broadcast services (DBS) platform utilized by the nation's subscription-based, sole satellite DBS television, ASTRO (All Asia Television and Radio Company). The second television service is HyppTV which operates on an Internet Protocol TV (IPTV) platform. HyppTV is offered by the national telecommunications provider Telekom Malaysia and is available only as a subscription-based service that comes bundled with the provider's internet broadband service. The newest of the three platforms is the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) platform operated by MyTV. DTT is expected to transform the entire Malaysian television landscape, given that the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia aims to migrate all current FTA broadcasts onto the DTT platform, and "switch off" all analogue, non-DTT FTA streams nation-wide by 2018 (Singh, 2014). To date, MyTV retransmits current FTA channels – TV1, TV2, TV3, 8TV, nt7, TV9, and TV Al-Hijrah – but does not host any unique non-FTA channels (MCMC 2015).

It is notable that ASTRO's 4<sup>th</sup> quarter report<sup>151</sup> for the year 2014 reveals that it commands a national viewership share of 57% while FTA channels (TV1, TV2, and MPB channels) have a combined Malaysian viewership share of 43%<sup>152</sup> ("Astro 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter" 2014, 6). Two obvious exclusions from this data are the viewership shares of HyppTV and MyTV. The national viewership data above was extracted from a DTT presentation given by the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Commission's (MCMC) in 2015 (MCMC 2015) and corroborated with ASTRO's 4<sup>th</sup> quarter report for 2014. Neither source includes data for HyppTV and MyTV, though the reason for their exclusion is unclear. This will not however, affect our discussion on MPB's viewership data later in this chapter

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<sup>151</sup> We review ASTRO's viewership instead of HyppTV or MyTV since ASTRO has been operating for 20 years. Its viewership growth would by now, have reached an approximate saturation-point.

<sup>152</sup> Based on television viewership data sourced from Nielsen Television Audience Measurement.

since it will be a review of MPB's inter-station viewership. One other complication with the data lies with the 'must-carry' retransmission arrangement.<sup>153</sup> Malaysia's FTA channels are also telecast on ASTRO, thus allowing subscribers to view FTA programming through ASTRO's satellite service. With this arrangement, the obvious question is whether an ASTRO subscriber watching FTA channels via the ASTRO digital service, is logged as an FTA viewer or an ASTRO viewer by Nielsen television. Since this would affect the viewership figures on either side, different permutations to questions like these only serve to complicate any effort in neatly dividing the viewership share between FTA channels and ASTRO.

In any case, based on the viewership share above, there is still relatively strong viewership for all terrestrial FTA stations in spite of ASTRO's more diverse channel offerings. In the context of FTA channels, of particular note are the Malay-language stations, specifically TV3, TV9, and TV Al-Hijrah. Foo (2004), Mohd. Sidin & Amira (2010), Wang (2010), and Mohd. Azlanshah (2012) all agree that these stations consistently draw in the largest audiences. With the Malay ethnic community equating to approximately 63% of Malaysia's population, this is not surprising.<sup>154</sup> Let us view this reality through the lens of UMNO's strategic monopoly on broadcasting.

As I have indicated at the beginning of this chapter, RTM's broadcast objectives, at the elementary level, prioritize the administration's agenda. The point at issue is UMNO's 'dynastic' hold on Malaysian politics – insofar as Malay religio-cultural identity markers are predicated – that frames the agenda of the administration. In the previous chapter, I suggested certain attributes to UMNO's social engineering of the Malays and the resulting communal ideological imprint left by

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<sup>153</sup> I refer to a broadcast model that broadly references the 'must-carry' channels that originate from the American cable broadcast system where the Federal Communications Commission regulates that locally licensed TV stations must be carried on a cable provider's system. A retransmission consent rule originates from the same legislative body to state that cable operators must obtain permission from broadcasters before carrying their programming ("FCC Strengthens Retransmission," 2014).

<sup>154</sup> According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia conducted every 10 years by the Department of Statistics of Malaysia, the ethnic distribution of Malaysia is 63.1% Malays, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians, 4.3% other non-Malay *Bumiputeras*, and 0.7% classified as Others. (Jadual Hayat Ringkas Malaysia 2010-2013).

the Malay party's persistent socio-political positioning. Nowhere is this phenomenon more acutely manifested than in the Malay-language stations, for as indicated previously, ethnically categorized demographics can be politically mobilized by the state. One potential for this political actuation is clarified in the subsequent section on censorship and TV3's production processes. When we consider that UMNO derives its political currency from a self-constructed role as the saviour of the Malays – a theme that was discussed in the previous chapter – the significance of UMNO's ideological influence over TV3, TV9, and TV Al-Hijrah is brought into clearer focus. Within the dynamics of this politico-ideological determination, Malay television and specifically our focus, TV3, is appropriately positioned for the formulation of a Malay identity that is defined almost solely by UMNO. The complex broadcasting legislative apparatus – that at an elementary level functions to normalize and maintain state configurations of Malay identity – will be discussed in the following section.

#### *Overview of the Broadcasting Legal Framework*

Besides ownership of the mass media institutions themselves, governmental control is also exerted through other channels. This control is primarily manifested through the legal framework. There are several acts related to this control with overlapping jurisdictions. Furthermore, regulatory bodies for both film and television are closely linked in Malaysia, and broadcasting legislation often applies to both simultaneously (Foo 2004, 112, 114-115, 124). McDaniel identified two types of Malaysian broadcasting laws. The first type of laws are regulations that define and limit content, while the second type are enactments that delimit actions or responsibilities (McDaniel 1994, 92). In the proceeding sections, both facets to the legislative framework for Malaysian broadcasting will be discussed, starting with an overview of the government's primary legislation for broadcast governance – the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 – followed by a discussion of the state's apparatus for the implementation and facilitation of the television legislative process – the Film Censorship Board.

#### *Communications and Multimedia Act 1998*

The boundaries of freedom of speech and expression accorded to broadcasting is

primarily delimited by the Broadcasting Act 1988. This Act was enacted to facilitate the development of new media technologies such as satellite, cable and digital technology, and the convergence of the multimedia environment. According to Juriah Abdul Jalil (2000, 98), the Broadcasting Act 1988 works to restrict the freedom of broadcasting in the following three ways:

1. Section 4 requires all private broadcasters to obtain an operating license. The section also authorizes the Minister of Information to impose any conditions to the issuance of licenses.
2. The regulating of programme content through the conditions that accompany the issuance of a license. This may include restrictions/limitations to violent, obscene, or such similar content by the licensee.
3. Regulating television advertising through the requirement of an advertisement license. Licensees are expected to operate within the guidelines outlined by the Ministry of Information under Section 21, as well as the RTM Code of Advertising.

R. Sonia, P. Puah, & S. Loone (2005, 61) observe that these stipulations do not in fact, regulate broadcast censorship. Rather, it is the legal control of broadcasters' terms of operations that indirectly influence what content is telecast. The three methods of control suggested by Juriah, foreground the administration's primary strategy - the issuance of operating licenses. With the 1988 Act's subsequent replacement with the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA), the government's scope of jurisdiction has since been widened to include the areas of telecommunication, the internet, and information technology (Juriah 2000, 134-135; Sonia *et al.* 2005, 61).

The CMA is currently under the purview of the *Kementerian Komunikasi dan Multimedia Malaysia* (Ministry of Communications and Multimedia - KKMM) and is overseen by the Communications and Multimedia Commission that was established through a related Act of Parliament<sup>155</sup> ("Ministry of Communications," 2014). Citing then Chairman of the Commission Syed Hussein

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<sup>155</sup> The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Act 1998 (Act 589).

Mohammad, Juriah suggests that the CMA is structured around the principles of national interest, transparency, and a deregulated framework that focused on more flexibility (2000, 141). The success of this deregulated framework was to be achieved through more sensible self-censorship (Juriah 2000, 141), even as the supposed flexibility offered through the CMA was meant to accommodate the fast pace of development that came with media convergence. Several issues associated with the terms 'flexibility', 'deregulation', and 'self-censorship', need to be discussed.

Sonia *et al.* (2005, 61) observe that compared to the older Broadcasting Act of 1988, the CMA aims for greater transparency. This is presumably attributed to the establishment of a Commission as the administrative body that makes recommendations on issues of licensing – the conditions for restrictions, fees, fines, jail penalties and other such matters (Sonia *et al.* 2005, 61-62). While this is predicated on the logic of not having the Minister as the sole arbiter, its supposed greater transparency is mitigated by the reality that its members are appointed by, answerable to, and operate under, the Communications and Multimedia (KKMM) Minister. This is explicitly stipulated in Sections 10(1) and (3) which state respectively:

The Minister may, from time to time, determine any matter specified in this Act as being subject to Ministerial determination, without consultation with any licensees or persons.

The Commission shall exercise its powers conferred under this Act in a manner which is consistent with the determination.

–Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (2006, 29)

This establishes two points. Firstly, while the Commission is meant to administer and adjudicate on matters pertaining to the CMA, it is in turn, legally bound to implement the directives of the KKMM Minister. Curiously, it did not stipulate that the determination be implemented in a manner consistent with other sections of the Act, which would have provided the semblance of a check-balance mechanism, regardless of its efficacy. Secondly, the Minister's authority over the Commission is further delineated in Subsections 10(4) to 10(7) and Sections 11 to 15, all of which are centred on the notion of Ministerial

determination without any requirement of consultation with any party.

Therefore, it is clear that while the CMA 'deregulates' by being less explicit, and with fewer stipulations to licensees, the notion that it is flexible or transparent is an arguable point since the factors contributing to the adjudication on many matters pertaining to licenses are now less clear.

At first glance, the CMA appears – and it arguably is – suitably poised to embrace the digital age since the flexibility of arbitrary executive decisions can result in effective quick responses that adapt to rapidly shifting times. However, quick decisions may also include license revocation or suspension. This incentivizes more stringent self-censorship from broadcasters since elements that can potentially be deemed prejudicial or sensitive, must be deduced on the part of television producers. This practice of self-censorship and deducing the nature of non-appropriate material, will be further clarified below when considering comments made by TV3's former *Senario* production member Hisyam regarding TV3's in-house censorship workflow. As we will observe from Hisyam's account, television producers – under pressure from broadcasters – are now content to err on the side of caution when it comes to acceptable material. A case in point relating to the CMA and the unpredictable deductive element of self-censorship, is a recent infraction by RTM's TV2.

On 27 October 2015, TV2's 8pm prime time Mandarin news featured a montage of photographs related to the nation's 1MDB financial scandal.<sup>156</sup> Included in the montage footage was the photograph of a solemn-looking Prime Minister Najib Razak and the millionaire Jho Low, the two protagonists who at the time were rumoured to be at the centre of the scandal ("RTM News Crew," 2015). In spite of its justification as visual accompaniment to the news being read, by the following day, RTM's management had issued a ban on all visuals by the Mandarin news team for all its programmes. The cause for the ban was presumably the implications of featuring images of the Prime Minister and Jho Low in the same segment, even though their photographs were included at

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<sup>156</sup> For an overview of the scandal, see ("1MDB: The case," 2016). For a series of detailed reports tracking its development, see ("Malaysia Controversy," n.d.).

different moments in the montage. By 29 October, the newsreaders had to contend with reading continuously for 20-30 minutes with no visual breaks, without any visual headlines or crawlers (words at the bottom of the screen) and unaccompanied by any form of visual programme introduction. The only on-screen visual for the duration of the entire Mandarin news programme was a single sentence in Malay – “*Ikut prosedur atau lesen dibatalkan*” (Follow procedure or license will be revoked) (“Minister Orders Return,” 2015). On 30 October a directive was presumably given by KKMM Minister Salleh Said Keruak for operations to resume as normal (“Minister Orders Return,” 2015). Curiously, this was relayed to the public by Wee Ka Siong, deputy president of Barisan Nasional’s (BN) Chinese coalition party - the Malaysian Chinese Association – rather than by Minister Salleh himself. However, on 1 November viewers noted the programme’s format had been restructured to include a repositioning of the news anchor that now obstructed the background visual. Moreover, Chinese headlines were replaced with Malay headlines and the practice of screening relevant footage in the background accompanying the reading of news was discontinued (“Remove Restrictions On,” 2015).

The above example foregrounds the primary method by which the CMA, through the Communications and Multimedia Minister, controls the broadcasting terrain. The case highlights the conditions by which a broadcaster’s license to operate can be revoked if they are found to have impinged on regulations and sensitivities.<sup>161</sup> As discussed however, the exact interpretation of these sensitivities may not be explicitly stated. As mentioned at the outset, this strategy is central to the government’s legislative control over media, for the CMA directly controls broadcasters’ terms of operations which indirectly influences what content is telecast, and in turn, results in more rigorous self-censorship.

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<sup>161</sup> This is ironic since TV2 is under RTM, both of which are state-run and state-owned. This is presumably a demonstration of state power meant for the wider public, and a cautionary tale to other broadcasters who may be similarly inclined – especially to the Chinese media community – who were unreservedly vocal in their criticisms of the Prime Minister and his purported role in the state-linked 1MDB financial scandal.

### *Lembaga Penapis Filem (Film Censorship Board) and the Censorship Process*

A central part of the government's control over broadcast content is censorship. The resilience of censorship as an integral part of administrative control is evidenced by its existence in Malaya (in the form of film censorship) from as early as 1908 during the period of governance by the British colonial administration. At the time, it was facilitated through the Theatre Ordinance 1908 which authorized the police to determine the suitability of film content (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016). Today, film censorship in Malaysia involves a complex process that is facilitated through the *Lembaga Penapis Filem* (Film Censorship Board - LPF) as part of the Ministry of Home Affairs' *Bahagian Kawalan Penapisan Filem dan Penguatkuasaan* (Film Censorship Control and Enforcement Division) (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016).

LPF was initially established in 1954 under Section 3 of the Film Act (Censorship) 1952 (revised in 1971). It served to enforce the Cinematograph Films Act 1952 before its subsequent replacement with the Film Censorship Act 2002 (Act 620) ("*Lembaga Penapis Filem*", 2016a). LPF is meant to function as a safeguard for national security and racial harmony ("*Lembaga Penapis Filem*", 2016a) by protecting the nation and its people from negative influences in films, and for ensuring that content is aligned with the *Rukun Negara*<sup>164</sup> (National Ideology) (Garis Panduan Penapisan Filem 2011, 1). With jurisdiction over both film and television content in Malaysia (Foo 2004, 114, 115), LPF works with another government body - the *Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional* (National Film Development Corporation – FINAS), to regulate on-screen content.

Under the Act, LPF's board chairman, deputy chairman, and 63 of its members are recommended by the Ministry of Home Affairs and appointed by the Yang DiPertuan Agong<sup>165</sup> (Foo 2004, 114). By way of ensuring that the decisions from LPF are aligned with the government, Foo notes that most of its members are retired senior civil employees (Foo 2004, 115). Working closely with the

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<sup>164</sup> Note that this operational remit does not differ significantly from RTM's objectives discussed in the preceding section.

<sup>165</sup> The King or ruler of Malaysia, selected from within, and by the Council of Rulers comprising the Sultans from each respective Malaysian state.



different divisions under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the LPF determines which films or television content, both foreign and local, are aired (Foo 2004, 115). Once approved by the LPF, licenses are then issued through another governmental regulatory body - FINAS (Foo 2004, 137).

For content that has been censored or banned by the censorship board, there is a Committee of Appeal within LPF that is convened under Section 22(1) of the Film Censorship Act 2002 (Act 620) (Akta Penapisan Filem 2002, 2006). The committee consists of 18 members – a Chairman and Deputy Chairman appointed by the Minister of Home Affairs, the Inspector-General of Police or a nominee above the rank of Assistant Superintendent, the Ministry of Home Affairs' Executive Secretary, the Chief Education Director, and 13 members nominated by the Minister of Home Affairs (Akta Penapisan Filem 2002, 2006).<sup>166</sup> Given the composition of the members and their backgrounds, Foo observes that the leniency or rigidity of enforcement is often aligned to political sentiment at the time of appeal (2004, 118).

Furthermore, partisan decisions through LPF are augmented through Section 25(1) of the Film Censorship Act 2002 (Act 620). Through this section, the Minister of Home Affairs has the authority to issue general directives to LPF or the Committee of Appeal, as long as it does not contravene the dictates of the Act, when it pertains to the Government's position on the public screening of films and associated publicity materials. Further, Subsection (2) outlines that the board or the committee is legally obliged to implement the directives issued through Subsection (1) (Akta Penapisan Filem 2002, 2006). In this respect, the Cabinet is empowered to control the LPF through the Minister of Home Affairs – who is currently the Deputy Prime Minister and also UMNO deputy president Zahid Hamidi. Interestingly, Karthigesu (1994, 77) observed that the Information Minister was similarly tasked with ensuring that RTM's policy and practices are aligned with the government's. These realities foreground the fact that UMNO's control over Malaysian television is explicitly provided for under

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<sup>166</sup> The power of appointment and distribution of members as stipulated in the actual government documentation appear to differ slightly from Foo's observations (2004, 117).

legal provisions.

The processes of censorship and content approval that govern on-air media material is however, slightly different with Media Prima. According to Media Prima's Resource Centre<sup>167</sup> executive Farah Asmanina, the broadcaster's censorship and approval process occurs on-site, within their premises at Seri Pentas, Bandar Utama, Selangor (personal communication, December 22, 2015). TV3's former *Senario* production member Hisyam<sup>168</sup> explained that the large volume of weekly content produced by Media Prima, and the speed by which it is telecast – for *Senario*, typically within 14 days from the studio recording, which includes LPF's censorship process – makes this on-site approval process an ideal arrangement (personal communication, October 10, 2015). In order for this on-site approval to function, LPF thus maintains a team within Media Prima itself, though it is inferred that with the volume-time-team size ratio, the censorship process may not be as rigorous as external submissions to LPF. In fact, to minimize obstacles for productions to go on-air at the scheduled time slot, Hisyam asserts that TV3 directors and producers ensure a certain degree of institutional compliance even before a programme is filmed. This self-imposed compliance, and the ambiguous nature of LPF guidelines are explained by Hisyam in the following interview excerpt:

Researcher: *Untuk sitkom yang baik, in view of guidelines, bila buat skrip tu ada yang nak testkan boundary ke?*  
In order to produce a good sitcom, in view of guidelines, have you ever written a script that tested their boundaries?<sup>169</sup>

Hisyam: *Oh, takde. Sebab masa tu, dah queue production ni, you tak boleh retract-kan dia, sebab apa – dia kos ... tak silap I, Senario dalam tu ada 10 yang kena ban, I rasa lah.*  
Oh, no. Because at the time, when you have queued the production, you can't retract it because of the cost involved. If I'm not mistaken, there were 10 of *Senario* that were

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<sup>167</sup> One task of MPB's Resource Centre is the archiving and cataloguing of all Media Prima television content.

<sup>168</sup> To reiterate, Hisyam is a pseudonym. Hisyam was a long serving member on *Senario*'s team, fulfilling a number of different roles, during the period of the sitcom's popularity.

<sup>169</sup> Translated to English by the researcher.

banned, I think.<sup>170</sup>

Researcher: *Tapi bila buat skrip tu, perlu ke dia approve dulu?*  
But, was it a requirement for the script to be pre-approved?

Hisyam: *Tak payah. LPF ni satu. Dia suruh kita – zaman tulah – dia suruh kita buat dulu. Buat dulu, dia tengok. Itu stail LPF. Dia tak ada trial error, hantar skrip dulu ke, takde. So jadi kita, bila nak tahu ada guideline dia, jadi kita tengoklah, kita hati-hati lah ... Lepas tu tak boleh sentuh apa politik, apa semua. itu tak boleh sentuh ... tak boleh sentuh politik, paling-paling kita tak boleh sentuh. Benda yang sensitif saja yang ada kaitan dengan race.*

No need. This LPF, they told us – during that period – we were told to complete it first. Complete it, then they'll have a look. That's LPF's style. There is no trial and error, nor can we submit the script first, no. So for us, if we want to know what the guidelines are, we will have to observe, and we'll have to be careful ... Further, politics and anything related to it are off-limits. We cannot touch on the issue, cannot touch politics, that's absolutely something we can't touch on. Also, sensitive issues associated with race.

In the above excerpt, we note the primary factor underscoring Hisyam's compliance with LPF guidelines in the production of *Senario*, is economic in nature. Moreover, his reference to “*stail LPF*” (LPF's style) describes a process that is not entirely explicit in its stipulations. As discussed previously with specific reference to TV2's Mandarin news, Hisyam's mention of “*stail LPF*” draws attention to the issue of arbitrary and partisan interpretation of CMA and LPF guidelines. In spite of some ambiguity in guidelines, it is clear from Hisyam's account that several themes – politics and race, for instance – are clearly understood to be prohibited.

It is important to note that most MPB-TV3 internally-produced programmes<sup>171</sup> have short turn-around cycles. Our research focus *Senario* for example, has an approximate seven-day rehearsal-filming-editing turn-around time per episode,

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<sup>170</sup> Hisyam only remembers three of the episodes that were banned. They were *Selit!*, *Mahligai Impian* Part 1, and *Mahligai Impian* Part 2. The discussions involving Hisyam's explanations in the next chapter may provide some insights into the reasons for the ban on these episodes.

<sup>171</sup> All the different divisions under MPB's individual stations have been streamlined into one consolidated content creation subsidiary called Primeworks Studios, that now produces content for all MPB stations.

with each episode often completed only approximately two weeks – the censorship duration – before its scheduled telecast date (Hisyam, personal communication, October 10, 2015). This narrow margin for uncertainty contextualizes Hisyam’s reasoning for the mitigation of potential problems. In this respect, when exercising this form of self-censorship, erring on the side of caution is usually the practice, and very little is left to chance.

It is instructive that Karthigesu, in observing RTM’s responsibilities of transmitting government policies in 1994, had suggested that television producers often compromised their content to accommodate the nation’s multi-ethnic/cultural sensitivities (1994, 72). In fact, in the interest of avoiding unwanted attention from the administration, they skirted away from any potential cultural controversies of their own volition (Karthigesu 1994, 72). Moreover, Zaharom & Mustafa view the act of circumventing any offence to cultural communities as being fundamental to the practice of institutional censorship, leading eventually to self-censorship (2000, 155). Sonia *et al.* (2005, 61) similarly noted that the common practice of self-censorship by Malaysian television broadcasters is to avoid any revocation of their operating licenses. When we juxtapose these observations with Hisyam’s account, it appears that though Media Prima is a commercial station, its operational processes do not differ much from state-owned TV1 and TV2.<sup>172</sup> This resilience of self-censorship both in state-run and commercial FTA stations can be explained by UMNO’s layered structure of control, resulting in guidelines that dictate how broadcasts are produced, regardless of whether by public or private owned stations.

Hisyam’s descriptions of TV3’s production of the Malay sitcom *Senario*, provide an insight into the immense political and institutional pressures governing TV3’s operations, as experienced internally by the producers themselves. By all accounts, television directors and producers are pressured into producing ‘safe’ content that introduces and reaffirms the status quo as interpreted by the state. Given TV3’s resolve in 1985 to “ride on RTM’s coat-tails”, this indirect adoption

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<sup>172</sup> This was discussed earlier in the chapter where we drew attention to TV3’s programming shift in 1985, and the declaration that it was easier to ride on RTM’s coat-tails.

of RTM's objectives would, at the very least, see a distillation of state imperatives onto the TV3 platform. Within the dynamics of TV3-RTM-BN, the accounts of Karthigesu, Sonia *et al.*, Zaharom & Mustafa, and Hisyam describe an unshifting production mind-set reflecting a trajectory that has largely remained unchanged with Media Prima, and with current television producers.

#### *Media Prima's Narrowcasting and Its Implications for Senario*

In the preceding sections, we have observed how state control over media – and specifically television – is enhanced through media ownership and the broadcasting legal framework.<sup>173</sup> By establishing the relationship between broadcasters and state power, we are presented with a media industry that is monopolized by UMNO. Furthermore, it was suggested that Malay FTA television stations hold the highest FTA viewership within the nation. In this respect, the state's monopoly over FTA television means that Malay stations can potentially be utilized for the construction of statist narratives of Malay nationhood, and we observed its impact on content production as described by TV3's Hisyam in producing the Malay sitcom *Senario*. This function of Malay stations becomes more apparent when we consider its explicitly defined role as the government's tool for 'nation building'. In this section, we will examine Media Prima Berhad's (MPB) viewership, and by extension TV3's and *Senario*'s viewers, as a consequence of MPB's narrowcast model<sup>174</sup> which categorizes audiences along tiers of race, language, and perhaps not inadvertently, social class. By understanding how MPB categorizes its viewers and who those viewers are, it will become clear that these categories can be made to serve political objectives.

Given the diverse ethnic composition of Malaysia and more specifically, given the prevalence of inter-ethnic identity contestations, the use of languages on television has changed since RTM started broadcasting television in 1969. The administration has since regarded television's use of different vernacular (or ethnic) languages as an ideal method for the dissemination of messages in

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<sup>173</sup> See also Foo (2004, 112, 114-115, 117, 119-120, 123-124, 137), Juriah (2000, 77-98, 115-116, 134-135), and Roslina, Wan Amizah & Ali (2013, 53-55).

<sup>174</sup> Broadly, this refers to the targeting of content into specialized channels that each appeal to specific audience demographics. The narrowcast model will be discussed later in the section.

promoting inter-ethnic or national cohesion (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 153-154). To ensure the state could reach the country's different ethnic groups, the languages utilized by these minority ethnic groups were therefore maintained on television even though Malay was the national language (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 154).<sup>175</sup>

The inclusion of non-Malay vernacular languages has clearly been present since the start of Malaysian television in 1963. Karthigesu cites G.F. Brickenden's 1960s' study of Talivishen Malaysia that focused on language distribution to have arrived at a language ratio of 45 (Malay) :30 (Chinese) :25 (English) (Karthigesu 1994, 35). With the subsequent outcry from the Indian community at the exclusion of Indian programmes, this ratio was corrected to 45:30:20:5, the last being the introduction of Tamil language content on television.<sup>176</sup> With respect to the Indian communal position within the nation's socio-political dynamics, it is instructive that while state-owned RTM channels do still roughly adhere to a similar language ratio within each broadcast day, Media Prima's FTA station offering does not include an Indian-language channel. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Malaysia's inter-ethnic and inter-faith tensions have primarily been between the Malays and the Chinese. In this context, it may be suggested that the exclusion of Indian channels – which may also be interpreted as the lack of a need for these channels – reflect the administration's view towards the ideological utility of Malay television stations. In practice, the exclusion of Indian language channels means that audiences who are thus inclined, will have to resort to the Indian language channels provided through subscription-based DBS service ASTRO, or subscription-based IPTV service HyppTV.

This brings to the foreground, the practice of narrowcasting within Malaysian television. As we observed in an earlier section of this chapter, TV3's initial telecasts were neither mono-ethnic nor mono-lingual. Similarly, up until March

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<sup>175</sup> It is unclear how this was aligned with RTM's guidelines, as per our discussion at the start of this chapter. Though it can arguably be qualified as part of RTM's nation-building objectives.

<sup>176</sup> It is unclear exactly when Tamil programmes were included, though it is presumed to be within the periods of 1963 when Talivishen Malaysia was established, to 1969 when RTM was established.

2016, MPB's 8TV<sup>177</sup> was a two language station which meant that there was a Chinese content belt during the day and an English content belt from the evening onwards. Under a narrowcast framework, channel offerings are single-streamed into specialized channels that appeal to specific groups of audiences, segmenting viewers along language, race and class tiers. This would explain why the Malay sitcom *Senario* for example, is aired on MPB's Malay channel TV3. With these factors determining the categorization of specialized channels, it is unsurprising that the narrowcast model is largely based on commercial determinants. Its business model is shaped by the aim of delivering very specific viewership to advertisers, since channel content is not produced to appeal to a generic viewership. However, as a political tool, it can work to attract and categorise very specific groups of electorates.

From the perspective of ethnic segregation, this dimension to television narrowcasting can work to entrench and potentially widen existing ethnic fissures. The presupposition of fixity to these lines of differences is reinforced in the concept of an 'ethnicized channel', where programming is specific to a particular ethnic category. In its deployment, it indicates that the channel as a spatial marker, draws its boundaries not just with televised content but also simply with the channel being ethnically-specific. A large corpus of work by television scholars asserts that genre or interest-based televisual content categories are ethnicized and/or gendered in and of themselves (for example, John Fiske 2011, Jane Gerhad 2005, and Sharon Sharp 2006). However, my deployment of the epithet refers to the privileging of race and its associated language-use in MPB's categorization, above any other considerations. I also refer to the statist-influenced ascription of interests or social-economic function to specific ethnic groups – in short, racial stereotypes. Within the context of this research, the Malaysian 'ethnicized channel' therefore references a

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<sup>177</sup> Until the end of 8TV's 'The Quickie' programme on 31 March 2016, 8TV had a unique strategy whereby the morning and day segments of the channel contained Chinese programmes, while the remainder of the broadcast day after the Mandarin news at 8pm was dedicated to English programmes. 8TV is now a Chinese station, marketed by MPB as "Malaysia's No. 1 Chinese television station" (Tontonextra 8TV, 2017).

particularized term that needs to be understood within the nation's inter-ethnic and inter-faith history.

On this basis, the notion of an 'ethnicized channel' goes beyond a mere categorization of interest-based<sup>178</sup> or genre<sup>179</sup> viewing choices and overlays it with an additional religio-racialist perspective. This conflates interest-based or genre categorizations with ethnicity/race, religion, culture, and their associated language preferences. It is curious that these same considerations are similarly echoed on TV3's *Senario*, where one of our primary inquiries engages with the erasure or marginalization of non-Malays within on-screen Malay imaginaries. This similarity between the 'ethnicized channel' and *Senario*'s 'ethnicized content' lies within their construction of ethnically-exclusive televisual spaces. From a strictly economic perspective, MPB's narrowcast strategy has thus far proven to be successful and resilient – by the simple fact that it has incorporated all commercial FTA channels under its operations.<sup>180</sup> We may be able to gain some insights into the underlying criteria-set employed in MPB's narrowcast (or channel ethnicization), and its influence in determining the viewership of TV3's sitcom *Senario*, by examining the demographic categorizations contained within the broadcaster's 2015 annual report.

According to data collected by the Nielsen Audience Measurement, MPB's stations collectively have a 37 percent national television viewership share in 2015 (Media Prima Berhad Annual Report 2015, 9). From this 37 percent national viewership share, MPB further segregates their audiences into categories of 'Malay', 'Urban', 'Chinese', and '4-14 years' of age (Media Prima Berhad Annual Report 2015, 63). The viewership data for MPB's Malay and Chinese categories are reproduced in Table 3.1.

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<sup>178</sup> Though not available on FTA stations, Asian Food Channel, History Channel, and HBO are examples of content delivery based on audience interests.

<sup>179</sup> Though not available on FTA stations, Syfy Channel, Comedy Central, and Al Jazeera are examples of content delivery based on genre types.

<sup>180</sup> In addition to TV3, MPB acquired both Channel 9 (relaunched as TV9) and ntv7 in 2005. Metropolitan TV was acquired in 2003 and relaunched as 8TV. Prior to MPB's ownership, all stations were also owned by individuals connected to UMNO (Wang 2010, 23-24).



<b>Station</b>	<b>Malay (%)</b>	<b>Chinese (%)</b>
TV3	28.8	1.9
TV9	9.9	0.6
ntv7	1.7	14.6
8TV	0.7	22.9
Total	41.1	40

Table 3.1: Media Prima's Malay and Chinese viewership

According to the viewership breakdown in Table 3.1, 41.1 percent of MPB's total viewership is Malay, and 40 percent of its total viewership is Chinese, equating to 81.1 percent of MPB's total viewership across its stations. It is presumed that the remaining 18.9 percent is comprised of non-Malay and non-Chinese viewers such as the Indian community, and the sizeable foreign workforce living in Malaysia. In any case, MPB's inclusion of only these two ethnic categories and by extension, MPB's view of their significance, once again reflects the political and economic importance accorded to Malay and Chinese audiences. While on the surface, this simple classification is based on economic considerations,<sup>181</sup> there is an additional political factor since MPB is owned by the governing coalition's dominant political party. In light of MPB's association with UMNO, it will be beneficial to consider these Malay and Chinese categorizations separately through two realities – the obvious economic determinant in categorizing, and the ethnically-homogeneous category's potential for political actuation. Each will be discussed in turn.

The economic determinant is best observed through the perspective of Malaysian television advertisements. Malaysian television advertisements were first introduced in 1965 with the primary intention of focusing not on advertising profits, but of attracting more Malaysian buyers to locally produced goods (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 155). These advertisements were predominantly in English, since the buying power at the time, lay squarely with

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<sup>181</sup> The delivery of specific higher disposable income groups to advertisers, for example.

the English-educated<sup>183</sup> citizenry who were located in the urban areas where television broadcasts were easily accessible (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 155-156). The next communal group with big spending potential were the Chinese-speaking viewers who lived in towns (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 155-156). Malay and Indian advertisements were fewer by comparison since the majority of the Malays and Indians were located in the rural areas where television was a rarity, and both groups had little spending power (Zaharom & Mustafa 2000, 155-156). These ethno-spatial identifiers were in fact, a consequence of the British colonial strategy of land gazetting.<sup>184</sup>

This trend in advertising would however, reverse its trajectory in the following years. Beginning with the NEP policy, the subsequent success of Malaysia Incorporated, and the consequent economic rise of the New Malays, the paradigm shifted favourably towards the Malays. This new Malay socio-economic power led to more Malay advertisements and a corresponding reduction in Chinese and English advertisements. These developments explain two points in relation to MPB's ethnicized channels and its Malay and Chinese viewership data.

Firstly, the prioritization and increase of Malay language content can be explained by its status as the national language.<sup>185</sup> An increase in its televisual presence is therefore consonant with the administration's language policies post-1971 (Enloe 1967, 154-177), and it remains the language promoted televisually by the state (Wang 2010, 24). Furthermore, the protection of the Malay language is aligned to UMNO's self-styled role as protector of the Malays – a significant consideration among Malay electorates. Therefore, sustaining this televisual language status quo is, in reality, a simple exercise of socio-political

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<sup>183</sup> These were presumably the Malay, Chinese, and Indian citizenry who had the opportunity to receive an English education at school – primarily in the urban areas – established by the British colonial administration. Moreover, English speakers also included some of the British nationals who had decided to reside in the country even after its independence (Roff 1967).

<sup>184</sup> Shamsul & Athi (2015) and Milner (2011) for example, have written at length about the colonial land segregation strategies that resulted in the identification of particular ethnicities with specific geographical localities and thus economic functions.

<sup>185</sup> We noted earlier that RTM adheres to a language ratio breakdown of roughly 45 (Malay) :30 (Chinese) :20 (English) :5 (Indians).

positioning on the part of UMNO. Secondly, as many scholars of both the NEP years and the subsequent Malaysia Incorporated phenomenon have observed, while these two policies catalyzed the emergence of a Malay business elite class which was politically well-connected, this did not necessarily result in a reduction of non-Malay wealth, primarily that of the Chinese (Shamsul 1996a, 24).

From a commercial perspective, these realities are presently reflected in MPB's key channels – TV3 for the Malays and 8TV for the Chinese – each reflecting the economic positions of the Malays and Chinese, as well as their population sizes. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering our previous observation on the comparatively larger population size of 63.1 percent for Malays, while the Chinese are less than half that percentage at 24.6 percent. (Jadual Hayat Ringkas Malaysia 2010-2013). All these account for MPB's Malay and Chinese narrowcasting categorizations through obvious economic determinants. Let us now consider how the inherent ethnic homogeneity resulting from MPB's narrowcasting can potentially be mobilized for political purposes.

As mentioned earlier, there is an urban percentage for MPB's viewership that is tabulated separately from the Malay and Chinese percentages. Based on Media Prima data, TV3's total urban viewership is at 19 percent while 8TV's total urban viewership at 5.3 percent (Media Prima Berhad Annual Report 2015, 63). Focusing on Malay viewership, if 19 percent are categorized as urban viewers, it follows that 81 percent are non-urban viewers. MPB however, does not have explicit data for a 'non-urban' category. Nonetheless, by this logic, the urban category can be used to determine the size of the non-urban Malay viewership which due to its substantial size, represents the true demographic for TV3. This is a fact corroborated by Media Prima's then Chief Executive Officer Ahmad Izham Omar who stated that urban television viewers are not the majority viewers of MPB's stations (Goh 2015). This may explain the absence of an explicitly-scheduled urban content belt on TV3. In contrast, while 8TV's urban audience is only 5.3 percent (less than TV3), it features an urban content belt. This disparity in MPB's programming rationale will become clearer in the

following discussion where it will become evident that the actual 'urban' and 'non-urban' Malay viewership are in fact categories that may refer to viewers with similar content preferences. In such a case, TV3's total Malay viewership – a majority of whom are rural – will in fact be much larger than previously stated.

It is unclear how MPB defines its 'urban' category.<sup>186</sup> One obvious presumption is the urban category is defined purely by location of the audience – those geographically-located in cosmopolitan/city areas. Another plausible explanation is that MPB has identified TV3's cosmopolitan-located Malay viewers to be primarily non-English speakers who prefer Malay content. In short, this would mean that TV3's urban Malay viewers (located in urban centres), prefer Malay content. The ethnographical studies of Eric Thompson (2002) and Tim Bunnell (2002) may provide further insight to these understandings of TV3's urban-rural-programme dynamics, and by extension, TV3's targeted demographic for the Malay sitcom *Senario*.

In studying the Malay communities living in Malaysia's capital city Kuala Lumpur, both Thompson (2002, 69-71) and Bunnell (2002) found a correlation between the translocation of traditional Malay *kampung* (village) culture and social mobility. Even while those who ventured from the periphery<sup>187</sup> states were now spatially located within Kuala Lumpur, both Bunnell and Thompson found that the majority from this group were not culturally invested in urbanization or modernization. The effect was compounded when their families from the *kampung* joined them in the city, or when these individuals or family units then congregated with other *kampung* individuals or families who had similarly moved from the periphery states to the city. Instead, they were more invested in constructing a cultural bubble to buffer what was perceived as an incompatible cosmopolitan culture, through communal solidarity that would strengthen existing Malay religio-cultural convictions.

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<sup>186</sup> My efforts in seeking clarification with Media Prima's research department and public relations department between March 2016 to May 2016, yielded no real answers.

<sup>187</sup> I refer to the states at the periphery of the main cities in Malaysia. These periphery states include Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Sabah.

This phenomenon may perhaps explain TV3's 'urban' category, for if MPB's definition of 'urban' is derived purely from locality, it would include this large category of Malays who may be disinterested in watching 'non-traditional' content even if they are in urban areas. It would therefore be reasonable to surmise that even when TV3 makes a distinction between urban and non-urban viewers, its programming strategies are targeted at the latter, for as observed, the viewers constituting the urban category may not actually be cosmopolitan in their content preferences or their worldviews. The political significance of TV3's actual demographics, neatly categorized by its practice of narrowcasting, therefore lies in the reality that the true bastion of UMNO's political power lies with the rural Malays (Gomez 2009, 2, 5-6) who – perhaps not incidentally – are also *Senario's* primary demographic.

### *Conclusion*

Much of what was discussed in this chapter implies that the state assumes control of all FTA television stations, commercial or otherwise, and that consequently, the ultimate criteria regulating television production are determined by political decisions. Such a situation does not of course preclude the continued development of creative content provided it is within the limits of state legislation; though any real creative exploration has, as observed by TV3-*Senario's* Hisyam, been curbed through stringent self-censorship. This suggests that the controls and measures set in place by the administration for an ideological control of Malaysians and specifically the Malays, extend fluidly to television broadcasting.

One theme that runs throughout this chapter's discussions is the ambiguous nature of officially-formulated institutional literature. One example is RTM's vaguely worded objectives and rationalizations ('heritage and culture of the Malaysian people/race' and 'too much information' having 'adverse effects'). Another example is the subtly contradictory positions of privileging Ministerial determinations over all else in the Communications and Multimedia Act 1988. This ambiguity is similarly observed in TV3's deliberately-unofficial true demographics (nowhere is it stated or published in MPB's official literature)

though they have long identified the rural Malays as MPB's primary viewers. These mirror the discrepancies between formal positions scripted in official literature, and what/how it is practiced and implemented in reality.

Moreover, while Malay and Chinese stations exist, Indian stations are starkly missing (though Indian programmes are presently available on RTM stations). Since RTM's first initiatives on language programming, there is a tendency to sideline Indian content. Why are the Indians consistently absent from the Malay imaginary of what RTM – and by extension, the Ministry of Information and KKMM – considers 'the Malaysian people/race'? Would it be overreaching to perceive this oversight as an insistence of the state's focus on Malay-Chinese bicultural relationship – positively or negatively – to the exclusion of the Indians and other minority communities? Given that TV3's Malay viewership is the largest among all of MPB's FTA channels,<sup>188</sup> it would be logical to question, among other things, what kind of a nationhood-imaginary is proposed televisually.

Furthermore, if Malay culture and language are references for a national identity, why does the state, through RTM, view the retention of minority languages on television as serving the purposes of nation building? Considering contemporary realities, one wonders if, on the pretext of preserving diverse cultural and traditional heritages, these are in fact strategies for a continual strengthening of differences between ethnic groups. The vagueness or ambiguity of official literature certainly does contribute to the blurring of the state's formal position on these issues.

Certainly, rural Malays are the primary ideological focus for UMNO, and thus central to the state's ability to constitute Malay identity. It is not accidental that TV3's primary demographic, urban or otherwise, is similar in origin with the characters in the Malay sitcom *Senario*. As we will observe in the next chapter, in portrayal of those who came not from privileged backgrounds but from the peripheral rural-suburban states of Malaysia, *Senario*'s precise reflection of the

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<sup>188</sup> As discussed, this includes both the urban and non-urban Malay viewers.

non-urban viewership made the its institutionally-constructed myths and narratives highly relatable.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Ideologues: Representation, Situation Comedy, and *Senario*

*I'm not sure people look to sitcom for 100% reality, do they?*

–Sophie Clarke-Jervoise (Mills 2009, 24)

Television is often viewed as a site for the representation and contestation of identity. Like other products of media culture, television provides a basis from which we constitute a perception of ourselves, and helps us frame how others and the world are understood. It is however, also true that cultural and social factors shape television far more than television shapes culture (Fiske 2011, xviii). Nowhere is this two-directional influence more evident than in television comedy, where the genre has often been regarded as a barometer for society (Berman 1987, 6-8; Dalton & Linder 2005, 10; Hurd 2006, 763; Kenton 2016, 75; Lee 1991, 20; Mills 2009, 125). The abundance of scholarship dealing with television, television comedy – and specifically our focus, the situation comedy (sitcom) – demonstrates the complex nature of definitively demonstrating what comedy on television is all ‘about’ (Mills 2009, 10).<sup>189</sup>

These studies assert that television comedy and sitcoms are not merely good entertainment; due to their very comedic nature there is a common misconception that sitcoms do not require thinking from viewers, or that they are not reflective of deeper and more critical issues. Michael Teuth’s (2005) examination of *South Park* as transgressive comedy for example, reveals alternate social conventions expressed through the violation of cultural taboos. Lori Linday’s (2005) analysis of ‘I Love Lucy’ uncovers the innate articulation of power relations between genders. David Marc (2005) explores the deeper issues of identity and representation in the context of race through the sitcoms ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ and ‘The Cosby Show’. These demonstrate that real issues are foundational to the narratives that drive sitcom’s comedy. In the context of

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<sup>189</sup> See for example, the works of Glen Creeber (2001), Mary Dalton & Laura Linder (2005), and Brett Mills (2009).



Malaysian TV3's sitcom *Senario*, of interest are the discursive formations of Malayness that influence interpretations of *Senario*'s comedy and narratives.

With these realities, one central focus of this chapter is to demonstrate that sitcoms are, at a more elementary level, a reflection of society. Furthermore, whether through actor improvisations or rigidly scripted performances, sitcoms do in fact take the status quo, popular norms, and contemporary events as their narrative and dialogic reference point. This is in fact part of their intertextual basis. To this end, the present chapter is divided into three sections structured according to the themes of meaning-making through representation, the genre of situation comedy, and theories on humour.

The first section accounts for the derivation of meaning through the process of televisual representation and the polysemic potential of its interpretive meaning-making. This first section will outline the methods by which we identify, and make sense of, the different elements within *Senario*'s text. These methods are crucial, for they inform us of how different, and seemingly disparate and 'random' elements, are not disassociated when interpreted through a signification chain. These are discussed primarily through the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), John Fiske (2011), John Fiske & John Hartley (1985), Roland Barthes (1974, 1977), Slavoj Žižek (1989) and Stuart Hall (2013).

The second section extends the discussion by introducing the situation comedy genre and its conventions to establish how the signification chains of meaning in the first section function to engage with, or reflect, that which has been normalized within society. It will be clear in this section that *Senario* does not fit perfectly with all conventional definitions of sitcom though conceived as such by TV3. For more context to our study, former TV3 production member Hisyam's accounts of *Senario* are also juxtaposed accordingly. Studies by Andy Medhurst & Lucy Tuck (1982), Brett Mills (2011), Mary Dalton & Laura Linder (2005), Phillip J. Glenn (2003), and Susan Turnbull (2009) will primarily inform the discussions in this second section.

The third section explores two theories on humour – the Superiority Theory and Incongruity Theory. I discuss both theories by framing them through Hisyam’s accounts of *Senario* to reveal the different attitudes that can undergird humour and its potential to normalize behaviours that would otherwise be unacceptable in society. More importantly, I reflect on what each of these two theories reveal about Malaysia’s social and institutional realities when transposed to *Senario*. While our discussion on sitcom addresses the social function of the genre/format, this third section engages with the element of humour itself.

#### *The System of Representation as the Bearer of Meanings*

Television’s societal role has often been as a cultural storyteller (Baran 2012, 14-15) in that it propagates a culture’s values and beliefs within its televisual narratives. John Fiske called this a process of storytelling – that of production and reproduction of “meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation” – as part of the dynamics by which the social structure attempts to maintain itself (2011, 1). Stanley Baran describes this process as the “construction of social reality”, where reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed (2012, 375) through the cultural agent that is television.

These methods by which television communicates with its audience rely on the fact that the medium is a human construct and thus is contingent upon human choices that are cultural, social, and political in nature. In this respect, understanding the way that meaning is derived by audiences and specifically how meanings are contained within the televisual text,<sup>190</sup> will provide an insight into the cultural and/or social elements implicated in its production. When Fiske proposed the term “television-as-culture” (2011, 1) to indicate the centrality of television within the economy of cultural production, I suggest that he also – wittingly or unwittingly – identified a social structure formulated along the notion of myths. The present section seeks to delineate these processes by which television, as the scholars above noted, has secured for itself a central

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<sup>190</sup> The use of ‘text’ refers to the similarities between how viewers understand television content and the reading of a literary text, since other mediums have been understood through the original conventions established in literacy and the oral tradition (Fiske & Hartley 1985, 2-3).

communicative role within our culture and society. Primary among these processes is a system that Stuart Hall refers to as “representation” (2013, 1).

Hall suggests there are two representational systems. The first representational system is premised on what Ferdinand de Saussure called the signifying system and works to correlate ideas, events, people and objects to a pre-existing set of concepts or mental representations in our heads (Hall 2013, 3-4). The second is that of language which translates these shared conceptual maps into a common language, correlating our concepts and ideas to written words, spoken sounds or visual images (Hall 2013, 4). In the first system, Saussure proposed that a ‘sign’ is produced when a ‘signifier’ (the language or physical object) is correlated to a ‘signified’ (our pre-existing mental concepts) (Hall 2013, 3-4, 7, 20-21; Fiske & Hartley 1985, 38). In this way, an image of a tree (the signifier) is given meaning when we correlate it to our conceptual notion of “a large plant that grows in nature” (the signified) (Hall 2013, 7). This literal and descriptive understanding of the sign ‘tree’ operates only at the denotative level of the signifying system. In the second system, Roland Barthes suggests that a connotative understanding to the sign can result when it is read through cultural themes (Hall 2013, 23; Fiske & Hartley 1985, 41-45). At this level, the connotative tree is now associated with meanings of growth, fertility, vigour, strength and nature. However, these are meanings that can only be activated when they exist and circulate within, and inform, a particular culture. Susan Hayward explains for example, that a photograph of Marilyn Monroe can only activate the proposed connotative meanings of her star qualities, her depression and untimely death, when communities have seen her films, or can relate to her in their culture (1996, 310). In this respect, Hall views representation as the “process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (2013, 1).

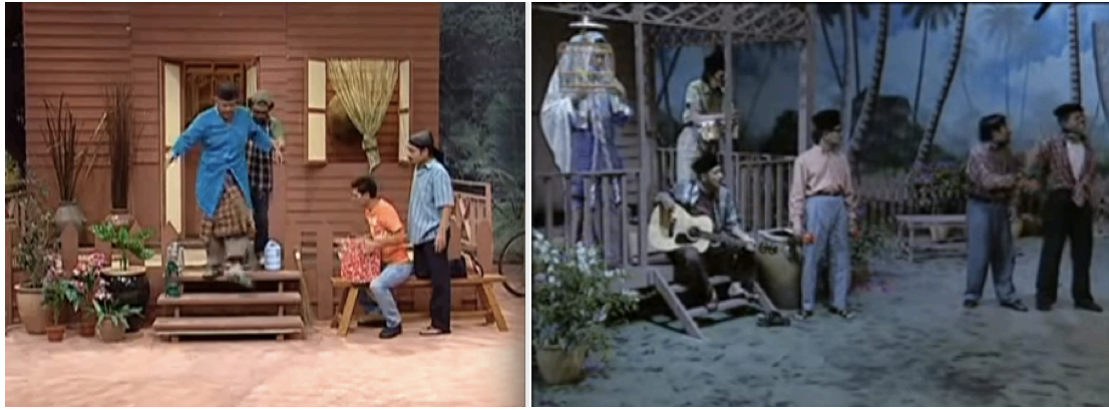


Figure 4.1

A common feature in *Senario* is the *kampung* house. *Senario: Cucu Atok* (2010) & *Senario: Jejak Kasihan* (1996).

Take the example of a Malaysian Malay *kampung* house, which is a common feature in the mise-en-scene of TV3's sitcom *Senario* (Figure 4.1) (while *kampung* is more accurately translated as 'compound', the most common meaning is 'village'). As a 'sign' in a majority of *Senario*'s episodes, the *kampung* house embodies sets of ideas and conceptual maps that are historically and culturally situated. Notions of Malay tradition, roots, lineage, preservation of culture, *adat*, and family are probable concepts that may be communicated symbolically through the sign of the *kampung* house. The historical tradition and legacy of the *kampung* house as being central to the socio-cultural Malay community (as well as its dichotomous nature within the discourse of an urban-imposed social construct) has been widely documented by scholars (for example, Shamsul A.B. 1991; T. Yoshihiro 2001; E. Thompson 2002, 52-53). These are the historical socio-cultural pre-existing conceptual maps that are being correlated to the sign; without which, a viewer would not understand the significance of the sign '*kampung*' and the many associated discourses that exist within the community's social mindset. When the 'signifier' is thus linked to the 'signified' through cultural themes, we are now interpreting the sign at the second connotative level.

Denotation is thus only a literal descriptive understanding, while connotation is the understanding gleaned through a certain insight of cultural ideas (Hall 2013, 23). What this implies, is a certain 'fixity' in shared meaning that is facilitated by

a code that governs the relationship of translation between our conceptual maps and language codes that exist within our culture (Hall 2013, 7). Meaning is therefore stabilized and is “fixed socially, fixed in culture” (Hall 2013, 7-8). This process of interpretation ensures that we are all ‘reading’ the sign in the same way. However, different meanings can be produced when there are differences in conceptual maps and language codes that govern the subject’s connotative interpretation. While varying meanings can co-exist for the sign, its polysemy can be limited, or ‘fixed’, through the imposition of dominant socio-cultural normatives.<sup>191</sup>

This process of organization, arrangement and categorization of concepts and ideas is key to our interrogation of Malayness as represented through a televisual signifying system. These two representational systems are used to structure and organize our concepts in the production of meaning, and are therefore crucial to our ability to function as culturally competent subjects. The ‘fixity’ in shared meaning stabilizes a sign’s socio-cultural meanings to constitute a cultural subject and one’s cultural proficiency. This would therefore appear to function in the same capacity for Malay identity through the code of Malay *adat*.<sup>192</sup>

However, one obvious question regarding Hall’s process of representation through the signifying system relates to the circulation of meaning within a specific culture. While this establishes a degree of fixity in meaning communally, it similarly works to exteriorize cultures or communities that do not have access to the same culture bank. How do communities that possess little or no experience with the full breadth of *adat* for instance, interpret and respond to signs that require such fore-knowledge? This act of exclusion, takes on new significance when we consider that TV3’s Malay sitcom *Senario* is telecast specifically on a Malay channel that is meant for a largely Malay demographic. Given that Malaysia has a diverse multi-ethnic and multi-faith citizenry, what do

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<sup>191</sup> How meanings are ‘fixed’, even with resistant or oppositional readings will be discussed later in the discussion on John Fiske and Slavoj Žižek.

<sup>192</sup> The meaning of *adat* and its centrality to the discourse of Malay identity were discussed in Chapter 1.

the two representational systems reveal about the inter-faith and inter-cultural relations within the nation? Furthermore, what types of meta-discourses are contained within these exclusionary televisual spaces even as they occur within very public channels of communication? These questions will be addressed in the next three chapters of this thesis, where my attention turns specifically to a thematic analysis of specific episodes of *Senario*.

From an ideological perspective, Slavoj Žižek's (1989) reading of Jacques Lacan's "ideological 'quilt'" appears to share a similar theoretical basis with the representational-signifying system proposed by Hall, Saussure, and Barthes above. Insofar as achieving a fixity in meaning, Žižek's description of the ideological quilt seems to address the same result. "[F]loating signifiers" of "proto-ideological elements" are described by Žižek as being "structured into a unified field through the intervention of a nodal point", also known as the *point de capiton* (1989, 95). This nodal point 'quilts' them into place, a process that stops the slippage of meaning and as a result, fixes their meaning. The *point de capiton* is described as the point in the signifying chain at which "the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification" (1989, 303). This in short, 'fixes' or 'sets' the sign's meaning.

What is key to Žižek's description of the ideological quilt is that ideological space is initially a terrain constructed by non-bound, non-tied elements "whose very identity is 'open'" (1989, 95). Individual elements within the ideological space are thus undetermined at the start. Their meaning can only be derived contextually to the other elements within the ideological field. What structures the connection between one ideological element and the next (and as a result, imbues them with meaning), is the nodal point which 'quilts' these free-floating ideological elements to become parts of a structured network of meaning. Thus, a sign is retroactively given meaning (and contextually to other related signs) only at the point when it is interpreted through a "master-signifier" (Žižek 1989, 112). Varying meanings can co-exist since these free-floating elements may belong to more than one ideological field and more than one nodal point. Key to this, is the master-signifier that organizes them. In this sense, it is similar to the

connotative stabilization of meaning through social conventions. Through this framework, nuances to the performativity of Malay *adat* for example, can only be of significance when one understands them through the identity Malay.<sup>194</sup>

It is clear from Žižek's description that every element of a signification chain functions to signify. Nothing is devoid of meaning, and no element is random or arbitrary. Within our context of screen media, it is notable that this relational meaning-making similarly undergirds, among others, the contextual nature behind each aesthetical element comprising a set's mise-en-scene. These altogether describe how the polysemy of a sign – which Hall had earlier suggested can be productive of different meanings – is ideologically 'fixed' to certain dominant meanings through this process of 'quilting' effected by the construction of a signifying chain. In short, the nodal point acts to 'frame' how one interprets (and makes meaning of) the disparate elements *relationally* to each other. As we will shortly observe, this is a process that John Fiske similarly describes as the production of dominant preferred meanings within a televisual text.

It was established in Chapter 2 that Malay identity is largely determined by the state. In Chapter 3, we discussed the potential for a politicization of the narrowcast model based on a state agenda led by the dominant party of the governing coalition. Additionally, we have explored how TV3, as an UMNO-owned station through Media Prima Berhad, is perceived to be targeting a largely homogenous Malay demographic. Framed through these realities, the quilting system at the connotative level can ensure that TV3's televisual signs are read specifically through conceptual maps of Malayness which simultaneously stabilize their meanings to a dominant few. While the Lacanian-Žižekian system proposes a retroactive construction of meaning, these meanings can be anticipated when they are directed at an ethnically and religiously homogenous demographic, such as in the case of TV3. This homogeneity in turn, accounts for the ease by which a specific interpretation (amidst all potential) can

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<sup>194</sup> However, this is tautological; Malay identity, as commonly understood, is in turn largely given form by *adat* – one reaffirms the other. It is tautological in that either exists only insofar as the Malays believe in them.

be encoded within the sign, which is to say, a meaning that John Fiske (2011, 21) suggests, is the preferred meaning of its producer.

Fiske's (2011) work refocuses television theory towards a more audience-centered theory that largely revolves around two central discussions – realism and ideology, and subjectivity and polysemy. According to Fiske, these underlie all television genres and are deployed towards the ultimate objective of producing pleasure for the audience/viewer as a form of gratification. Thus the role of television in this capacity, is to encode 'reality' as understood by social and cultural norms, and in doing so, to produce a cultural text that is appropriate for its viewers (Fiske 2011, 4-5). This is not the production of reality but a reproduction of the "dominant sense of reality" (Fiske 2011, 21). Fiske explains that the "essence of realism is that it reproduces reality in such a form as to make it easily understandable" (2011, 24). This suggests that reality and realism as encoded on television is a reality interpreted by the dominant/mainstream segments of society that has since become socio-cultural 'common sense'. This representation is further simplified for the screen to ensure it is easily consumed. Through its wide propagation, it thus encourages or provokes a dominant ideology of, for example, masculinity and patriarchy. In this sense, by providing viewers gratification through the production of pleasure, dominant social and cultural norms are made 'digestable' to the viewing public at large.

Similar to both the Lacanian-Žižekian and connotative representational systems, Fiske (2011, 2, 90, 108, 145) suggests that while messages may be encoded within television, it is open to a multitude of readings. Furthermore, while the producers of the text can encode a preferred subject-reader position, it is the viewers that ultimately make meanings out of the text at the point of decoding. This is what he calls a producerly-text, where viewers take up different subject positions – dominant and resistant – depending on their preferred manner of reading, informed through issues such as social class, gender, race, and socio-economic positions. However, this does not mean that the sign's meanings are not 'fixed' to several dominant meanings, for even oppositional or resistant readings exist only in reference to the dominant preferred meanings of the text.



This is in fact, observed by how the ideological quilt ‘totalizes’ all positions, for it ‘halts’ or ‘fixes’ meanings *by referencing* the nodal point (the dominant preferred meaning) which contextualizes all potential positions to itself (Žižek 1989, 95-97).<sup>198</sup>

Fiske describes this same nodal point on television as ‘realism’ (2011, 21). Televised ‘reality’ is, in this context, “the dominant sense of reality” that focuses television’s polysemic potential into a more singular preferred meaning (Fiske 2011, 6, 21, 64). This advances Hall’s proposition of fixity in cultural codes, though in Fiske’s application, it is ideology<sup>199</sup> that stabilizes televised reality’s many meanings through the televisual ideological structure (2011, 6, 64). In this sense, the ability of Fiske’s dominant televisual reality to naturalize and make innocent what is inherently constructed and ideological, is in fact, similar to the primary function of ‘myths’ (Hall 2013, 156).

Claude Lévi-Strauss explains that a myth is a narrative that has been preserved through generations which in turn legitimates the status quo of the present (2001). Roland Barthes argues that by stating the fabricated plainly as fact, myths serve the ideological function of naturalization (1977, 45-46), a process that enables myths to turn culture into nature (1974, 206). This results in making the dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes, and beliefs seem natural, normal, self-evident, and consequently, like an ‘objective’ and ‘true’ reflection of reality. Its function within television is thus key, for myths invite audiences to identify with, or disassociate from, characters and values that are peddled by the televisual text. While these theories stress the importance of signs to culture, its utilization by culture, and how signs derive and convey meaning, of equal importance is the way signs relate to one another. To understand the full scope of this last point – of how the ideological quilt

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<sup>198</sup> For example, both pro-male privilege (dominant) and gender equality (resistant/oppositional) positions exist only by referencing the same dominant discourse of patriarchy.

<sup>199</sup> Boundaries are however, progressively blurred since ‘culture’ may essentially be ‘ideology’, as alluded to by our assertion of ‘statist Malay’, for example.

constructs televised 'reality' – it might be best to frame the discussion through the 'paradigmatic-syntagmatic' (or 'paradigm-syntagm') system.

John Fiske & John Hartley described a paradigm as a 'set' of units – each unit being a sign or word, and a syntagm as a 'chain' "into which it is linked to others, according to agreed rules and conventions, to make a meaningful whole" (1985, 50-51). As an example, alphabets (paradigms) are combined into syntagms called words. Paradigmatic (alphabet) modifications thus result in different syntagms (words). This can further be taken to a broader context where each word can be considered a paradigm that when linked to other paradigmatic words, create a syntagmatic chain. The flexibility of this systematic relationship between signs thus allows for a narrower or broader construction of signification chains within the context of the ideological quilt. Let us illustrate this process with an example so it is less abstract.

One Malay artefact imbued with cultural meaning is the *keris* (traditional Malay dagger with a wavy blade). At the denotative (literal) level, the *keris* is merely a blade used as a weapon. Reading the *keris* connotatively, it becomes a repository of cultural meanings. The *keris* is transformed from a mere weapon to that of a Malay spiritual object, imbued with a presence or essence possessing magical powers that can aid its wielder in battle (Farish 2010, 26-30). In a televised scene, the *keris* is then held by a Malay male character who is dressed in the garb of a traditional Malay warrior and featured in the setting of a *kampung*. Each element in the description – the mise-en-scene, if you will – is a repository of Malay cultural meanings. In this instance, the *keris*, the male gender, his Malay ethnicity, and the warrior garb, each becomes a paradigmatic unit that when considered in relation to each other, constructs a syntagmatic meaning (ideological quilt) that finds its nodal point in 'traditional Malay'. This nodal point of 'traditional Malay' can only be gleaned when one first understands the connotative significance of each of these elements individually. It is clear in this example that if even one of these individual paradigms is modified (say, the character's gender or ethnicity), the syntagmatic meaning would change, for the shared cultural conceptual map would be altered.

Further, other characters in the same scene would function similarly as individual syntagms with meanings derived out of their own paradigms. However, individual syntagm-characters can also become paradigms again when viewed from a broader perspective since collectively, the characters are productive of meaning when understood *in relation to* other characters. This constructs a wider syntagmatic chain – and thus a broader ideological quilt – that expands its reading to the entire scene, rather than individual characters. In an even wider construction, each scene that is a syntagm can once again be considered as paradigms when linking *between* scenes in a broader, inter-scene syntagmatic construction of meaning. This makes clear, that within the paradigm-syntagm construction that exists as part of the ideological quilt giving meaning to televised ‘reality’, every element, act, and line of dialogue – as well as different permutations to each of their combinations – is productive of meaning and is never devoid of signification, even if it is seemingly random.

The discussions thus far, have demonstrated some of the various ways that significations occur within a televisual text. Further, we have observed how meaning can be derived from a paradigmatic detail at the lowest level, to affect a change in meaning on a much broader, syntagmatic level. The next section discusses the situation comedy, which grounds the largely theoretical discussions of this first section with an emphasis on how the representations in sitcoms resonate with society’s self-conceptualization of its own social reality.

### *The Situation Comedy*

The situation comedy (sitcom) is a genre of television comedy. The term ‘genre’ is a French word which means ‘kind’ or ‘type’, and has been used widely in the study of literary, television, film, theatre and other media theories (Neale 2001, 1). There are always more definitive, yet less obvious traits beneath the explicit characteristics of any particular genre type. Within the context of sitcoms for example, Sioned Wiliam, then Controller of Comedy at the British channel ITV, explained in 2005 that there is a common misconception that sitcoms are made up of jokes when the converse is actually true (Mills 2009, 24). For while a

sitcom can be “defined by its comic impetus” simply because it relies significantly on that for “all of its textual elements” (Mills 2009, 25), less obvious factors such as narrative, character, and representation do play equal parts in defining this genre. So if humour or comedy does not solely define sitcoms, how are they defined?

The academic literature suggests that, beyond the broad synonymy of sitcom with television humour, the sitcom genre continues to elude any rigid or precise definition. This is evidenced by the diverse and differing descriptors of sitcom on the part of television broadcasters as well as scholars of television. Brett Mills for example, suggests that sitcoms feature metadrama fleshed out as an ‘acknowledgement’ of the audiences’ presence through the addition of a laugh track (2009, 31). Kristin Thompson reasons that sitcoms feature recurring characters in regular settings with the aim of telling stories in an entertaining and easily comprehensible fashion (2003, ix). Alan Rubin observes that sitcom’s primary goal is to be funny, and is thus defined by its humorous content which audiences watch with the expectation of laughter (1981, 159). Mills notes that sitcoms are filmed in front of a live studio audience to mirror the genre’s roots in theatrical comedy (2009, 14-15). Britain’s broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, defines sitcom through its on-air duration, which is that of 25-30 minutes (2004, Appendix B). This is used to differentiate it from another closely related hybrid genre, the comedy drama, which Ofcom defines as being in excess of 25 minutes in length (2004, Appendix B).

Malaysian broadcaster TV3’s definition of sitcom is similarly vague. Then senior analyst for TV3’s Research Department Ahmad Bashah Mat Wasi<sup>200</sup> explained in 2014, that a programme will be categorized by TV3 as a sitcom if its objective is to generate laughter, and it is not the length of a movie (personal communication, October 10, 2014). This makes it evident that broadcasters have their own definitions to what constitutes a sitcom, which explains why it is often “open to negotiation for those who produce it” (Mills 2009, 2).

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<sup>200</sup> Ahmad Bashah is now Manager for MPB’s TV9.

Based on these definitions, it becomes clear that *Senario* does not fit perfectly into some of the conventions of sitcoms mentioned above. One feature of *Senario* is its non-recurring characters and locations. This also means that *Senario* features different episodal stories that do not relate to previous episodes (even if themes may recur). It will also become evident in the three chapters of analysis that *Senario* is more often didactic than it is comical, though it still aims to generate some laughter. All of these do not entirely align with the descriptions of sitcom mentioned earlier. There are, however, features of *Senario* that do fit into the genre. For one, *Senario* is recorded in front of a live-studio audience and it does include laughter from these audiences. Of more significance is that TV3 advertises *Senario* as a sitcom, which is a process that frames the viewing experience and viewer expectations to popular understandings of television humour, all of which potentially affects how one approaches and interprets the televisual text. Therefore, how accurately we define sitcom as a genre, and *Senario* as a format is, in this sense, less crucial than TV3's branding of *Senario* since TV3's labelling largely determines the boundaries governing the consumption of the text. In this respect, it is more useful for us to regard *Senario* broadly as a sitcom, where 'sitcom' is defined simply (by TV3's definition) as a half-hour programme characterized by its television humour.

While the preceding discussion sought to define sitcom (and consequently how *Senario* conformed with the genre), we shall now shift to a discussion of sitcom's social function. It is evident from the descriptions of sitcom that the genre's boundaries are fluid, though one defining trait is still its comedic impetus. The genre's reliance on laughter is important, since it strengthens emotional bonds because of humour's innate social nature (Glenn 2003). This communal or social collective nature of sitcoms is further enhanced with the use of laugh tracks, for they simulate a homogenous appreciation of humour that communicates a "collectively agreed notion of when it is appropriate and inappropriate to laugh" (Mills 2009, 103).

Andy Medhurst & Lucy Tuck (1982, 45) found that this collective experience encourages a degree of 'conservatism' in comedy, so that sitcoms 'make sense'

to the majority. In its desire to reach a mass audience, sitcoms may generally sideline the needs and ideologies of minority groups. The resultant unambiguity that is central to their success functions to discourage viewers from reading the text in a variety of ways. In attempting to homogenize the text to create this collective experience, one can argue that messages may be normalized to the point of denying alternative ideologies that are central to critiques of media power (Winn, 1985; Postman, 1986; Barker & Petley, 2001). This in fact, aligns with Fiske's notion of encoded preferred meanings and televised 'reality' that was discussed previously.

From a cultural perspective, the sitcom exists and functions as a socio-cultural text. While it may often be assumed to be a self-evident category, it is reliant on many cultural factors for its meanings (Mills 2009, 2). Here, we observe again that signs (the comedic elements) must be understood within the context of the milieu for which it was intended before any meaning-making can occur (Hall's fixed socially, fixed in culture). Susan Turnbull observed that the highly popular British sitcom *The Office*<sup>201</sup> for instance, was rewritten and remade in a new format by NBC, before it could achieve the same degree of success in America (Smith 2009). Turnbull explained, it was not merely that the comedic forms in each country were different. American societal sensitivities were also entirely different in nature from British sensitivities, a trait that Turnbull attributed to a difference in socio-cultural environments (Smith 2009). In a sense, she explains that American audiences are in this way xenophobic, being more conservative and less open to things that are unfamiliar (Smith 2009).<sup>202</sup> Turnbull's account alludes to a conscious attempt at maintaining ease in the consumption of sitcoms for its viewers by reiterating that which is comfortable to watch. This is fundamentally echoed by Mills who argues:

While high-profile drama and landmark documentaries can be seen to make up those programmes which broadcasters often define themselves by (especially in public service regimes such as that in the UK), sitcom has quietly and consistently given pleasure to millions for decades, rarely

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<sup>201</sup> Turnbull notes that the popularity of *The Office* extended beyond Britain and was sold to over 80 countries (Smith 2009).

<sup>202</sup> Turnbull qualifies this by noting that imported non-American television content only made up 2% of America's on-air programming in 2009 (Smith 2009).

occupying the rarefied space which makes up the landscape of television history.

–Mills (2009, 4)

The excerpt suggests that sitcoms are inconspicuous by the standards of its society for the primary reason of being consumed with little fuss and attention by its viewers. This would of course, corroborate with Turnbull's case of *The Office*. Turnbull explains that the British version with actor Ricky Gervais' "offensive", "racist", and "sexist" (Smith 2009) main character David Brent would have hardly been inconspicuous or 'comfortable' to an American demographic who have very different understandings of political correctness. This feeling of 'comfort' is in fact integral to sitcom's popularity, since as a genre, the sitcom goes "out of its way to fit into the lives of its viewers" by appearing to be simple even when it is actually highly complex (Mills 2009, 4).

This ease of consumption is further reinforced by a familiarity with the sitcom's underlying framework which Jane Feuer notes is "so simple and so easy to recognise" that it is literally "child's play" (2001, 69). Thus, further to its subtle underlying premise as a cultural text, the intended ease of the sitcom's consumption by a large majority of people imbues it with a significant cultural import from another perspective, that of culture as lifestyle. The flow is thus circular, where the expectations of the audience is shaped by the sitcom's familiarity, yet this familiarity itself is a response to perceived audience expectations. In this respect, a sitcom does not merely reflect socio-cultural norms in its meta-discourse at a textual level. From the perspective of viewer consumption, it similarly reflects the culture within which it must be made suitable for easy consumption. This circular flow is in fact a primary reason for our interest in TV3's *Senario* as a gauge for the Malay social mindset.

Entertainment is often erroneously accepted as an "end point in discourse" and mistakenly perceived to only offer enjoyment without truly positing any questions or ruminations on society and popular culture (Dyer 1992, 2). This would speciously imply that all entertainment, including sitcoms, does not encourage or require any critical thinking and analysis for viewers to derive

enjoyment, since it does not require one to think. This can only be true if sitcoms are understood at a superficial, literal level. Head of Comedy at the BBC, Jon Plowman, is one who reasons that the sitcom must be more than merely its humour or comedy:

Comedy's about character, it's not about jokes, so I will quite often say to writers, 'Look, just take the jokes out and see if it still works'. I think there has to be a deeply serious thing in there as well. If you look at all the great sitcoms, there is a fundamental question to answer which is, 'What's it about?' And what it's about should be something quite straightforward and serious. *Fawlty Towers* is about a man who, wherever he is, his aspirations will never be met by the world. He could be running the Ritz, and he'd still be upset by the customers. *Absolutely Fabulous* is about a mother looking after a daughter and a daughter looking after a mother. *The Office* is about life in an office run by somebody who's incompetent. There has to be a fundamentally serious thing which is the thing, if you like, that gives it legs.

– Mills (2009, 57)

This emphasis on character rather than jokes is what provides the sitcom with relevance to popular culture and how it engages with social norms. For while comedy is the vehicle of the narrative, it is the fundamental human condition contextualized within a specific societal framework that is the true appeal of sitcoms. In this sense, it is not merely social norms but how characters themselves interpret, live with, and experience this engagement with society. More contextually to Malaysia, former TV3 *Senario* production member Hisyam (personal communication, October 10, 2015) similarly alludes to this process when he recounts that the narratives for *Senario* were in fact, based on real-life experiences of individuals who are obviously bounded within society's framework:

*Cerita-cerita yang berlaku, ... kebanyakan dia adalah cerita-cerita yang berkaitan dengan diri kami. Cakap jujur. Ia berkaitan dengan pengalaman kami-lah. Okay, contohnya, kami buat cerita bersolat-lah, cerita 60-an-lah. ... so kita ada kenangan cerita mak bapak kitaorang, cerita kita orang kat kampung. So benda tu yang banyak menjadi tau. ... Kisah tu kisah benar. Cerita tu memang rapat dengan orang-lah. Cerita tu orang mudah terima. ... Kebanyakan dia, benda tu mesti ada kaitan dengan ... kalau you cakap-lah, cerita tu memang ada kaitan dengan ahhh ... apa you cakap tadi – ah, social trend tadi. Dia [social trend] macam fillers je lah. Tapi dia punya teras cerita tu, mesti dekat dengan hati orang which is mesti kena dalam hati orang. Kalau kita buat cerita dengan hati kita, ramai yang connect. Ramai yang connect sebab ramai ada pengalaman tu.*



The stories that occurred [in *Senario*], ... they were mostly stories that were associated with ourselves. To be honest, it was from our own experiences. Okay, for example, there was a story about [Islamic] prayers, a story set in the 1960s ... so it was a nostalgic story about our parents, our story when we were in the *kampung* [village or hometown]. So, it turned out really well ... The story was a real story. The story was really close to the heart for many. The story was easy to accept. ... Most of the time, it must be associated with ... if you were to call it, the story must be associated with ahhh ... what did you call it – ah, social trend. It [social trend] functions only as fillers. The actual basis of the story, it must be close to the hearts of the viewers, which is, it must be agreeable to the viewers emotionally. If we produce a story with our hearts [a story with heart], many will connect with it. Many will connect because it will be a relatable experience.<sup>203</sup>

–Hisyam (personal communication, October 10, 2015)

From Plowman's and Hisyam's accounts, it is evident that comedy is not the primary variable that connects with viewers, even if it is the definitive element in determining the text's classification as a genre. This is ironic, for it seems designed to misdirect attention even as it comments and reflect on far less simplistic societal issues. More interesting is how both Plowman's and Hisyam's accounts describe the emphasis on characters who engage with social conventions to articulate the realities governing their lives. Though Plowman refers to British sitcoms and Hisyam to a Malaysian sitcom, their fundamental considerations transcend what are potentially, different cultural and religious values of Western and Eastern audiences.

This link between character and wider society is, among others, the 'relatable factor' that resonates with viewers. Thus, if sitcoms require cultural contexts within which the televisual texts will make sense, then those who consume these texts must similarly produce these cultural contexts in order for them to feel included. This is the same tautological premise outlined in the Lacanian-Žižekian system. In this respect, it would not be overreaching to suggest that *Senario*'s popularity<sup>204</sup> might be attributed to its success in televisually constructing a relatable microcosm of Malay communal reality.

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<sup>203</sup> English translation provided by the researcher.

<sup>204</sup> *Senario* was produced for 17 years (1996-2013), and re-runs are still telecast on TV3 and on HyppTV's video-on-demand service.

### *More Than Just Humour*

To further appreciate sitcom's function within a broader social context, a discussion of Humour Theory may provide some valuable insights. Humour Theory is a collection of works from seemingly unrelated disciplines such as sociology, politics, psychology, linguistics, biology and mathematics (Mills 2009, 76). Three distinct approaches or categories broadly subsume the many different discussions within Humour Theory itself. These three main theoretical approaches are the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory, and the Relief Theory (Mills 2009, 76). I discuss two of these theories – Superiority Theory and Incongruity Theory – for they directly relate to Hisyam's account of *Senario*. I am interested in how the fundamental themes of these two theories on humour can be related to the realities of producing *Senario* and how they may be reflected in *Senario*'s content. As such, I frame the discussion of Superiority Theory through Hisyam's account of specific episodes of *Senario* where their humour were deemed unsuitable by the censors. The discussion on Incongruity Theory will also draw on Hisyam's explanation of *Senario*'s "cross-gender" characters as a source of humour (personal communication, October 10, 2015). Framing *Senario*'s comedic impetus broadly through these two theories will allow us to situate our understanding of the sitcom's subtext within its broader social context.

The Superiority Theory is the oldest of the three theories and has at its foundation, the supposition that "people laugh when they feel a kind of superiority, particularly over people" (Mills 2009, 77). For this reason, humour is regarded as a negative emotion where enjoyment and its subsequent laughter, is derived out of the misfortune or distress of others. Laughter is thus seen as an immoral act, which prompted Aristotle to view humour as a "sort of abuse" (Mills 2009, 77) for this is laughter 'at' a subject rather than 'with' a subject. Analyses of the sitcom as a platform for repeated mocking of minorities and social groups find its roots here (Medhurst & Tuck, 1982; Porter, 1998).

The most notable development in the Superiority Theory is the inclusion of Thomas Hobbes' work that viewed this humour as the result of 'sudden glory' (Mills 2009, 77) – a tactic used by those with little power to mock others to reassure themselves of their own dominance. Hobbes thus viewed humour as an adverse consequence of social distinctions, which in turn revealed the relationship of humour with social power. Of significance is what comedy actually 'does'. In its social context, this humour and laughter is employed by 'inferior groups' to mock those viewed as 'superior', in order to point out that they are just as flawed (Mills 2009, 78-79). It is no surprise therefore, that Mills suggests contemporary broadcasting regulations are in fact designed to regulate the topics which can be joked about in an attempt to mitigate comedy's negative effects, when compared to other more educating or "civilising" television genres (2009, 78).

While Mills writes primarily about British sitcoms, Malaysian television regulators similarly address these 'negative' comedic effects that are identified by the Superiority Theory. While the reasoning of the *Lembaga Penapis Filem* (Film Censorship Board - LPF) is based more on national considerations, the delimiting of certain non-political and non-racial topics are based on the same premise. LPF's role in Malaysian television censorship was discussed in Chapter 3, and TV3's former *Senario* production member Hisyam recounted some of his experiences with LPF during the years of *Senario*'s production. He mentions 10 episodes that were banned by LPF, though he only remembers the titles of three. In Hisyam's following account on one of the unremembered titles,<sup>207</sup> it is clear that the fundamental logic of Superiority Theory is present in LPF's censorship considerations, where the humour of laughing 'at' someone, can be perceived as inappropriate (personal communication, October 10, 2015).

Hisyam: *Lagi dia ada kisah yang mak dia lari daripada rumah. Mak dia lari daripada rumah sebab konon-konon birthday mak diaorang nak surprise-kan mak dia tau. Mak dia terasa diabaikan-lah, orang semua ignore dia ... dia sensitif ...*

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<sup>207</sup> On checking with Hisyam on 4 June 2016, he clarifies that this story refers to '*Mahligai Impian*'.

*zaman itu sangat sensitif sebab kita tunjukkan macam bad on mak-lah, tapi kisah tu kisah betul tau. Serius tau. Kisah tu warga tua yang diabaikan tapi bila kita tunjuk ... bila realiti sangat yang kita tunjuk, and lepas kita lawakkan, LPF rasa benda itu sensitif.*

There was also a story about a mother who ran away from home. The mother ran away from home because apparently, they wanted to surprise her for her birthday, you know. But the mother thought she was neglected since everyone was ignoring her ... she was sensitive ... that period in time was very sensitive [to themes like these] because we portrayed something that was 'bad on' the mother. But it was a true story, you know. Seriously. It was a story about old folks who have been neglected, but when we showed it ... when it was too realistic, and then we made it comedic, LPF found the issue to be sensitive.

Researcher: So ok ke, kalau cerita tu kalau bukan sitkom, kalau drama? So would it be OK if the story wasn't a sitcom, if it was a drama?

Hisyam: Ok. I think ok. *Tapi bila kita .... benda tu jadi sensitif tau. I rasa masa I nak buat cerita apa pun takut. (laughs) ... Contoh eh, realiti kan ada anak yang kurang ajar dengan ibu bapa kan. Tapi bila kita tunjuk on TV, benda itu jadi komedi, ... Orang gelak. Benda itu macam eh - asal dia kurang ajar ah? Asal dia jerit-jerit dengan mak dia? Ah, tapi kalau drama, benda tu lain tau? Benda tu lain tau. Macam you buli you punye mak dekat sitkom, orang gelak kan, benda tu mesti ada orang yang tak best nya. Sebab benda tu sangat sensitif untuk komedi .... sangat sensitif.*

Ok. I think ok. But when we ... it becomes sensitive, you know. I think, at the time, I would be afraid to even write the story. (laughs) ... For example eh, in reality we have children who are disrespectful to their parents, isn't it? But when we show it on TV, it becomes comedy, ... People laugh. It becomes, eh - why is he disrespectful? Why is he shouting at his mother? When its drama, its different, you know? It's different. Like, if you bully your mom in a sitcom, people laugh, [but] there are definitely some who aren't happy with it. Because it is very sensitive material for comedy ... very sensitive.

The central concern with Hisyam's televisual narrative above, appears to be its potential to be misconstrued as, and perceived to be, laughter 'at' a subject rather than 'with' a subject. However, this is the exact fundamental basis for humour identified by the Superiority Theory. LPF's rationale in this case, is that

the comedic narrative's polysemy should not contain the potential for viewer misinterpretation, which in Hisyam's case, is the misinterpretation of mocking.<sup>208</sup> Of equal interest is also how the Superiority Theory's elementary notions about laughter and humour are in fact, put into practice as legislation. These foreground concretely, the function of humour and sitcoms within the society they circulate within.

The key concern with Malaysian sitcoms in general, revolves around the previously discussed polysemy of a televised text that may be open to viewer interpretation. While Mills does not mention it, he takes on Fiske's perspective by similarly proposing that a "variety of audience positions are available" within the text (Mills 2009, 80). This explains why regulators attempt to narrow this polysemy through constrictive policies. Further to the potential for misconstrued mocking, Hisyam's account also reveals a concern that stories may be too realistic for sitcoms. This seems to contradict Plowman's observation that sitcoms should be driven by something rooted in reality, as well as Hisyam's own assertion that stories need to be grounded in lived-experience. This may reflect the fundamental logic of the Asian values discourse in balancing between local cultural sensitivities and global culture, insofar as Malaysian sitcoms can only portray certain forms of 'realism' or lived-reality.

The point to note here, is that the episode described by Hisyam was not prohibited on the usual grounds of race or politics. Given that TV3 is a Malay channel primarily for a Malay demographic,<sup>209</sup> this references a heavy-handed attempt by the state to decide what is suitable for the consumption of the Malay community. While an argument can be made that LPF's decision in this case, was guided by an effort to ensure that neutral, uncontroversial, and non-offensive content was aired, there is another facet to the argument. From an ideological perspective, the determining of what is suitable for Malay viewers by the state,

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<sup>208</sup> When Hisyam explains that the mother in the story is reflective of 'old folks' being 'neglected', he also makes explicit our earlier point that sitcoms' characters (individuals) must be understood within the wider rubric of their society (communal).

<sup>209</sup> Discussed in Chapter 3.

references Fiske's proposition of televisual 'realism' where televised 'reality' is "the dominant sense of reality" (2011, 6, 21, 64).

LPF's rationale thus contradicts the basis for this type of humour when explained by the Superiority Theory, where it is the 'inferior' or 'marginalized' groups that mock those viewed as 'superior'. Instead, in the episode of the neglected mother (marginalized party), it is an inversion of the 'superiority' humour's social power dynamics since the marginalized party is protected from being the source of humour for the dominant group. In essence, this represents a mismatch with the central problematics of sitcoms where debates over stereotyping of marginalized groups for humour (Greene 2007; King 2002, 143-147; Mills 2009, 79) seem to invert the Superiority Theory's social power dynamics.<sup>212</sup> It is precisely this attribute of duality that has prompted debates over sitcom to assert that it is a highly political form (Greene 2007) since the "genre problematically upholds power structures within society and is a useful tool for normalising the demonization of certain social groups" (Mills 2009, 79). In all of our cases on *Senario* for instance, the joke itself lies with the victimized party, or the vulnerable groups, which was the central problem that LPF had with Hisyam's runaway mother story. In this respect, the Superiority Theory only addresses some facets of contemporary sitcoms.

The second key theory to humour is the Incongruity Theory. At its centre is the understanding that laughter is an oral expression of the surprise at confounded expectations (Mills 2009, 82). Humour in this case, is found in the disparity that occurs when things that are expected in the sitcom are not actually how they are, or are not portrayed in the way that one expects them to be. This unexpectedness can occur in a myriad of ways, from the inclusion of character dialogue that isn't associated with the narrative or a scene that has no narrative purpose, to the parody of television conventions like characters walking around the walls of the set rather than doors, thus breaking the 'rules' of broadcasting (Mills 2009, 82-83). It could be as simple as a play on words where a word is

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<sup>212</sup> To reiterate, the Superiority Theory describes a type of humour that occurs when the marginalized group laughs 'at' the dominant or 'superior' group.

used to mean one thing, but is understood by a character differently, resulting in unexpected reactions, quite to the perplexity of the originator of the words. Parodies of genres for instance, rely on audiences knowing the conventions of that genre,<sup>213</sup> and it is these expectations of the conventions that the jokes undercut (Mills 2009, 83). More recently, this approach of incongruous humour was used by several scholars to analyze the popular American sitcom, the 'Big Bang Theory' (for example, K. McGrath 2014; S. Walters 2013).

Incongruity Theory "clearly positions humour as a cognitive rather than emotional phenomenon, while acknowledging the physical process which is its outcome" (Mills 2009, 83). The central dependence on expectations and norms is clear, for unless a viewer understands the way things are 'supposed' to be, the incongruity will go unnoticed and laughter will not be achieved. In this respect, the deployment of stereotypes is thus seen as being a 'safe bet' since it draws upon archetypes that are socially recognizable – even if they may be inaccurate. In similar fashion, Barthian myths serve their key function here; dominant cultural-historical values, attitudes, and beliefs that have become natural and normal, invite audiences to identify with them before they are undermined through the humour.

There are limits for this approach to humour. Pure unnarrativized incongruity can lead to confusion, incomprehension, and even distress – since not all surprises have comedic value – such as the surprises in the horror genre (Mills 2009, 84). In this respect, what differentiates the incongruities employed in sitcoms from those employed by other genres, is how audiences are encouraged to read sitcom's incongruities in particular ways. The conventions of the sitcom such as the laugh track,<sup>214</sup> are in fact cues that make it clear to audiences how to respond when incongruities occur (Mills 2009, 85). Here again, Fiske's production of preferred meaning can be transposed, for within Incongruity Theory, the genre's conventions work to ensure that incongruities are read as funny rather than shocking or scary. Central to the notion of surprise here, is

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<sup>213</sup> For example, when watching a Western, one would expect to see horses, and cowboys.

<sup>214</sup> To reiterate, we noted previously how laugh tracks ensure that viewers all find the text 'funny' at specific junctures of the sitcom, engendering a homogenous response to the text.

that audiences must get the joke rather than having it slowly dawn on them. In the case of TV3's *Senario*, Hisyam's reasoning on the show's use of "cross-gender" characters,<sup>215</sup> would appear aligned (unknowingly) to the Incongruity approach (personal communication, October 10, 2015):

*Dia cross-gender ni senang nak dapat laughter. Cross-gender ni senang ... bila diaorang jadi perempuan, laughter senang dapat. Diaorang gerak sikit, movement diaorang, dah gelak dah. Dah lawak dah. You boleh dapat benda tu dengan (snaps fingers) lawak mudah tau. Lawak ni pun cepat, pantas, easy, dan tak yah fikir. Ah ... tak yah fikir. ... bila tengok diaorang jatuh, jatuh sikit, nampak movement diaorang, ah, benda tu yang jadi mudah. Mudah, mudah sangat dapat laughter jika watak perempuan. Tapi watak perempuan ni ada bahaya sikit. Kalau dia jadi over, orang tak suka. Orang jadi benci, orang jadi menyampah. So jadi diaorang kena play minimal saje. Tak boleh over sangat. Tak boleh ghairah sangat – jadi perempuan tu tak boleh lah. Tapi ... ok, maybe they look like pondan tapi takde dalam fikiran scripwriter, tak pernahlah dia buat cerita-cerita tu cerita pondan. Takde. Tapi watak perem (corrects himself) lelaki lembut ada. Watak lelaki lembut ada.*

It is easy to generate laughter through cross-gender [characters]. It's easy ... when they act as females, it's easy to achieve laughter. They move a little, their movements, there is already laughter there. It's already funny. You can get it with (snaps fingers) humour is easy. It's comedy that's fast, quick, easy, and you don't have to think about it. Ah ... don't have to think ... when you watch them fall, or just trip, you see their movements, ah, it becomes easy. Very, very easy to get laughter if it's a female character. But, female characters can be a bit dangerous. If it is overdone, people will not like it. They will hate it, they will find it disgusting. So they have to keep it to a minimum. You can't overdo it. Can't be too enthusiastic [or too extroverted] – as a female, you can't lah. But ... ok, maybe they look like transgenders/cross-dressers but in the mind of the scriptwriter, it was not intended. There aren't any. But fema (corrects himself) effeminate male characters, there are. Effeminate male characters, yes.

–Hisyam (personal communication, October 10, 2015)

The incongruity occurs through the obviously male actor, performing as a female or as effeminate. In this way, the comedy occurs when there is a disparity between the true gender of the actor and the gender performed – when masculinity is feminized. This is explicitly identified by Hisyam who explains that it is a humour that is easy to achieve, where even little movements by the character can work to elicit laughter. His assertion that this humour is triggered

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<sup>215</sup> Cross-gender or cross-dressed characters were banned on sitcoms by the LPF from around 1999. To feature such characters as the joke, was considered by LPF as an insult to women (Hisyam, personal communication, October 10, 2015).



quickly, without any room for thinking, also aligns to incongruous humour's cognitive process rather than emotional. All these are further grounded on social expectations as the basis on which the disparities occur.

Mills notes the Incongruity Theory reveals that humour rests on diversions from social norms (2009, 87). In such a way, it can be used by sitcoms to demonstrate the artificial nature of social normatives and undermine their supposedly natural or self-evident state. However, this works both ways; it is as likely to be utilized for mocking the socially deviant, as much as it can be a subversive tool against the status quo. Regardless, in both cases, this theory suggests that there is a relationship between comedy and social norms, where laughter can only be elicited when audiences possess an understanding of the norms that the incongruities rely on for humour. In this sense, the theory can be used to detect the differences between one culture and another, as well as the (non)changes to a culture across time. For what is revealed as suitable comedic material also exposes what is unsuitable. Both in turn, uncovers the cultural values of the era. In short, the performance of what is incongruous within social norms also reveals what exists outside of these dominant normatives. For this reason, when framed through the Incongruity Theory, sitcoms can be regarded as offensive, anti-establishment, or excessive, though the converse is also true.

Both these theories on humour engage with different understandings of social humour, and they serve to account for the social worth of humour. While these two theories originated before the advent of television, they have nonetheless been broadly transposed to broadcasting and sitcoms. What is significant are the wider societal responses to these comedies that actuate their social function. They are therefore necessary to the process of understanding sitcom's importance to culture as it places comedy within a social context. While these two theories are not the only theoretical expositions on sitcoms, comedy, or humour – for the corpus of work on these are vast – they are nonetheless relevant to our understanding of *Senario*.

### *Conclusion*

By establishing the relationship between broadcasters and state power in Chapter 3, we are presented with a media industry that is monopolized by UMNO. We have also considered that with Malay media drawing the largest audiences, the state's monopoly over Malay media could potentially result in its use as a site to embed a nationalist trajectory to the narrative of Malay nationhood. The present chapter demonstrated how this argument can be extended to TV3's sitcom *Senario*, where we first addressed the polysemy of the television format, the political form of the situation comedy genre, the social value of comedy and humour, and the different signifying methods by which all these are represented televisually.

These theories of representation, signifying chains, ideological quilting, and televisual 'reality' as applied within the sitcom's socio-ideological spaces, serve as the starting point for our analysis of *Senario*. One central consideration is *Senario*'s format which differs from the typical conventions of sitcoms that have been discussed in this chapter. *Senario*'s non-recurring characters therefore place more emphasis on how/what its characters do feature. This means that *Senario* is not able to progressively develop its characters, provide the nuances of the real world that it mirrors, or critically pose questions about the moral positions of its characters.

As we will observe in the next three chapters, *Senario* must instead establish its characters and achieve a bond between character and viewer within the first scene, since it effectively 'begins anew' with each episode. This places a significant emphasis on the deployment of stereotype characters since it must draw upon archetypes that are immediately socially recognizable – even if they may be inaccurate representations. The meanings of the lowest level paradigms that are represented thus become more significant in *Senario*, since they affect acute changes in syntagmatic meanings. The concern is that *Senario* then skirts towards essentialism, since it must adopt dominant socio-cultural conventions of the lowest common denominator for it to achieve mass relatability. Hisyam's account of an effeminate character being funny for instance, similarly relies on

essentialist notions of male-female attributes. The final effect is further augmented because every single representation in the mise-en-scene is productive of meaning within the ideological signification chain.

In the analysis of *Senario* which follows in the next three chapters, I shall be interested primarily to observe how these concerns are manifested in *Senario*, and what effects they produce. This is particularly interesting since the need for *Senario* to have an 'immediate relatable factor' means that it needs to rely heavily on popular references to Malay culture, current events, historical narratives, and political rhetoric, among others. Of interest is how these popular references to Malay culture, tradition, and religion contribute to, and/or reflect the wider discursive terrain of the Malay imaginary. I will seek to observe whether subjective affects, and the experiences derived from sites of inter-communal exchanges and contestations, all represent the multitude of discourses that are incorporated into *Senario*, and if these are truly subjective or statist.

## CHAPTER 5

### Situating the Malay Narrative in *Senario*

*Masyarakat hari ini, dia ada beberapa kategori. Kategori pertama, dia betui-betui paham erti kemerdekaan ... yang keduanya, dia paham, tapi buat tak paham ... yang ketiganya, langsung tak paham. ... Hang tengok ... sinilah dia penyakit penjajah la ni ...*

*Society today is comprised of several categories. The first category understands the meaning of [the nation's] independence. The second understands, but chooses to ignore. The third totally has no understanding ... look ... here, we have the sickness of the colonials (or colonizers) ...*

*–Negara Chekpa Merdeka (Abdul Samad, 1996)*

The analysis in this chapter and the next two chapters are focused on interpreting *Senario* in relation to the broader cultural, historical, religious, and socio-political milieus outlined in the preceding chapters. They are thus categorized according to the broadly interrelated themes of Malayness, supra-Malay and Islam, and gender relations, respectively. We have already observed that the nation's broader religious and socio-political milieus shape the discursive terrain of Malay irredentism that undergirds the rhetoric of Malay nationalism. Focusing on notions of Malayness, this chapter will discuss *Senario* against this wider discourse of Malay nationalism and its deployment as a primary constitutive element providing substance to the imaginings of Malay identity.

Three broad themes to *Senario*'s televisual Malayness direct the discussions in this chapter. The first is the urban-rural dichotomy exemplified through the binary of New Malay and traditional Malay. This includes a strengthening of imagined Malayness through a shifting of Malay *adat* from the periphery to the centre. The second is the threat of the West to the Malays – the us-them othering and demonization of 'foreign-ness' – as effected through the relativist Asian values position.<sup>217</sup> The third is the construction and affirmation of partisan historical myths that validate the existing dynamics of inter-ethnic relations and

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<sup>217</sup> Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's aspiration for Asian values to be embraced against the influence of Western culture. This was discussed in Chapter 2.

political structures within the nation. These three themes do not constitute the complete construction of what it means to be Malay; that would be an oversimplification of a complex group identity. They are however, the dominant discourses contained within the televisual text that is *Senario* and are broadly recurrent in various forms throughout the episodes analyzed. These three themes will be discussed in turn.

The first section of the chapter will focus on the theme of Malay nationalism as articulated in the episode *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* (Abdul Samad, 1996). We will observe how the episodes' characters are represented as direct participants of the independence movement. This in turn, legitimizes a monolithic historical narrative to establish an ethnically tiered structure of Malaysian citizenship. This will be followed by an analysis of the episode *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* (Jamil, Ilya, & Norwani, 1998) in the second section where the narratives first introduced in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* are expanded to include even wider themes accenting statist Malayness. *Raya ... Raya ... Raya's* statist-traditional interpretation of the urban-rural, West-Malay, and Malay-non-Malay contests, will be the primary focus in this section. It will be observed that these binaries are in fact, state strategies of othering. The third section will foreground *Senario's* deliberate aesthetic caricaturization of ethnicity which in fact, is a manifestation of Homi Bhabha's concept of stereotypes discussed in Chapter 2. The overarching type-casting of non-Malays through visual, aural, and behavioural markers that were first introduced by British Sinophobia will be examined across *Tandas Awam* (Aznil, & Adiel, 1997), *Jejak Karun* (Nizam, 1998), *Gong Xi* (Muhd. Sufian, & Kamalia, 2002), and *Kantoi* Part 1 & 2 (Nurul, & Anniesafinas, 2011). In all of these three sections, it will be observed that the characters on *Senario* demonstrate rhetorical positions that are ideologically aligned with the administration.

*Tanah Tumpahnya Darahku*<sup>218</sup> or 'The Land Where My Blood Was Spilt'

One of the earliest episodes<sup>219</sup> of *Senario* that explicitly addressed the theme of Malay nationalism is *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*<sup>220</sup> (Uncle's Nation [Has Achieved]

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<sup>218</sup> This is a line from the Malaysian National Anthem – *Negaraku* (My Nation).

Independence)(Abdul Samad) which first aired in 1996. *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* tells the story of the elderly *ketua kampung* (village head) Pak Teh visiting his old friend Pak Ark and his wife Mak Bedah<sup>221</sup> on Malaysia's Independence Day.<sup>222</sup> The couple live in a traditional *kampung*. Accompanying Pak Teh is Jefri Lemon, a university student who is keen to interview both men for they are regarded as *Tokoh Kemerdekaan* (Independence Leader[s]). After Pak Ark and Pak Teh recount their struggles prior to the nation's independence,<sup>223</sup> Jefri wonders if Malaysian youths and the people of the *kampung* understand its significance. Two youths, Ucop and Daruih (see Figure 5.2) who seem to have adopted non-traditional habits and culture, come across the group and are subsequently questioned about their understanding of the nation's independence.<sup>224</sup>

It should be noted from the outset that as a sitcom episode, *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* comes across as uncharacteristically overt in its didacticism. It is sparse on humour which occurs only in between the brief interstices of very lengthy blocs of what I suggest are Malay nationalist rhetoric. Very little actually happens in the narrative with the characters' dialogue mainly functioning to move the rhetoric forward. The discussion of *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* will therefore be primarily focused on the narrative's unspoken and dialogic rhetoric, and the creation of the rhetoric's basis through a specific interpretation of the nation's history.

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<sup>219</sup> According to Media Prima's Resource Centre data, this was the seventh episode aired.

<sup>220</sup> Unless specified, all episodes discussed were recorded on-stage with two or three non-mobile cameras in front of a live studio audience. Further, unless specified, they all feature a Malay-only cast performing as characters who are Malay, in its wider polysemic application.

<sup>221</sup> Pak and Mak are terms commonly used to address the elderly, translating to Uncle and Aunt, respectively.

<sup>222</sup> Mak Bedah is played by a female actor. I point this out since male actors do perform as female characters in several of the episodes discussed.

<sup>223</sup> Their actual contribution towards the independence initiative is never mentioned. What is recounted are the struggles they encountered by living in the jungles of Malaya. However, because they are recognized as Independence Leaders, the narrative implies that they did contribute to the nation's independence. This vagueness in *Senario's* narratives is present in all the episodes discussed.

<sup>224</sup> Given its narrative, I initially assumed *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* (episode 7) was a commemorative 31 August National Day episode. However, this is not the case. Its exact airdate is unknown (undated on Media Prima Resource Centre records), though episode 11 (4 episodes after) is logged as being aired on 10 May 1996, which suggests that *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* aired well before the annual National Day celebrations.



Figure 5.1

Still from *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. From left: Jefri, Pak Teh, Mak Bedah, and Pak Ark.



Figure 5.2

Still from *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. From left: Ucop, and Daruih.

At the start of the episode, Pak Teh hands three vernacular language newspapers – *Tamil Nesan* (Indian), *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Chinese), and *Berita Harian* (Malay) – to Pak Ark and his wife Mak Bedah to read. At first sight, this is ethnically inclusive, for the newspapers symbolically include the three main ethnic communities into the wider discourse of Malaysian nationalism. This however, is the only reference to non-Malay citizens and it occurs obliquely through the

newspapers as an Andersonian<sup>225</sup> phenomenon of national imagining (Anderson 2006, 6-7, 31-46). As signifiers, the newspapers' role can therefore only be explained by its attempt at defining this national inclusiveness among the nation's citizenry. There are two interrelated layers to its signification.

The first layer functions to dictate the criteria of inclusion on the basis of inter-ethnic dynamics. These three vernacular papers were chosen presumably for their political association with UMNO, as well as their symbolic meaning within the context of the nation's leadership. At the time, the leaders of UMNO's Indian coalition partner, the Malaysian Indian Congress had business links with *Tamil Nesan* (Mohd. Azizuddin 2009, 39). *Nanyang Siang Pau* was, at the time, owned by Huaren Holdings, the investment arm of UMNO's Chinese coalition partner, the Malaysian Chinese Association (Mohd. Azizuddin 2009, 39). *Berita Harian* is published by NSTP which is owned by Media Prima Berhad, UMNO's media investment arm.<sup>226</sup> All three are dominant ethnic-based parties within the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition government that has been in power since independence.

Within the scene, minority inclusion is furthermore made possible only by the performance of the Malay Independence leaders' reading of vernacular papers; the mediating element of Malay that 'enables' national inclusivity. Here, Pak Teh and Pak Ark are signifiers for Malay nationalism, for both are Malay (pre)independence movement leaders and the former is now a government-sanctioned village head. Notwithstanding Pak Teh's bureaucratic position, both men's significations are associated with UMNO by the connoted pre-independence Malay opposition to the Malayan Union<sup>227</sup> that led to the

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<sup>225</sup> I refer to Benedict Anderson's view that national imaginings are made possible through technological and economic advancements in modernity (2006, 6-7, 31-46).

<sup>226</sup> Instead of Malay daily *Utusan Melayu* which UMNO owns directly, *Berita Harian* is presumably chosen because like TV3 (which telecasts *Senario*), it is owned by Media Prima. Furthermore, contextually to the present discussion on national inclusion, *Berita Harian* is less ethnically chauvinistic in its editorial when compared to *Utusan Melayu*.

<sup>227</sup> The Malayan Union was an attempt by the British administration at unifying the Malay Peninsula. A federation of the Malay states and the Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca, it lasted from 1946 to 1948. Two primary factors that motivated significant Malay opposition to the Union were the perceived loss of powers by the Malay Sultans, and the granting of citizenship



formation of UMNO (Milner 2011, 152). When these significations are considered together, one connotation seems to be that national inclusivity can only be guaranteed when Malay interests are protected by the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition government. This signification will become clearer when the Malays' – and by default, UMNO's – instrumental role in achieving independence is asserted later in the narrative. Correspondingly, the implicit quality of Pak Teh's proposed Malay nationalist meta-discourse becomes more explicit as the narrative progresses.

The second layer of signification is particularistic. It structures this 'inclusive' nationalism through Pak Teh's wider ideological rejection of Western<sup>228</sup> culture and values – what he terms as *penyakit penjajah* (sickness of the colonials/colonizers).<sup>229</sup> There are two possible explanations for Pak Teh's rejection; then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's adversarial stance towards the West and Pak Teh's notion of language's symbolic value. We have previously discussed the Asian values position proposed by Prime Minister Mahathir in the 1990s. Mahathir was overtly critical of what he viewed to be Western pluralist democracy's emphasis on 'excessive individualism' and its predisposition towards predatory interest-group politics (Milne & Mauzy 1999, 138-142; Connors, Davison & Dosch 2004, 141-143). His foreign policies tended towards what Connors, Davison & Dosch observed was an oppositional "Asian values position" that prioritized communitarian Asian values and culture<sup>230</sup> (2004, 142). Pak Teh's rejection of the 'colonizers' sickness' similarly aligns itself with the fundamental arguments of Mahathir's 'Asian values position' against the West. This is the first possible explanation for Pak Teh's wider ideological rejection of Western culture and values.

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to the large number of domiciled Chinese who would then have had equal rights to the Malays (Milner 2011, 151-153,).

<sup>228</sup> In these analyses, I employ the term 'West' or 'Western' within the context of its use by the characters on *Senario* to refer to the '*orang putih*' (white people), and their similarly ambiguous reference to the '*penjajah*' (colonizers/colonials). This also aligns with Mahathir's deployment of the term in his political rhetoric.

<sup>229</sup> The full extract is featured as an opening quote at the start of this chapter. Note that both terms – sickness and colonials/colonizers – connote negativity.

<sup>230</sup> It is intrinsically paradoxical that simultaneous to Mahathir's advocacy for a progressive Malay category, he was also advocating a set of traditional 'Asian values' in opposition to the West, which by its traditional legacy would be fundamentally antithetical to the former.

The second explanation is grounded on a rejection that finds symbolic value in the contest for language, for only vernacular papers were handed out. While this contest for the Malay language can presumably be grounded in Mahathir's Asian values discourse, it can be traced further back as a pre-independence rallying call for Malay solidarity, taking form in nationalistic slogans of "*Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa*" (Language is the soul of the Nation) (Milner 2011, 233) and "*Hidup Bahasa! Hidup-lah Bangsa!*" ([If] Language Lives! The Nation [or Race] Lives!) (Roff 1967, 219). However, the elementary factors motivating these slogans are arguably the same communal anxieties over the future of Malayness that presumably undergird Mahathir's Asian values position. From this perspective, the insistence on an 'erasure' of English by prioritizing the Malay language, is part of the same dialogue of rejecting the West. Malay language is consequently ideologically located at the centre of Malayness and by default, the wider Malay nation. Malay anxieties over the status of the English language persist.<sup>231</sup> Its present permutation – threat to the national supremacy of the Malay language – is largely responsible for communal resistance to the English language today (for examples, see Kashuerin 2015, Aizyl 2016, Chan 2016, and Radzi 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that the English dailies *The Star* and *The New Straits Times* are omitted by Pak Teh.

Language thus functions as a historically-determined ideological component of Pak Teh's Malay nationalism. Pak Teh's omission symbolically denies a space for Western culture and values within the discourse of Malay(sian) nationalism. Within this ideological field, Pak Teh's earlier performance of national inclusiveness towards Malaysia's minority citizenry appears to be operative only under the wider binary of colonizer-colonized. This is central to the scene's second layer of signification. This us-them othering of Malaysians-colonizers/Westerners will be brought into sharper relief, when we analyze Pak Teh's criticisms of the two youths, Ucop and Daruih.

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<sup>231</sup> See Enloe (1967, 153-157) for early developments of Malay anxiety over language. See "Wanita to highlight," (2014) and Zulhilmi (2015) for more recent public expressions of these same anxieties. Note that these cases are more than 37 years apart.

Ucop and Daruih's on-screen introduction is preceded by Pak Teh's polemic on society. He explains that the first category in society today, understands the meaning of Malaysian independence. The second category similarly understands, but chooses to ignore its meaning. The third societal category however, has no understanding whatsoever because they are afflicted with 'colonizers' sickness' (or sickness of the colonials/colonizers).<sup>232</sup>

When Jefri asks about the motivations of this third societal group, Pak Teh is unable to answer. At this point, Ucop and Daruih, dressed in comparatively more urban clothing, boisterously enter the scene (see Figure 5.2). With headphones on, they are listening to what is presumed to be Western-influenced music as they mimic the sounds.<sup>233</sup> The timely introduction of the youths serves as an 'answer by example' regarding this third category that is afflicted with 'colonizers' sickness'. Pak Teh exclaims "*Tak payah aku jawab. Hang nak tengok jawapan, dia di sini*" (There's no need for my answer. If you want to see the answer, its right here). This is a visual confirmation of what may earlier have been mere rhetoric on the part of Pak Teh – since Jefri's request for clarification carried an implicit need for verification. The entry of the two youths thus serves to deprive the sign – 'colonizers' sickness' – of its un-specificity and grounds it with an explicit, observable context that invokes the myth of 'incompatible' Western culture.

In this instance, the myth is validated from two directions. The first is provided by specificity that formulates its denotative meaning. The myth needs to relate specifically and accurately to similar realities that can be seen – hence its actuation through the observable 'answer by example'. In this way, the habits, values, and attitudes of youths who act beyond the boundaries of Malay *adat* by mimicking what is discernibly observed through mass media as Western culture,

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<sup>232</sup> Translated from "*Masyarakat hari ini, dia ada beberapa kategori. Kategori pertama, dia betui-betui paham erti kemerdekaan ... yang keduanya, dia paham, tapi buat tak paham ... yang ketiganya, langsung tak paham. ... Hang tengok ... sinilah dia penyakit penjajah la ni ...*"

<sup>233</sup> Another performance of their Western habits is through their greeting to Jefri. Instead of the usual *salam*, it is (said in English) "Yo!" by Ucop, and "Hey friend! Long time no see!" by Daruih. A *salam* as practiced in Malaysia, is a Muslim way of greeting another Muslim that refers to the spoken "*Assalamualaikum*" (Peace be upon you). Towards an elder, it can be accompanied with a deferential clasping of the elder's hand with both palms.

becomes relationally linked by its televisual sign to observable lived reality. Their display of individualism – by differing from the coherent traditional *adat*-adhering *kampung*-unit – contrasts with Mahathir's Asian values position that prioritized communitarianism, the role of discipline for the common good and what Carolina Lopez (2008, 56) observed was deference to authority. The scene's denotative 'accuracy' in mirroring lived reality thus catalyzes the myth's second meaning. The second meaning is connotative and occurs through the fulfilment of viewers' cultural expectations of what are perceived in reality as foreign threats to traditional Malay values and culture.

These meanings are contained in the sign '*penjajah*' (colonials or colonizers), whose deployment consequently activates the myth and both its validating denotative and connotative meanings. The mnemonic association of 'incompatible culture' or 'transgressive behaviour' (against the rubric of *adat*) to the signifier of colonizers-colonials is not accidental. The signifying chain of 'independence leaders', 'colonizers', and 'anti-colonial heroes' completes the connotation to narratives of heroic feudal Malay struggles – Maharaja Lela, Mat Kilau,<sup>234</sup> and Tok Janggut,<sup>235</sup> for instance – against the British colonial administration. These individuals have since been hailed as national heroes and as anti-colonial fighters, though whether their true motivation was Malay nationalism, has been a point of much academic rather than social or political debates.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Maharaja Lela is known for leading the uprising against the British in Perak when James Birch, the first British Resident in Perak, reneged on the terms of the 1874 Pangkor Treaty. Birch was assassinated and Lela was subsequently tried and hanged by the British administration (Black 2014, xvii-xviii). Mat Kilau is one of the leaders of the anti-British uprising in Pahang that occurred between the years of 1891 and 1895 (Black 2014, xviii).

<sup>235</sup> Tok Janggut is best known for 'leading' (or starting) a peasant uprising against the colonial administration in Pasir Putih, Kelantan, that lasted from 29 April to 24 May 1915. While he is presented as a Malay hero, the dominant narrative places his loyalties with the common people rather than the Sultan (who was advised by the British), against whom he rebelled. However, different studies have described his motivations as ranging from (1) resistance to injustice over taxation, (2) a *Jihad* (Islamic holy war), (3) political manoeuvrings of Malay feudal lords, (3) ousting of the Kelantanese royalty, to (4) personal revenge over the murder of his father (Cheah 2006, 19-32).

<sup>236</sup> For instance, Cheah Boon Kheng's work (2006), which explores the variety of historical accounts that often construct narratives revealing contradicting motivations.

The sequence of the events – the postulating of ‘colonizers’ sickness’ followed by the ‘answer by example’ that activates the myth – provides a syntagmatic chain that supports and validates Pak Teh’s forthcoming criticisms of the conduct and attitude of the youths. In this sense, the chain of signification functions on a self-validating cycle that is tautological, where opposition to Western values exists only insofar as it is sustained by the Malay community’s vested belief in the myth of the culturally transgressive Western subject. Through Jefri however, the narrative attempts to mediate this overt rejection by offering a recourse for the recovery of Malay essence which in this context, is ideologically sutured to Malay nationalism.

Jefri explains that his father is *Jawa* (Javanese) and his mother is an *orang putih* (white person). To this, Mak Bedah says “*Anak campur-la ni*” (You’re [of] mixed [parentage] then). Jefri admits, “*nak kata Melayu pun bukan, Jawa pun bukan, orang putih pun bukan*” (can’t really be called a Malay, Javanese, or even ‘white’). By his own explanation, Jefri’s mixed parentage categorizes him in the hybrid-Malay, New Malay, or Other Malay category discussed in Chapter 2. While these categories are part of the urban-rural dichotomy, Jefri’s acceptance by both Independence Leaders as Malay, is televisually observed to be unproblematic.

Jefri’s admission of not fitting into any traditional ethnic or cultural typecast, seems an expression of awareness and acknowledgement of a certain ‘lack’ that precludes his inclusion in any category not defined solely through citizenship. However, while Ucop and Daruih ‘deny’ their heritage through a wilful adoption of Western culture, Jefri is keen on connecting with, or strengthening, his Malay roots by understanding Malaysian nationalism through Pak Teh’s and Pak Ark’s Malay nationalist interpretation. Given that Jefri is culturally hybrid, it is curious that in this instance and the entire episode in fact, the issue of religion or Islam does not arise and is a non-issue. While a Muslim cannot legally marry a non-Muslim in Malaysia, it is never stated in the narrative if Jefri’s parents were married in Malaysia or overseas. Since his mother is ‘white’, the possibility that Jefri is non-Muslim exists until he gives the Muslim greeting “*Assalamualaikum*” (Peace be upon you) to his elders and to the two youths when he meets them.

This suggests that the normative of ‘Malays are Muslims, Muslims are Malays’ – irrespective of which polysemic interpretation to Malay is used – is not just present, but hints at the degree of its naturalization for it does not even warrant any notice by the characters. The degree of naturalization of this televisual proposition works in turn to reaffirm the logic of the normative.<sup>238</sup>

Jefri’s implicit, unspoken Malaysian nationality – even if he is Javanese-‘white’ in origin and thus ‘foreign’ – and his automatic inclusion into the Malay category, however conflicted, isn’t just predicated on his status as both a *bumiputeh*<sup>239</sup> by Khoo G.C.’s definition or an Other Malay<sup>240</sup> by Kahn’s definition. Jefri’s inclusion to either category is enabled only through his supra-Malay Javanese roots – what ex-premier Mahathir viewed as part of the Malays’ ‘feudal past’ (Milner 2011, 233-234). A popular recursive political rhetoric that centres on the notion of a supra-Malay category was identified by William Roff (1967, 232-233) and Anthony Milner (2011, 147, 148, 152, 155, 157-159) as the cross-Archipelago *Melayu Raya* (Greater Malaydom). Farish Noor (2002, 92-100) termed this same political concept as *Malaya-Raya*. This was a political (or ideological) movement that sought to unify the variegated communities into one great nation of *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race/nation).<sup>241</sup> More explicitly, Milner observed that from as early as the 1920s, Malayan historian and social critic Abdul Hadi postulated that the Javanese are regarded as part of the category of Malay (2011, 129).

Therefore, while Jefri is not peninsular Malay and is in fact Javanese,<sup>242</sup> he is still widely considered Malay by virtue of being part of a supra-category that existed

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<sup>238</sup> Analyses of the theme of Islam in *Senario* will be discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>239</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, ‘*bumiputeh*’ is formed from the words ‘*bumiputera*’ (sons of the soil) and ‘*orang puteh*’ (white man). It refers to the children of Malays who have gone overseas and returned to Malaysia with their foreign ‘white’ spouses. The word ‘*bumi*’ in the term references their access to Malay-only or *bumiputera* privileges.

<sup>240</sup> I refer to Kahn’s deployment of the epithet to addressing those Malays who were originally from Indonesia but have been living in Malaysia. They are thus different in attitude and still practise their own heritage and culture that are different from the peninsular Malays (Kahn 2006, xix-xx).

<sup>241</sup> Dismissing geo-political borders, Malay radicals regard the original inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago as part of the supra-Malay category. This includes diasporic Malay communities from as far afield as Cape Town, South Africa. See Milner (2011) and Farish (2002, 82-103) for more.

<sup>242</sup> In this instance, I refer specifically to Jefri’s paternal ancestry because within the context of our discussion on his Malay identity, only his Javanese ancestry qualifies as ‘Malay’.

from a 'feudal past'. It is however, curious that while Jefri explicitly states that he is not entirely 'Malay' and identifies as half-Javanese, he speaks peninsular/Malaysian Malay rather than Indonesian Malay. As we shall observe in the proceeding chapters, some of the characters playing Indonesians, do speak in Indonesian. Jefri's spoken Malay thus seems to encapsulate the ambivalence of Malay/supra-Malay identity that lies at the fundamental condition of Malayness. Perhaps this reflects the untenable nature of the politically-motivated *Melayu-Raya* concept, for unlike what is popularly imagined, there are no genuinely monolithic boundaries to what is Malay.

Within the episode's narrative however, Jefri's Javanese ancestry creates a wholly acceptable recourse to constitute a (Peninsular) Malay identity. Within this paradoxical rubric of continuity and change, Jefri represents the straddling of a middle ground between the strident Malay nationalist positions of Pak Teh and Pak Ark, and the oppositional cultural denial of Ucop and Daruih. However, as observed through Jefri's character, this conciliatory position is only possible when the subject chooses a trajectory that aspires to the nationalist imaginary of Malay. In such a position, the televisual sign 'Jefri' functions as the mediating force between the diametrical positions of the Malay 'traditional'- 'modern' binary. Given the episode was aired during Mahathir's premiership, it would seem unsurprising that this middle-ground is offered, for as observed in Chapter 2, Mahathir was responsible for the New Malay and Malaysia Incorporated national initiatives that represented a shift from 'traditional' Malay.

The foregoing analysis has thus far focused on the signification contained within what is primarily a very lengthy narrative exposition. Now we will turn to *Negara Chekpa Merdeka's* construction of historical myths and its socio-political predilections which seem grounded in, and validated by, these historical myths. In describing how the nation gained independence, Daruih reveals that his understanding is wholly informed by lessons in school.<sup>244</sup> He then explains, "*Dulu masa ... sebelum merdeka dulu, orang Melayu pegi perang sana, perang sini.*

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<sup>244</sup> Interestingly, this bridges the previous point in Chapter 1 where we discussed the association of *Senario's* effects on children, and school curriculum as a state ideological vehicle.

*Jumpak Jepun, jumpak orang putih. Mintak lepaskan kitaorang Melayu ini.*" (In the past, before independence, the Malays were warring here and there. They met [or fought] the Japanese, and the 'whites'. Asked that the Malays be freed/released). Though Daruih was previously seen as westernized and symptomatic of the 'colonizers' sickness', the accuracy of his explanation informed by national education, is not disputed by his elders.

Not only does this endorse the 'truism' of the 'official' account, an implicit distinction is made between the Malays who are imagined as active independence fighters and the non-Malay communities domiciled in Malaya at the time. What is more problematic however, is Daruih's conflation of Malay struggles – insurrections against the British, struggles against the Japanese during World War 2, the subsequent Malay political opposition to the Malayan Union conceived by the British, and the independence negotiations with the metropole – into a one-dimensional timeline. The suturing of events that ranged from the late 1700s to the mid-1900s glosses over the distinct contributions of each ethnic group within the various historical periods.<sup>245</sup>

In fact, Milner observes that the Malay community were largely cooperative with the Japanese during their occupation of Malaya from 1942 to 1945. A Japanese-sponsored Malay paramilitary Volunteer Force was even formed and its commander, Ibrahim Yaacob, held one of the most senior ranks ever to be given to a non-Japanese during the occupation (Milner 2011, 149). These historical facts are omitted from all of *Senario's* narratives. In two other episodes set during the Japanese occupation for example – *Hait Nippon Hait* (Ahmad, & Muhd Sufian, 1999) and *Penipu Zaman Berzaman* (Kamarul, 2012) – they are similarly absent. Moreover, based on the production dates, the myth is maintained

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<sup>245</sup> The domiciled Chinese for instance, were actively engaged in resistance towards the Japanese (Milner 2011, 151), though this was largely an extension of the war between China and Japan during the years 1937-1945 (Wang 2000, 15-16). However, it was also this Chinese anti-Japanese movement – led by Chin Peng – that extended its opposition towards the British colonial administration after they returned to Malaya post-World War 2. One reason for the bicultural tensions between the Malays and the Chinese in the years after World War 2, can be attributed to Chinese dissatisfaction at Malay cooperation with the Japanese, and for Malay resentment of Chinese brutality against them as a result of the former sentiments (Milner 2011, 151-152).



consistently over the thirteen years between which these episodes were produced.

It would be specious to suggest that the Malays were homogenously compliant or the non-Malays were uniformly nationalistic. Herein lies the problem with Daruih's explanation. By the very act of oversimplification – by design or otherwise – he reiterates the myth of a homogeneous and consistent Malay struggle against foreign occupation that was devoid of contributions from ethnic minorities. This becomes more authoritative precisely because he foregrounds the point that this was learnt at school, which is then affirmed by Pak Teh's tacit agreement. The consequent totalized discourse forecloses any possibility of alternative interpretations that may provide counter narratives to Malay claims of absolute rights to the land. This suppression of conditions which might allow for the emergence of alternate narratives is augmented by Daruih's compression of the historical timeline which presents the myth simply and clearly as plain fact.

Through this discursive strategy, the earlier inclusiveness of the newspapers is reversed by this mythic historical narrative. Instead, Pak Teh and Pak Ark are retroactively (within the televisual narrative) validated as Malay examples of independence leaders which exclude any minorities from that heroic category. The mnemonic trigger for the tradition of Malay warriors is once again evoked. By a self-validating act which attempts to suggest that Daruih's narrative is fact, Pak Teh replies, "*tu sebelum merdeka, betui. Sekarang ni, negara kita dah merdeka.*" (correct, but that was before independence. Now, our nation has achieved independence). Pak Teh's confirmation that Daruih's explanation has a 'factual' basis is made credible by the unspoken, implicit authority that he holds as village head, and as an independence leader who has lived through the travails of the independence movement.

The didactic quality of *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and its exclusion of minority voices even as it engages with the wider issues of the Malaysian category, serves to present a foreclosed discourse to viewers. The consequent topology of

Malaysian nationalism is thus shaped by this diachronic vocabulary of Malay chauvinism or nationalism, if in fact they are not ideologically sutured, that centres on *Melayuisme*<sup>246</sup> as the defining element to the identity of Malay. However, if *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*'s references to the Malaysian ethnic minorities were oblique, these references became observably more explicit in the subsequent years. For example, an episode aired two years later in 1998 titled *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* (Jamil, Ilya, & Khalijah, 1998), was premised on a more cogent articulation of the hierarchized inter-ethnic social structure obliquely referenced in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*.

#### *The Kampung, Class, and Exclusivity of Race*

*Raya ... Raya ... Raya* (Celebrate ... Celebrate ... Celebrate) tells the story of granddaughters Intan and Uruk, and grandsons Ku and Cin, who are visiting their grandparents Tok Nasir (grandfather Nasir) and Nenek Yan (grandmother Yan) at a *kampung* located in the northern state of Kedah on the eve of *Hari Raya* ('Day of Celebration', the Islamic *Eid al-Fitr*).<sup>247</sup> They are from a family of divorced (or separated) parents who are too busy working in the city to have accompanied them on this visit. The children are of mixed parentage where their mother is Bangladeshi and their Malay father Basiron is Tok Nasir and Nenek Yan's son. Basiron eventually makes it to the *kampung* in time for the celebrations and seeks forgiveness for his errors (one of which is not sending money to his parents for *Hari Raya*).<sup>248</sup>

It seems clear from the synopsis that the episode's themes of filial or parental absence and the importance of family values – the significance of which is augmented by the *Hari Raya* celebration – are traditional<sup>249</sup> in nature.

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<sup>246</sup> *Melayuisme* is "the belief that the interests of the *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race) must be upheld over all else" (Ting 2009, 35). UMNO's founding president Dato' Onn Jaafar said, "UMNO did not adhere to any ideology other than *Melayuisme*" (Ting 2009, 35). This was first mentioned in Chapter 2.

<sup>247</sup> This marks the end of a month of Ramadhan fasting for the Muslims. As practised in Malaysia, the days just before the celebrations would result in a mass exodus of Muslims back to their hometowns, since it is traditional to celebrate with family.

<sup>248</sup> All female characters in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* are played by male actors. The Bangladeshi mother is only spoken of, and does not appear on-screen. The significance of male actors performing female characters will be discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>249</sup> I am not suggesting that they are culturally specific, for these themes are broadly present in most, if not all, traditional cultures.

Furthermore, similar to Jefri's role within *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, the eventual presence of the father Basiron and his remorse constructs an acceptable resolution that aligns his position to a preferred Malay family values position. In this respect, like *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s narrative serves to demonstrate what is deemed unsuitable by the wider Malay traditional category and to suggest a preferable position.

It is interesting that *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s elementary logic of observable or demonstrable 'reality' is similar to Pak Teh's 'answer by example' in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. Its consequent effect on the constructed myth and its denotative and connotative validation are also similar; in this case, that the only accepted definition for a family unit is one enjoined by Malay *adat*. In both episodes, especially with *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, this process by which audiences observe the characters who themselves are observing thematic transgressions and resolution, can be read as a highly reflexive process. This in fact, enhances the narratives' ideological power.

It was previously asserted that the articulations of inter-ethnic structures are more explicit within *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*. These can be observed in two primary scenes of the episode whose significations are interrelated. The first occurs within a scene where *Tok Nasir* recounts his day to the household (Figure 5.3). At one juncture, referencing his attempt to purchase clothing for his grandchildren, he says "*Aku ketuk kedai Cina itu*" (I knocked on the shop[door] of that Chinese or I knocked on the [door of the] Chinese shop). While referring to a person by race is a common social practice in Malaysia, I suggest that this manner of address is often employed to suggest a reduction of an individual to characteristics of the collective group. What is key to the production of meaning, are the paradigmatic units of '*kedai*' (shop) and '*Cina*' (Chinese). Hall describes this reduction to a few simplified essential characteristics as being central to racial stereotyping (2013, 234-237). Furthermore, this representational strategy of reducing cultures to certain totemic signifiers is a practice of naturalizing difference (Hall 2013, 234). The constructed discursive position produces meaning by referencing the colonial stereotype and the post-Malaysia

Incorporated view of the Chinese as being the rich business owners. The reduction of the Chinese to an economic and materialistic group by the imaginaries of the Malay community is thus a reproduction of a discourse that is historically specific.



Figure 5.3

Still from *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*. From left: Ku, Cin, Intan, Uruk, Tok Nasir, and Nenek Yan.

In the second major scene, the grandchildren assist their grandmother in making traditional *kuih* (cakes). Granddaughter Intan reveals that their father Basiron has a good job in the city. He works as an officer for the “*kong si gelap*” (triads). Grandson Ku quickly corrects Intan by saying “*bukan kong si gelap lah. Gong xi fa choi*” (Not triads. *Gong Xi Fa Cai* [a common Chinese greeting for prosperity offered during Chinese New Year]). The Chinese prosperity greeting bears no real reference to the overall conversation at all, nor does it make any logical sense in the flow of the dialogue. While there is a phonetic play on sounds/words between both terms, I suggest that a more compelling explanation exists when we consider that after Ku’s correction of Intan, Nenek Yan says “*Kacau, kacau, kacau!*” (Stir, stir, stir!<sup>250</sup>) as she points at the pot for making the cakes. Considered together, the entire exchange is now

<sup>250</sup> *Kacau* also means ‘disturb’. Interestingly, a related word is ‘*kacukan*’, meaning hybrid or mixed. Given that Nenek Yan is pointing at the pot, I take its meaning literally as ‘stir’.

contextualized around the idiom of ‘stirring the pot’.<sup>251</sup> The supposedly random words ‘*Gong Xi Fa Cai*’ are now antagonistic, for the intent is ‘to agitate’ for the purpose of causing ‘tension and discord’. As we shall observe, the implied meaning and antagonistic value of these intertextual terms can only be fully understood when read in the context of each other.

When the Chinese immigrants came to British Malaya, a significant number of them were inducted into the Chinese triads (Barry *et al.* 2003, 39). While not entirely exclusive to the ethnic group, Chinese triads do still represent a major criminal element within present day Malaysia (Barry *et al.* 2003, 39-41; *Refugee Review Tribunal Response*, 2007; Foster 2013). A historically specific, discursively-produced stereotype of the Chinese as being singularly economically motivated is thus reinforced by linking the paradigmatic units of ‘*kedai*’ (shop) and ‘*Cina*’ (Chinese). This meaning is strengthened through a reduction of all that is Chinese to that of the materialistic prosperity greeting. With the economic reference of ‘*Gong Xi Fa Cai*’ and the addition of a subliminal reference to ‘*kong si gelap*’ (triads), it would not be remiss to venture a conceptual leap that the subtext suggests that all Chinese are crooks, singularly devoted to prosperity and enriching themselves at the expense of all else/others. This would certainly fit into the colonial stereotype of the Chinese who is “inherently dedicated to making money by any means possible” (Reid 2006, 14-15).

This clear delineation of difference is drawn again when a visitor at the door gives the traditional Islamic greeting<sup>252</sup> of *Salam*.<sup>253</sup> The characters wonder at the identity of the visitor and Intan advises “*Jangan buka Tok. Orang mintak hutang*” (Don’t open the door, Grandma. Someone’s here for payment on a debt). Granddaughter Uruk suggests that it might be Ah Fatt (a typical Chinese name)

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<sup>251</sup> Interpreted to mean ‘agitating a situation on purpose to cause or proliferate tension and discord’.

<sup>252</sup> While the theme of Islam is discussed in Chapter 6, it will still be addressed in this chapter whenever it cannot be neatly separated from any present discussions on the theme of Malayness. This is especially true since, as we have observed in Chapter 2, both themes are ideologically sutured.

<sup>253</sup> In this instance, it is the greeting “*Assalamualaikum*” (Peace be upon you).

from the sundry shop delivering flour, while grandson Cin retorts “*Takkan Ah Fatt bagi Salam*” (It’s not as if Ah Fatt would give a *Salam*), before the audiences’ whooping and laughter is heard. They subsequently discover that it is Tok Nasir who is at the door.

There are several important textual layers to this exchange. A chain of equivalences is constructed between ‘debt-collector’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘Chinese are not Muslims’. The shared common feature between the previous triad-Chinese narrative and this chain of equivalences is the marking of difference, an othering that establishes the boundaries between both cultures/races. Hall conceptualized the marking of difference as the central identifier of cultural belongingness (2013, 220) and a signifier of ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ (2013, 219). In this instance, the implied meaning can be read as reinforcement of the notion that a Chinese cannot possibly greet us in a Muslim way because ‘they’ are uninitiated in ‘our’ ways, a corollary of the normative myth that all Muslims are Malays. The earlier debt-collector-triad-illegal signifier is thus given a further additional layer of connotative meaning that hinges on the discursively produced difference between Chinese and Malays due to Chinese irreligiousness (since Muslims commonly view other religions as deviant non-religions). Resultantly, the previously asserted Chinese propensity towards criminality seems to have been accepted as inevitable and natural, and their inferior religious and moral positions normalized. As a televisual regime of truth, this grounding of ideology in ‘reality’ works to make it “appear unchallengeable and unchangeable, and thus is a reactionary political strategy” (Fiske 2011, 36) that ensures that the Chinese and Malay-Muslim stereotypes do not change or evolve.

Key to our understanding of this episode is the audiences’ whooping and laughter at the end of this exchange of dialogue. While *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* was largely sparse on comedic content and resultantly on ‘heard laughter’, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* is more liberally inflected with humour. Therefore, in this episode the signifier ‘laughter’ warrants a closer examination. Mills described the laugh track as part of sitcom’s metadrama that enforces or tells viewers when it is appropriate to laugh, a cue for viewers to interpret the text as being

funny (2009, 31) which stimulates a homogenous appreciation of the humour. The ease in obtaining viewing pleasure is achieved simply by laughing along with the rest of the crowd, resulting in the producers' control over meanings derived from an active participation in the cultural process. This is one of the central ways that comedy is a highly hegemonic form. It is significant in the case of *Senario* because the laughter heard by home audiences is not generic 'canned' laughter that was added post-recording.

The laughter of the studio audience indicates the degree to which dominant Malay narratives or myths have been naturalized. The laughter is rooted in *Senario*'s constructed televisual regimes of truth that become relatable to audiences through what is suggested by the episodic narrative as a performance of their lived reality. This reflexive process is key to *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s process of reaffirming the status quo, for it is the observation of a performance perceived to be grounded in daily life by those who can relate to that experience in reality. Within this framework, the ideological significations prompting *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s laughter are *already* understood, as evidenced through the real studio laughter.

In encouraging the wider viewers at home to laugh along with the studio audiences at the end of that chain of equivalences, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s narrative is attempting to naturalize (or to strengthen) the suggested ideologically dominant meanings of Malay-versus-Chinese by encouraging us to accept the text's proposed meaning and laugh about it. Augmenting this didactic efficacy is the laughter's existence as an off-camera 'voice' when viewed on-screen. Fiske notes that this creates a 'documentary look' that traditionally relates documentary drama to the 'ideology of naturalism' (2011, 30). The potency of this laughter may thus be paralleled to what is known as the "voice-of-God narration", telling viewers how to understand what is being shown by telling them how to think about it (Hall 2013, 66). In this respect, *Senario*'s

studio laughter serves a didactic function that socializes and familiarizes viewers on the terms of membership into the wider community of Malay.<sup>254</sup>

This entire process of signification represents a ‘racialized regime of representation’, to use Hall’s term (2013, 222), in which a regime of truth is reiterated to validate the wider discursive supra-notions of Malay-Muslim superiority; since all Malays are Muslims, they are presumed to abstain from criminal acts as part of the Muslim ideal. Since these ‘truths’ and stereotypes are deployed across time, we observe that Bhabha’s notions of othering and stereotype are similarly present in the subtexts. Within *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, the superior subject-position is fully occupied by the Malays, and is exemplified by the rural village Malays who hold on to traditional *adat*-informed values. Note that this superior Malay Muslim moral high-ground is similar to the findings of Rosya & Morris (2013, 155) on *Akademi Fantasia*<sup>255</sup> which in turn mirror the multitude of religio-political discourses discussed in Chapter 2.

The narrative’s meta-discourse of intra-group difference was also deployed in the acknowledgement of rural village Malays as being exemplars of the community. The terms “*kong si gelap*” and “*gong xi fa choi*” are dialogically relational to the economic prospects in the city, especially since most triads are dependent on the economic wealth in the city (*Refugee Review Tribunal Response*, 2007; Foster 2013). A possible reading suggests that the relocation towards a progressive, liberal, western-influenced cosmopolitan centre at the expense of traditional *adat* governed by the tenets of Islam, is akin to the Chinese economic devotion at the expense of all else. This would corroborate in part, with the ethnographical studies of both Thompson (2002, 69-71) and Bunnell (2002) that was discussed in Chapter 3. Their findings suggest that those who have moved from a traditional Malay *kampung* environment to the city centres of Kuala Lumpur or Selangor perceived cosmopolitan culture as being incompatible with their values and actively sought to strengthen existing Malay religio-cultural convictions through communal solidarity.

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<sup>254</sup> This also references our discussion in Chapter 4 about the ideological significance of *Senario*’s popularity with the younger audiences.

<sup>255</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1.



The associative meaning of the terms “*kong si gelap*” and “*gong xi fa choi*” seems to suggest that by seeking riches within business centres traditionally occupied by the Chinese, these Malays are relinquishing their position – their cultural and religious purity – to devote themselves to material success like the Chinese. This in turn, is predicated on the logic observed in the earlier distillation of ‘Chinese’ to an economic and materialistic group signifier by Tok Nasir’s ‘*kedai*’ (shop) and ‘*Cina*’ (Chinese). The added dimension of a Malay (Basiron) being employed for shady business on behalf of the Chinese (triads) amplifies this supposed debilitating effect. Unlike lawful employment, Basiron’s instrumentalization by the Chinese triads is diametrically opposite to acceptable Malay values.<sup>257</sup> This Malay intra-group marginalization of those constructed as deviating from Malay *adat* and tradition, is part of a larger urban-rural discourse involving those viewed as New Malays and/or hybrid-Malays. As we have observed in Chapter 2, this discourse is fundamental to the fractious rural-urban othering that exists within the Malay community.

More so than *Negara Chekpa Merdeka, Raya ... Raya ... Raya*’s signifying chains are centred on the master-signifier of *kampung*, which in turn contains two broad and interrelated significations. The first is predicated on the practice of returning to the *kampung* during *Hari Raya*, commonly known as *balik kampung*.<sup>258</sup> Within this context, the *kampung* is constructed as being the essence of Malayness; the nexus of *adat* and tradition. The very act of ‘going home’ or ‘returning to a hometown’ whose locale is distinct from that of the subject’s daily life connotes the subject’s decentred point of origin. Before Basiron’s return to his parents’ home, his situation was constructed as being less than ideal (through his parents’ discussion of the separation from his wife, his parental absence, and his excessive expenses). Resolution is only achieved with his return, crystallized through the need to seek the forgiveness of his parents for accrued mistakes (parental irresponsibility, lack of monetary support for his

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<sup>257</sup> This is contextual to our discussion on Malayness. I am not suggesting that positive values are exclusive to the Malays.

<sup>258</sup> While it literally means ‘return to village’, it is more commonly understood as ‘return to hometown’.

four children and his parents even though he is wealthy, and the prioritizing of materialism over family).

There are two paradigmatic layers to Basiron's act of redemption, both of which are part of the wider syntagmatic chain in the episode. The first is his return to his village that opens up the possibility for his recovery of 'traditional' Malayness which is similar to that of Jefri in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. However, unlike Jefri, Basiron's decentred position is by choice. His shift towards a recovery of Malayness can therefore only be activated through the second paradigmatic layer – the source of tradition and culture embodied by his parents. In this context, Basiron's parents Tok Nasir and Nenek Yan are metonyms for the total sum of the traditional Malay category. They are able to absolve Basiron of his cultural or traditional deviations precisely because they occupy a position of cultural and historical authority similar to that occupied by Pak Teh in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*.

However, if the concepts of 'traditional Malay' and the cultural-spatial marker of *kampung* is viewed through the discursivity of the rural-urban dichotomy, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya's* elementary problematic lies in a demarcation of class. This class distinction is the second signification of the master-signifier of *kampung*. While the move to the city or urban centres is essentially an exercise in upward class or social mobility, it is also seen as a debilitating act that detracts from the essence of the traditional. This is encapsulated in one scene when Tok Nasir and Nenek Yan assess their financial ability to purchase new clothing for the grandchildren. Tok Nasir reveals that he does not have enough money and asks, "*ada lagi duit?*" ([do you have] any more money?). Nenek Yan replies, "*adalah. Dua tiga ratui tu. Tapi cukup kah ..... sebab bapa tu dulu beli kat depak barang-barang yang ada nama*" (I suppose so. Two [or] three hundred. But is it enough ... because [their] father buys them branded goods). This needs to be considered in the light of an earlier scene where it was revealed that their *kampung* is located in the agrarian northern state of Kedah which locates the hometown – and thus origin – of Basiron as firmly in a Malay rural heartland.

The northern state of Kedah is also incidentally – or perhaps not incidentally – the *kampung* of then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Mahathir 2012, 12). By aligning Basiron's point of origin with that of Prime Minister Mahathir's, the sign 'Basiron' holds a subversive signification for all that is disagreeable with Mahathir's national initiatives which prioritized economic and modernization considerations over the traditional-cultural. This oppositional reading would suggest that *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* is an exploration of Mahathir's vision of Malayness. The self-reflexive quality of the observable 'answer by example' is a performance of New Malayness that is meant to demonstrate its inadequacy in upholding the historicized *adat*-adhering culture perceived as the Malay ideal. This oppositional position is probable. However, with no other narrative or meta-discursive cues, it is an inchoate construction which given the immense institutional pressures on *Senario*'s team, is understandable. Regardless, the staging of the episode in the agrarian northern state of Kedah<sup>259</sup> is meant to ground Basiron's point of origin in a viewer-identifiable Malay traditional heartland that is far removed from cosmopolitanism.

In the simple exchange between Tok Nasir and Nenek Yan, the difference in class and a corresponding economic disparity between the comparatively wealthy father – the supposed triad officer who works in the city – and the grandparents who live in a *kampung* of rural agrarian Kedah, is foregrounded. This rhetoric of class difference would seem to conform with the earlier discussions of "*kong si gelap*" and "*gong xi fa choi*" associations with the economic prospects in the city, and the role of Chinese social actors within that discourse. Moreover, it serves to magnify Basiron's irresponsibility through his placing of a seemingly considerable task of attending to his children's material needs onto his parents without any contingency of monetary support.

Basiron's irresponsibility is explained by Tok Nasir, "*tu lah ... dulu jangan hantar Basiron tu belajar kat luar negeri*" (that's why ... in the past [I said] don't send Basiron overseas for his studies). Here, Basiron's upward social mobility, his

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<sup>259</sup> The *kampung*'s location is known for this episode because it was mentioned in the dialogue. With the exception of *Senario Misteri Bamboo*, every episode has different characters and narratives, and the location for each episode is not always revealed.

earning potential, and the excessive lifestyle leading to his parental absence is explained by his time spent studying abroad.<sup>260</sup> The polemic seen in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* of a corrupting West is revived in these two simple sentences. When this is taken in conjunction with the '*kong si gelap*' and '*gong xi fa choi*' associations, the sign 'city' becomes a metonym for the entire ideological terrain of the 'corrupting West'. The disparity of values, tastes, and level of material consumption between the urban and rural-traditional, is emphasized again in another scene when Nenek Yan questions her grandchildren about their parents and their previous *Hari Raya* celebrations.

In answer to Nenek Yan's question about their previous celebrations in the city, Cin replies, "*Orang kampung pakai baju raya. Kami tak pakai baju!*" (The people in the village wear festive clothing. We don't wear any clothing!). Nenek Yan exclaims "*Amboi, hampa moden sangatlah tu.*" (No clothes? You're all [or that's] too modern). Ku explains that they celebrated with their mother at her hometown in Bangladesh. It is here that Intan's explanation of Basiron's job as a triad officer in the city, and the "*kong si gelap*" and "*gong xi fa choi*" dialogue occurs. This is followed by Nenek Yan saying "*Kacau, kacau, kacau!*" (Stir, stir, stir!), pointing at the pot for making traditional Malay cakes. Ku explains that it was fun celebrating in Bangladesh because "*kami paling putih*" (we were the whitest [fairest]) which was why they were not wearing any clothes, so as to "*tunjuk badan putih*" (show [our] white [fair] bodies). Nenek Yan reminds them that this year will be different since it is the *kampung*, before saying "*kacau baik-baik*" (stir it well).

There are three textual layers to this exchange. The first is the expression that the city practices a modern lifestyle that is inappropriate to Malay culture as embodied by the signifier *kampung*. This is articulated through Cin's distinction between clothing in the *kampung* and the city, and Nenek Yan's reply that the practice is too modern. The second is the ideological grounding of this modernity and inappropriateness in a culture and ethnicity that is non-Malay

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<sup>260</sup> It is only at this point in the narrative (with the conversation between Nenek Yan and Tok Nasir) that we learn of Basiron's overseas education, and his extravagant lifestyle.

when Ku reveals it occurred at their mother's hometown in Bangladesh. While the presumptive religion of Basiron's wife is Islam,<sup>261</sup> it is still inadequate in fulfilling the tenets of Malay *adat*. Here, non-Malay culture-values are ideologically associated with the notion of lifestyles that are excessive and modern, eventually leading to a broken family.<sup>262</sup> Moreover, the sequence in which the *kong si gelap* dialogue occurs, is not random. The Malay intra-group marginality of those constructed as deviating from *adat* and tradition, articulated through their move to the city and their aligning of interest with the Chinese, serves to strengthen the sense of inappropriateness as established in the first textual layer. This in turn, reaffirms the previously discussed ideological construction of the 'city' as a metonym for the source of moral corruption.

The third textual layer is the implied Malay superiority as expressed in the grandchildren's need to display their fairer skin amongst the darker-skinned Bangladeshis. It is ironic that while the British colonizers and the West are ideologically constructed as a source of negative influence that debilitates the true Malay subject, the 'whiter' skin of the Malays here, is an aesthetical mark of implied superiority. *Negara Chekpa Merdeka's* colonizing '*orang putih*' (white people) in this sense, has been replaced by the Malay '*orang putih*' in Bangladesh. There is a historical precedent to this, for Milner suggests that a "Malay colonialism" occurred prior to independence in the 1950s where non-Malay Muslim groups in Sabah<sup>263</sup> were told they were "not fully civilized" if they did not "become Malay"<sup>264</sup> (2011, 162-163).

This focus on skin colour as the primary signifier of difference is thus an aesthetical discrimination which ideologically sutures stereotypes to colour. In

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<sup>261</sup> The majority religion in Bangladesh is Islam, and Malaysian law requires that non-Muslims convert to Islam before they can marry a Muslim.

<sup>262</sup> Nazli Kibria (2011, 121) notes for instance that debates about Bangladeshi migrants have abounded regarding "the declining influence of local culture in the home, especially in the raising of children" resulting in a "loss of cultural identity". Further, there is much anxiety over Bangladeshi inclinations toward "criminality" and the practice of marrying Malays to remain in the country (Nazli 2011, 121). This is especially relevant to *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*. In "the late 1990s" this cultural encroachment and the tensions from cases involving "Malaysian and Bangladeshi men" were even "discussed in the Malaysian Parliament as a social problem" (Nazli 2011, 121). Also see Nayeem Sultana's (2008) work on the Bangladeshi diaspora in Malaysia.

<sup>263</sup> A state in East Malaysia.

<sup>264</sup> This references the fluidity of the Malay category, discussed in Chapter 2.

truth, this elementary argument undergirds all of our earlier discussions. This reveals the extent to which UMNO's extension of colonial ideological trajectories into the postcolonial period that was discussed in Chapter 2 has influenced the socio-cultural spheres of Malaysian society. The idiom of 'stirring the pot' is key to the interpretation of this scene. This master-signifier contextualizes the entire exchange as reactionary. The idiom is invoked twice; directly after the dialogue on *gong xi fa cai* and again after Ku's dialogue on their fair-coloured bodies in Bangladesh. Both cases are articulated as being a source of antagonism/anxiety for the Malay traditional community.

The televisual dialogue throughout *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* is seemingly simple; that is the central ideological power behind its naturalization. We have observed that the dialogue is laden with implicit descriptors for the Malay category, their inherent state of religiosity, and the obligations imposed by these states of being. Furthermore, it was observed that the meta-discourse of the urban Malay intra-group faction is ideologically associated with the stereotype of the Chinese and the West, and is in turn, equated to modernity and the city. This othering is extended to a Malay intra-ethnic hierarchization. Moreover, this us-them binary is established through viewer identification with the dominant normative which constructs the exclusivity of the traditional Malay category within the wider Malaysian citizenry.

This intra and inter-ethnic exteriorizing is a recurring theme in *Senario*. In *Tandas Awam* (Aznil, & Adiel, 1997) for example, the space within a public toilet is conceptualized as a microcosm for the nation's inter-racial and inter-class dynamics. In *Jejak Karun* (Nizam, 1998), the three main ethnic groups are represented as three ethnic groups of treasure hunters who fight over hidden treasure on Malay land. In *Muzium* (Muhd Sufian, & Ahmad, 2000), the children visiting the museum are shown artefacts and their corresponding historical narratives that reaffirm the hierarchized position of each ethnic group based on the same historical myths discussed in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. *Wakil Kampung* (Fauzita, & Anniesafinas, 2009) depicts a Chinese villager spreading misinformed news that becomes the source of major division in a Malay village.

*Dalam Hati Ada Taman* (Zulkeflee, & Anniesafinas, 2011) identifies intra-communal differences by performing the inappropriateness of liberal or modern values through the meta-discourse of gender dynamics. *Salah Sangka* (Ahmad, & Anniesafinas, 2011) similarly articulates the separateness and distinctiveness of the Malay category through a performance of an inherent Islamic moral superiority.

Noting the range of years in the episodes above, it is clear that the construction, affirmation, and reinforcement of Malay and specifically traditional Malay separateness/exclusivity is central to the meta-discourse contained over time within *Senario*. Once again, this aligns almost perfectly with what we have discussed of Homi Bhabha's notion of rigidity to the meanings of stereotypes that are sustained by the dominant powers which are recurrently deployed across periods of time in a process of othering. In the following discussions of *Kantoi* (Nurul, & Anniesafinas, 2011), *Jejak Karun* (Nizam, 1998), *Tandas Awam* (Aznil, & Adiel, 1997), and *Gong Xi* (Muhd. Sufian, & Kamalia, 2002), we shall identify the observable markers of Malay, Chinese, and Indian stereotypes that are similar to the subtexts of *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*.

#### *Visual Caricatures of the Representational Regime*

*Kantoi* (Busted) first aired in 2011. It tells the story of Karim and his friend who are security guards at a museum presumably owned by Chinese Muslim convert Tan Abdullah.<sup>267</sup> Karim spends beyond his means and has to borrow from loan sharks. He discovers that his friend is stealing museum artefacts to be sold on the black market to supplement his meagre income. Karim asks to be included in the scheme so that he is able to settle his debts. Tan's assistant Bakar realizes that the museum artefacts are missing and reports the matter to Tan. Two private investigators are subsequently hired to solve the mystery. A trap is laid and both Karim and his friend are eventually apprehended.

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<sup>267</sup> Tan Abdullah is played by a Malay actor. The last name Abdullah is commonly adopted by Muslim converts in Malaysia. This differs from Malaysian born Muslims who carry their father's first name as their last names. The name 'Abdullah' thus identifies one as a Muslim convert.

It bears pointing out that with only a few exceptions, almost all of the non-Malay characters in various episodes of *Senario* are performed by Malay actors. The Chinese-Muslim Tan Abdullah character in *Kantoi* is similarly played by a Malay actor. However, this becomes problematic when the actor's performance is observed to invariably rely on an essentialist ethnic caricaturizing, since it is an attempt at constituting non-Malay from a Malay imaginary.

There are two facets to this caricaturizing of ethnic characters in *Kantoi*. The first is the visual distinction of class difference. Reviving the narrative of the wealthy Chinese and the comparatively poorer Malays, Tan Abdullah is characterized as the business owner to whom all the Malay characters in the episode are answerable.<sup>268</sup> His higher position within the conflated social and economic hierarchy as Chinese and pay-master is visually signified by his suit jacket and his comparatively more colourful shirt (see figure 5.5). Bakar, who is Tan's assistant is dressed in a light pink shirt and trousers (see figure 5.5), while Karim and his friend are dressed in colourless white shirt and black trousers (see figure 5.4). Tan's attire needs to be understood in a culturally-vernacularized context,<sup>269</sup> for as discussed in Chapter 3, the rural viewership is *Senario's* primary demographic. While Tan's jacket attire may be common in the cosmopolitan areas, its connoted social status is arguably more pronounced in the rural areas. Furthermore, the bland shirts of Bakar and both security guards connote the common attire of Malaysian office clerks.

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<sup>268</sup> It is unclear how it is that an individual owns a museum. Perhaps it is a private gallery though it is not made clear in the episode.

<sup>269</sup> Historically, suits, blazers, and suit jackets are not part of Malay, Chinese, or Malaysian culture.





Figure 5.4

Still from *Kantoj*. From left: Karim, and Karim's friend.



Figure 5.5

Still from *Kantoj*. From left: Tan Abdullah, and Bakar.

However, *Senario's* first facet of visual or aesthetical caricaturization goes beyond mere class signification into the visual construction of ethnic stereotypes. For example, in *Jejak Karun* (Nizam, 1998) where the nation's three main ethnic groups are metaphorized into three ethnic groups of treasure hunters, biological, cultural or facial features are exaggerated for full ethnic effect. The Indian treasure hunters are given an excess of facial hair (see Figure 5.6) while the Chinese treasure hunters are featured with long upturned eyebrows, long thin moustaches, and long sideburns (see Figure 5.7). This visual

construction of the 'Chinese face' similarly appeared a year earlier in the 1997 episode *Tandas Awam* (Aznil, & Adiel, 1997) with the addition of a long wispy beard (see Figure 5.8). In all these episodes, the non-Malay characters are similarly played by Malay actors.



Figure 5.6

Still from *Jejak Karun*. The Indian treasure hunters.



Figure 5.7

Still from *Jejak Karun*. The Chinese treasure hunters.

In the abstract, these Chinese facial constructions seem similar to the Western construction of 'Oriental'<sup>270</sup> characters like Dr. Fu Manchu and Ming the Merciless (see Figure 5.9). While the fictional villain Ming the Merciless was

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<sup>270</sup> This refers to the historically specific term to communicate Western perceptions of Asia, the Near East, and the Far East.

originally introduced in 1934 through the Flash Gordon comics, Dr. Fu Manchu's character was introduced much earlier in 1913 by Sax Rohmer's literary fiction.



Figure 5.8  
Still from *Tandas Awam*. The Chinese caricature.



Figure 5.9  
From left: Ming the Merciless in the film adaptation of 'Flash Gordon' (Laurentiis, & Hodges, 1980) and Fu Manchu as portrayed on the film, 'The Mask of Fu Manchu' (Hearst, & Brabin, 1932)

In her analysis of Rohmer's writings on Fu Manchu, Urmila Seshagiri observes that the 'devil doctor' (Fu Manchu) symbolized the Yellow Peril, thus named for the perceived cultural and racial threat of China to the West (2006, 162, 187-188). This was an articulation of British and American Sinophobia that played on the racial prejudices and desires of white audiences (Sheshagiri 2006, 187-188). With *Senario's* consistent deployment of similar visual constructions, it would not be overreaching to suggest that the Malays have assimilated this same



Sinophobia with roughly the same implied meanings. Taken broadly, we have observed that Malay anxieties, prejudices, and desires have similarly been played on by UMNO in their othering of the Chinese. The adoption of Western-colonial Chinese caricaturizing reveals another facet to the colonial strategies observed to have been adopted post-independence by UMNO.

In contrast to the visual particularities of the Indian and Chinese treasure hunters however, the Malay treasure hunter in *Jejak Karun* looks entirely ordinary (see Figure 5.10). The visual articulations of these peculiar ethnic caricatures suggest the presence of an underlying racial narrative that is predicated on a rhetoric of difference. The ordinary-looking Malay character thus signifies an unproblematic, communally accepted, normalized Malay subject. He is the reference against which the other two ethnic visual constructions are measured, whose differences in turn, exteriorize them from the dominant normative group. This is a visual signification for the racial politics of differences that undergird Malaysia's discourse of identity where the dominant normative of Malay culture represents the idealized model.<sup>271</sup>



Figure 5.10  
Still from *Jejak Karun*. The Malay treasure hunter.

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<sup>271</sup> This is aligned with the National Culture Policy (NCP) of 1971, for example. NCP was discussed in Chapter 2.

The second caricaturizing facet is an aural differentiation. The speech of the Indian treasure hunters in *Jejak Karun* for example, possess a sing-song quality that is accompanied by the side-swaying or tilting of heads. In *Kantoi*, Tan Abdullah's spoken Malay is exaggerated with a Chinese accent inflected with discernibly Chinese expressions. He says, for example, "*Wah, lu dua olang ah. Haiyo! Gua tinggal lu olang sekijap, lu olang lilek-lilek ah. Wah, lilek-lilek. Lu goyang-goyang apa hal? Aiyooo!*" (You two. I leave you for a while, [and] you start relaxing. Relax, relax. Why are you swaying?). Here, the terms '*gua*' (I), and '*lu*' (you) are words from the Chinese Hokkien dialect (with the same meanings). The expressions (and manner of use) '*wah*', '*haiyo*', '*ah*' and '*aiyooo*' which are articulated liberally by Tan throughout the episode, are commonly found amongst the speech of more rural Malaysian Chinese.<sup>272</sup> This 'Chinese-ness' is augmented with Tan's phonetic replacement of 'r' with 'l' – '*olang*' instead of '*orang*' and '*lilek*' instead of '*rilek*' for example.

These speech particularities are similarly present in *Tandas Awam*. The Chinese character says, "*hali-hali mau cuci*" (have to clean daily), "*satu olang*" (one person), and "*kamsiah, kamsiah, kamsiah. Jalan loh*" (thanks, thanks, thanks. Walk (move)). Here, the switch from 'r' to 'l' is again present where '*hali*' and '*olang*' are used instead of '*hari*' and '*orang*'. '*Kamsiah*' is a Chinese Hokkien term for 'thank you', and the expression '*loh*' is frequently used by vernacular Chinese speakers. In totality, these construct a Chinese speech pattern in *Tandas Awam* that was similarly observed in *Jejak Karun* and is consistent with the speech patterns of Tan Abdullah's Chinese caricature in *Kantoi*.

The fact that these idiosyncratic speech identifiers are discernibly Chinese or Indian, suggests that they do exist in Malaysian society. However, similar to the production of meaning with '*kedai*' (shop) and '*Cina*' (Chinese) in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, this is a reduction of the entire ethnic community to a few simplified essential characteristics; the representational strategy of reducing cultures to certain totemic signifiers to naturalize difference. Furthermore, as we have

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<sup>272</sup> This would also mean, that this is the most likely version of Chinese-spoken Malay that the rural demographic of *Senario* will experience in reality.

observed, this near-biological essentializing has occurred since pre-colonial Malaya, and does not account for the realities of the globalized present.

In spite of the strident condemnation of Western values and culture, the close alignment of *Senario*'s Chinese caricatures to similar Western historical stereotypes reveals the persistence of British colonial constructs within the Malay communal imaginings of their ethnic 'others'. Perhaps this reveals an attempted critique of the institutional deployment of the same non-Malay stereotypes that were constructed by the British colonial administration. However, when considered in totality, the wider syntagmatic meanings to all of these signification chains seem to suggest otherwise.

*Senario*'s Malay characters all speak Malay 'normally'.<sup>273</sup> The peculiarities of this second auditory distinction thus function in similar ways to the first distinction which visually presents Malay characters as the cultural normative. By presenting non-Malay characters speaking normative Malay idiosyncratically, it augments the visual peculiarities of these same characters to arrive at a totalized caricature as part of the exteriorizing process. This presentation of total difference – in looks, speech, and as observed in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, in socio-economic and cultural values – constructs the ethnic minority stereotype as different, foreign, alien, and thus unassimilable in what can only be construed as a process of othering.

The premise for '*lelaki lembut*' (effeminate male) characters outlined by former production member Hisyam in Chapter 4 can be applied to *Senario*'s ethnic caricatures/stereotypes. At the elementary level, Hisyam describes that humour is found in the exaggerated performance of an effeminate male character. I suggested that this conforms to the Incongruity Theory since it is the disparity between the true gender of the actor and the gender performed that is humorous. In our present discussion of ethnic caricatures, this same humour is found within the incongruities between the speech and look of a 'normal person' (constructed as the Malay subject) and non-Malay caricatures.

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<sup>273</sup> This refers to how they would normally speak in everyday Malaysian society.

It is not mere conjecture that the incongruities between a 'normal' Malay and non-Malay caricature are humorous. Like the performance of an effeminate male character, it easily elicits laughter. The first line of Tan Abdullah's dialogue in *Kantoi* is accompanied by boisterous laughter and again on each subsequent instance of the Chinese speech pattern. The audience responds in similar ways to the Chinese in *Tandas Awam* and the Chinese treasure hunters in *Jejak Karun*. The head swaying/tilting and accompanying sing-song quality of the Indian treasure hunters' speech in *Jejak Karun* similarly result in much laughter. As discussed previously, because this is true laughter from the live studio audience, it reveals the strength of relationship between *Senario* and social norms since such laughter can only be elicited when an understanding of the norms exists.

*Senario*'s humour of incongruities can also work as a subversive tool to demonstrate the artificial nature of social norms and serves to undermine their supposedly natural or self-evident state. However, I suggest that once again, the cues available within the episodes provide a more coherent signification with a non-subversive reading. For what is revealed as suitable comedic material are the peculiarities of the non-Malays with contrapuntal meta-discourses that further emphasize the unsuitable nature of their cultural values. From this perspective, the Superiority Theory for humour can be applied to explain *Senario*'s meta-narrative of Malay primacy. Framed through the theory's dynamics on social power, *Senario*'s laughing 'at' ethnic minorities is thus a tool employed to mock others to reassure themselves of their own dominance. The presence of superiority on *Senario* is therefore contextualized as a manifestation of the socio-economic, religious, and political anxieties of the Malay community that was discussed in Chapter 2.

There was a shift from this Chinese caricature to a comparatively more accurate portrayal in the episode *Gong Xi* (Congratulations) (Muhd. Sufian, & Kamalia, 2002) that first aired in 2002. *Gong Xi*'s portrayal of Chinese characters are different from the rest of *Senario*'s episodes for four reasons. Firstly, the

episode's Chinese characters Mei Wah, Mei Ling,<sup>277</sup> and Alex, speak Malay without the earlier speech idiosyncrasies. While they do not sound like Malay native speakers, it is a comparatively more accurate portrayal of minority groups who have gone through the national Malay education system. Secondly, this is the only episode that contains any real non-Malay dialogue. The Chinese characters in *Gong Xi* speak Malay, English, Mandarin, as well as the Chinese dialects Hokkien and Hakka. Furthermore, the Malay actor who plays the Malay character Jeri, speaks in Mandarin, Cantonese, English, as well as Malay.

However, what is truly unique about *Gong Xi* is the fact that all three of its Chinese characters are played by Chinese actors (see Figure 5.11 and Figure 5.12). Only one other episode, 'How are you?' (Shamsul, & Abdul Samad, 1996), featured a Chinese actor. This rarity of casting ethnic Chinese performers is the third reason that marks it out as significantly different. This change in attitude towards non-Malays was however, not permanent and the Chinese caricature would return (for example, *Kantoi* aired in 2011). The fourth reason is premised on *Gong Xi* being the only episode with a Chinese New Year narrative as well as a Chinese Lion Dance performance (see Figure 5.13). While the *Hari Raya* celebration is a recurring theme for *Senario*, the sitcom's recognition of Chinese New Year is a phenomenon that only occurred once in the sitcom's history.



Figure 5.11

Still from *Gong Xi*. From left: Mei Wah and Mei Ling.

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<sup>277</sup> Mei Wah and Mei Ling are female characters who are played by female actors.





Figure 5.12

Still from *Gong Xi*. From left: Mei Wah, Tuan Besar Alex, and Jeri.



Figure 5.13

Still from *Gong Xi*. Chinese Lion Dance.

While the text itself does not provide any evident explanations for this sudden ethnic inclusion, it may be productive for us to consider if there were any potential slippages between the political and social discourses of the time and *Gong Xi*. Arguably, the most significant political development in the year that *Gong Xi* first aired (2002) is the resignation of then Prime Minister Mahathir who, at the time, had helmed the nation for 22 years (Kabilan 2002; Saravanamuttu 2016, 188-189; Ting 2009, 42). Persuaded by UMNO senior members to retain his premiership for another 18 months (Kabilan 2002; Saravanamuttu 2016, 188-189; Ting 2009, 42), the premiership would be handed to then Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi in 2003.

Then Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's impending ascendancy to Prime Ministership introduces several accompanying realities. Carolina Lopez for instance, observed that public and political events across the year 2002 were aimed at solidifying Badawi's credentials and his progressive stance to Islam as a lead-up to his premiership (2008, 65). The active encouragement of Badawi's moderate stance was in fact (Ong 2015, 27), intended to contrast sharply with then outgoing Prime Minister Mahathir, whose hard-line approach and involvement in the prosecution of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for sodomy, had resulted in a significant loss of public support for UMNO<sup>278</sup> (Marzuki 2008, 36-38; Saravanamuttu 2016, 175, 188). This loss of support was most tangibly felt at the 1999 general elections which registered significant Malay protest votes against UMNO (Gomez 2008, 10; Saravanamuttu 2016, 175-178; Ting 2009, 42).

This backdrop of significant political cleavage within the Malay community meant that non-Malay votes became decisive for UMNO in the coming elections (Saravanamuttu 2016, 178, 180; Ting 2009, 42). UMNO's subsequent reinvention of itself as non-racialist was thus imperative for the party's survival in the coming 2004 election. Among the state initiatives that were implemented in 2002 to encourage this perception of a non-racialist UMNO was the abolishment of ethnic quotas for admission into public universities that, since the 1960s, have been a part of the institutionalized Malay preferential system<sup>279</sup> (Lee 2015, 304; Raman & Tan 2010, 11, 14). Interestingly, a re-delineation exercise was also implemented in mid-2002, which at its conclusion in 2003, resulted in a reduction of constituencies with an over-weightage of Malay seats and the creation of more ethnically mixed seats (Abdul Rashid & Tunku Mohar

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<sup>278</sup> Marzuki Mohamad suggests the cause for this wide-scale Malay revolt was a perceived violation of the ideological Malay ruler/protector and subject/protected structure with Anwar's prosecution (2008, 37-41).

<sup>279</sup> This development in 2002 is made more significant when we consider that even with the supposed shift from ethno-nationalism during the period of Malaysia Incorporated and *Bangsa Malaysia*, the state did not abolish this ethnic quota for university admission.

2006, 321; Saravanamuttu 2016, 190-191), which would translate to UMNO being less reliant on Malay votes.<sup>280</sup>

Considered together, even if *Gong Xi*'s ethnic inclusiveness was not an apparent consequence of the state's political strategy in 2002, it is indicative of political and social considerations in that particular year regarding Malay-Chinese relations in both socio-national discourse as well as popular Malaysian consciousness. From this perspective, it would not be too much of a conceptual leap to question if *Gong Xi* was part of the contest of perception in canvassing popular support for this newly-inclusive UMNO – specifically since TV3 is owned by UMNO's media investment group, Media Prima Berhad. Notwithstanding these important innovations in *Gong Xi*, the old narratives of the wealthy Chinese and their criminality, the metonym of city as the corrupting 'West', and its suture to the sign 'Chinese' were retained. They were however, signified less explicitly through the characters Jeri and Alex.



Figure 5.14  
Still from *Gong Xi*. Jeri and his arm-tattoo of stars.

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<sup>280</sup> The 2004 general elections resulted in an unsurprising landslide victory for UMNO and the *Barisan Nasional* (Case 2015, 43; Saravanamuttu 2016, 189-191).

Jeri is a Malay from the city who works for a Chinese whom he refers to as *Tuan Besar Alex* (Big Boss Alex). The nature of Jeri's work is never mentioned. Jeri has two stars tattooed on his arm (see Figure 5.14) and there is a lengthy sequence where the other characters discuss, seemingly out of a novel curiosity, the potential meaning of the stars. No conclusion is reached in this lengthy sequence, and the significance of the stars is never referenced again for the remainder of the episode. The scene comes across almost as a narrative deviation for it does not directly contribute to moving the story forward. While their true meaning is not explicitly stated, the deliberate attempt at emphasizing the topic – through the lengthy deviation – reveals the stars' significance to Jefri's character and the meta-narrative.

I suggest the stars are meant to denote Jeri's rank and membership within a triad where Alex is a 'Big Boss'. The stars are a simplification of recognizable military-like rank, since it needs to be identifiable by viewers. Furthermore, Jeri's attire provides an impression of someone who can be 'rough'. His attitude towards Alex is another indication. Jeri's subservience to Big Boss Alex is revealed when he stands attentively by Alex who is sitting and chatting with Mei Wah (see Figure 5.12). Without even looking at Jeri, Alex hands him the jacket with a single instruction of "*pegang*" (hold), while Jeri complies instantaneously. This deference by Jeri is present in his interactions with Alex throughout the episode.

A possible oppositional reading for the above exists, if read as a satire for the Malay administration's pandering to the Chinese, with the consequent political reliance on favourable non-Malay support. The embarrassment of a subservient Malay (Jeri) who is required to serve the needs of a Chinese (Alex) occupying the position of 'boss', is precariously similar to the anti-Chinese polemics legitimizing Malay nationalist ambitions that has been circulating since British Malaya.<sup>281</sup> This reading is even more compelling since the episode's concession on ethnic stereotyping is potentially due to this perceived Chinese electoral

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<sup>281</sup> For examples, see Foo (2004, 82-83), Reid (2006, 14-15), Shamsul (1996b, 27), and Ting (2009, 35-37).

power. The embarrassment is augmented with the alluded triad connection of Jeri and Alex. In this respect, regardless of which reading position is taken, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s narrative of the Chinese and '*kong si gelap*' is still present and simultaneously reprised with the suturing of the 'city's economic prospects' with 'Chinese criminality' as both Alex and Jeri came from the city to the village. Therefore, Alex's social status signification in *Gong Xi* similarly occupies the same representational space as Tan Abdullah in *Kantoi*, and the faceless proprietor *Ah Fatt* in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*.

### *Conclusion*

Much of what is written in this chapter coheres to our previous observations on the nation's institutional dogma of Malay nationalism and cultural binaries. Through the analysis of several episodes of *Senario* that first aired between 1996 to 2011, we explored the significations of Malay identity, and the caricaturizing of ethnic minorities (the othering process) as the preferred encoded meaning within *Senario*.

The discussions in this chapter have brought into sharper relief, three main themes of *Senario*'s essentialist performances of identity. The first theme is the exclusionary nature of national narratives that pervade popular discourse. *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* represents a very early episode that articulated nationalist Malay myths which are foundational to the legitimation of exclusive ethnic spaces within the discourse of Malaysian identity. Within this wider discourse, it was observed that other ethnic communities were only included when contextualized through the colonizer-colonized binary. This binary was further associated with the city-*kampung* dichotomy and often articulated as being synonymous with the urban-rural discourse. These associations are syntagmatically extended to *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* and *Kantoi* where colonial-era stereotypes that sutured race to economic function and social strata were reproduced. All these reveal that the scope of the non-Malay 'others' can, and does, fluidly change in accordance with the political rhetoric of the time.

The second theme articulates the first theme tangentially by constructing the Malay community as the idealized normative within the country. Within this dominant narrative that recognizes the Malay subject as the status quo, non-Malay 'others' consequently occupy a caricaturized space within the Malay imaginary. This caricaturizing is furthermore a holistic construction. Aesthetic differences, speech idiosyncrasies – and building on the first theme – the behavioural, cultural, and socio-economic gaps, coalesce into a totalized 'other'. This un-evolving and totalizing stereotype is, like the first theme, consistently present from episodes first aired in 1997 up until 2011. While an exception was made with *Gong Xi*, it was presumably motivated by political circumstances of the time.

The third theme is the contradictory – or ambivalent, to use Bhabha's term – nature of *Senario*'s othering, for it is a process of ethnic de-assimilation that challenges official nation-building initiatives.<sup>282</sup> This perhaps reveals that political will for national inclusion is arguably only propagandistically focused. For rather than the bonds of Malaysian-ness, homogenous Malayness is instead contrasted with its ethnic 'others' to prioritize loyalty to (supra)race, religion, and cultural tradition.<sup>283</sup> Within this framework, nostalgia that is validated by pseudo-historicism is often deployed on *Senario* as a mnemonic and emotional trigger for the soliciting of cultural conformity and communal solidarity.

As part of the process of othering, *Senario*'s recurring reconstitution of Malayness is therefore only enabled by a perpetual re-delineation of what is non-Malay. This is the fundamental formation of the 'other' where Malay identity (as performed on *Senario* thus far) defines itself by insisting on the stereotypes of its 'others'. This achieves a 'fixed' meaning to the stereotype which in turn allows Malayness to define itself. The episodal narratives have thus far cohered with UMNO's conception to Malay identity as discussed in Chapter 2. It is

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<sup>282</sup> This references official nation-building propaganda like *Bangsa Malaysia* and 1Malaysia, discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>283</sup> I do not imply that this is unique to the Malays in Malaysia. Arguably, the Chinese and Indians exhibit similar tendencies. For examples, see Cynthia Enloe's (1967) study on early multi-ethnic politics, and Khoo Boo Teik's (2013) study on more contemporary Malaysian Chinese politics.

therefore unsurprising that they perfectly encapsulate Bhabha's notions of 'othering', 'stereotypes', 'rigidity' of meanings, and their totalized un-evolving meanings across time.

While our focus has been on the examination of the actual televisual text, it should be reiterated that individual agency on the part of television producers<sup>284</sup> is – as we have observed in Chapter 3 – heavily modulated by institutional frameworks. With this reality, it is uncertain as to how much of the text is a consequence of conformity to institutional pressure, and to what extent the text reveals a socially internalized interpretation of Malayness and non-Malayness. Both cases however, do not detract from the significations present in the text nor do they dilute their potential effects on society.

Several questions that arose in the midst of our discussions were not addressed. Among these are why the mixed-race marriages in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* invariably feature the mothers as foreign. Could the children's foreign ancestry not come from their fathers? Furthermore, what is *Mak Bedah*'s true function in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*? While she was included in several of the scenes, her inclusion was narratively superfluous. These questions will be accounted for in Chapter 7 when we discuss *Senario*'s representation of Malay gender relationships.

In the following chapter, the focus will be on the state of Malay religiosity on *Senario* and the consequent social proprieties that function to provide further communal cohesion within the Malay category. Moreover, we will observe that the themes of Malay nationalism that were uncovered in this chapter, are articulated as a bond for supra-Malay fraternity when viewed from a wider regional perspective. More broadly, these will demonstrate how *Senario* attempts to reconstitute the parameters of Malayness as structured by the conflated identities of Malay, Islam, and supra-Malay.

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<sup>284</sup> Note that 'producers' here do not refer to the job designation but rather, those who are part of the production of content for television.

## CHAPTER 6

### The Islamic *Senario* of Malayness

*Kita sekarang ni, buat cara baik. Kita bagi salam bagi dia. Den kata, ini orang Melayu punya rumah; orang Islam. Jadi jika kita bagi salam, dia mesti jawab ...*

*We'll do it the proper (or good) way. We'll give our salam. I say, this is a house owned by Malays; by Muslims. If we give our salam, he must answer ...*

*–Salah Sangka (Ahmad, & Anniesafinas, 2011)*

The distinct simplicity of the words employed in the excerpt from *Senario* above are charged with descriptors for the Malay category, their state of religiosity, and communal social proprieties. The implicit ideological fixity of the spatial, material, and religious boundaries presented by those five sentences, succinctly frames the themes of this present chapter. This chapter will thus provide a closer examination of the state of Malay religiosity on *Senario* and the consequent social proprieties that function to provide further communal cohesion within the Malay category.

It was observed in the previous chapter that *Senario*'s descriptors for Malayness are broadly constructed through the themes of Malay nationalism, culture, tradition, and history. This chapter will demonstrate that *Senario* also articulates a communally embedded condition of religiosity that further defines the quality of being Malay. Most strident however, is the manner in which these conditions are articulated within a rubric of Malay-Islam that is predicated on the ideological supra-Malay superstructure. There are two overarching trajectories to the following discussions. The first is *Senario*'s articulation of Islamic televisual descriptors that builds upon the previously identified Malay signifiers. The second reveals how the representations of this Islamic-Malayness function to inform and influence both the cultural and religious subjectivities upon which the community's supra-Malay imaginary is predicated.



The discussions in this chapter will primarily draw on two episodes: *Ta Ti Tu* (Jamil, & Norwani, 1997), and *Salah Sangka* (Ahmad, & Anniesafinas, 2011). As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, the strictures of religiosity and the intra-communal performatives of faith as practiced in the quotidian, are perfectly encapsulated in *Ta Ti Tu*. *Salah Sangka*, which was first telecast in 2011 is, on the other hand, a clear example of the complex interrelatedness between the discursive fields of regional autochthony, culture, and religion. I suggest that Malay Muslims' anxieties for their presumptive exclusive rights are plainly articulated through *Salah Sangka*'s thematic conflation of Malay, Muslim, and within the wider discursive field, the category of supra-Malay.

#### *Perambulations Between Malay, Muslim, and Malaysian*

In spite of Islam's dominance as a constitutive part of the discourse on Malay identity, its presence on *Senario* is not as overt as other non-religious descriptors of Malay. Many of the Islamic identifiers are instead, dialogically included or crafted into character appearance that subtly alludes to Islamic daily life. One of the earliest – and perhaps the only – episode to feature a wholly didactically Islamic narrative is an episode from 1997 titled *Ta Ti Tu* (Jamil, & Norwani, 1997).

The significance of the title *Ta Ti Tu* is attributable to the words being one of the basic phonemes ('ta' with a, i, u) in Quranic Arabic and Jawi. *Ta Ti Tu* thus represents a fundamental lesson in Quranic recitation and more broadly, Islamic studies. The episode's title thus perfectly encapsulates the perceived aims of this didactic episode. More tellingly, the title reflects the religious and cultural insularity of the episode, for it requires fore-knowledge of *Ta Ti Tu*'s significance to locate its meaning in relation to the episodic theme.

The story of *Ta Ti Tu* centres on an elderly lady Mak Aji who coaches students in her *kampung* home on the recitation of the Holy Quran. Among her older students are the girls Achik and Eja, and the boys Ninin, Meon, and Jijoi (see Figure 6.1). The episode starts with her younger students Sarah and Nawfal (see Figure 6.2) completing their final lesson before they go home. When Mak Aji

leaves the room to perform her prayers, Achik and Eja are left alone and become distracted from their reading. The boys arrive for their lessons and everyone starts to play around which interrupts Mak Aji's prayers. She returns to the room to re-establish order in the class before leaving again to continue with her prayers, which leaves the children to horse around again. It should be noted from the outset that except Sarah, all characters in the episode are played by male actors.



Figure 6.1

Still from *Ta Ti Tu*. From left: Achik, Eja Mak Aji, Ninin, Meon, and Jijoi.



Figure 6.2

Still from *Ta Ti Tu*. From left: Sarah, and Nawfal.

*Ta Ti Tu*'s narrative revolves wholly around the children's Quranic lessons at Mak Aji's *kampung* house. Like *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* that was discussed in Chapter 5, *Ta Ti Tu*'s central narrative is its didacticism, for there is no actual story line in the traditional sense.<sup>286</sup> The episode is instead structured around a series of religious instructions. This structure functions to construct an idealized on-screen Malay Muslim subject that is located within the centre of Malay symbolism – the *kampung*. This is achieved in *Ta Ti Tu* through three methods – dialogic instructions, demonstration, and meta-narrative. These three methods will broadly direct our discussions of the episode.

The first sentence of the opening scene – “*Sadaqa Allahu l-Azeem*” (‘Allah the Almighty has spoken the truth’) – effectively asserts the religious axiom that undergirds the entire logic of Islamic faith. Its significance is foregrounded for the viewers by Mak Aji's explanation on the utility of its recitation immediately after. The act of explaining emphasizes the verse, elevating its presence within the scene from mere narrative dissonance to an element that demands closer attention from viewers. This act's reflexivity is similar to *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* where Mak Aji's explanation is instructional not just for the characters in the narrative but also the viewers observing the exchange. Here, the implicit process of socialization serves firstly, to instruct viewers on the utility of this Islamic verse, and secondly, to inculcate the normalcy of its daily use within lived Islamic life. As we shall observe next, all three methods – dialogic instructions, demonstration, and meta-narrative – are deployed from this very first scene to present a faceted Malay Muslim subject.

After her explanation, Mak Aji goes on to lament that as a result of her advanced age, she tires easily. With the conclusion of the younger students' studies, she had planned to retire. However, the introduction of five new (older) students – Achik, Eja, Ninin, Meon, and Jijoi – strengthened her resolve to fulfil her responsibility for seeing them complete their Quranic education. Subsequently, Sarah and Nawfal are commended by Mak Aji for completing their Quranic

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<sup>286</sup> One that broadly adheres to the basic three-act structure, for instance.

recitations at a young age. Aesthetically, both younger children are shown to be attired in (religious-styled) clothing that are largely considered appropriate by the community (see Figure 6.2 for example). When Sarah and Nawfal relay their parents' intent of gifting *Mak Aji* with food as a token of gratitude for the lessons, *Mak Aji* modestly replies that it is not needed. This prompts the older student *Eja* to remind *Mak Aji*, "*Jangan ditolak rezeki, Opah*" (Don't reject sustenance,<sup>287</sup> Grandmother<sup>288</sup>). Here, I suggest that the performative dimension of the opening Quranic verse may be augmented by a conjunctural study of the characters' religious attires as well as the dialogue. The sequencing of its events and dialogue requires particular attention, for it reveals a layered construction to the faceted Malay Muslim subject.

The opening verse 'Allah the Almighty has spoken the truth' is the master-signifier that quilts the meaning of the floating signifiers within an ideological field that posits everything Quranic as a 'universal truth' that is beyond question. Within this field, *Mak Aji* as a source of authority on Islamic or Quranic knowledge is located at its centre. Within the episode's Malay intra-communal hierarchy of a *kampung*, *Mak Aji* thus occupies the same position as *Pak Teh* in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and *Basiron's* parents in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*. If the opening verse sets the criteria of religiosity (unquestioning faith in God' infallibility), *Mak Aji's* lament, revealing her resolve despite her frailty, further defines its quality.

Religious lessons often involve fees and thus have an economic facet. My reading of *Mak Aji's* lament however, takes its cue from the *hadith*<sup>289</sup> of the Prophet saying that the best among Muslims are those who learn and teach the Quran

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<sup>287</sup> Within an Islamic context, *rezeki* has a broad meaning that includes livelihood, subsistence, income, and gifts. It is meant to include all that adds to, or is beneficial to, one's life, however small. This is predicated on the belief that everything comes from God.

<sup>288</sup> The term can be used broadly to address elderly females not of blood-relations.

<sup>289</sup> The Brill Encyclopaedia of Islam defines *hadith* as a collection of "what was related about the Prophet and his community" (Gaiser, 2017). It is common for Muslims to aspire towards emulating what is recounted in a *sahih* (verified as genuine by a rigorous system) *hadith*.

(Sahih al-Bukhari 1996).<sup>290</sup> Framed in this context, Mak Aji's implicit act of self-sacrifice alludes to a sense of religious duty that transcends her physicality, where the dissemination of Quranic knowledge is prioritized over any mortal weakness. Furthermore, Mak Aji expresses a lament, rather than a passing dialogic comment, which seems to align with the popular notion of *cabaran* (trial/challenge) from God. Among other sources, *cabaran* is a notion informed by the first line of the Quranic verse 2:286 that says "On no soul doth God place a burden greater than it can bear" (Yusof 2000, 60). This becomes especially clear when she ends the lament by saying "*tak apalah macam ni*" (it's alright that it's like this) as a sign of tacit acceptance. All of these signify that Mak Aji's lament is not focused on the lessons' economic facet, but rather, to foreground the internal Islamic logic of the opening verse's 'universal truth' that subordinates Mak Aji's mortality as subsidiary to the pious nature of her work.

Eja's reminder to Mak Aji not to turn down *rezeki* serves two functions. The first establishes the transcendence of food from mere worldly sustenance to that which is provided by God. The manner of its deliverance by Eja as an oft-repeated, age-old, commonly-known word of wisdom constructs it plainly as uncontested normative truth. The second function works simultaneously with the first function as a reminder of human fallibility, inherent even in figures of Islamic authority like Mak Aji. For even if Mak Aji's declining of food is merely out of politeness expected of one who is *beradat*, Eja's reminder elevates Mak Aji's response by framing it Islamically. In this sense, any meaning imbued through *adat*, is doubly reinforced through what is signified as being complementary to Islam. Thus, regardless of her socio-religious standing within the community, this reminder locates her beneath the supposed infallibility of Quranic universal truth. This act is especially significant when we consider that Eja, the person who provides the reminder, is a new student who is presumably still lacking in Islamic instruction.

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<sup>290</sup> This is also consonant with my own experience of being taught by several religious teachers, or *Ustaz*. They never failed to mention that there was much *pahala* (religious merit) in teaching, learning, or even reciting/reading the Quran (in the original Quranic Arabic).

The wider implications of *Ta Ti Tu*'s opening scene lies in its relatability for viewers. William Roff for example, noted the insistence of Malay families to send their children to village religious schools instead of the secular Malay or English government schools during the period of British Malaya (1967, 26, 30, 71). The practice of sending children for Islamic education or recitation of the Quran is still adhered to by most Muslims in Malaysia.<sup>291</sup> Like *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, the on-screen reconstruction of a practice that exists in the real world, creates an immediately relatable experience for viewers that allows for a confirmation of their similar worldviews. Where the strictures of *adat* in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* previously dictated social proprieties, the tenets of communal Islam here, further refine these proprieties to locate them within a tighter framework of Islamic conservatism that is overlaid over social proprieties. This interweaving of *adat* and Islam subsequently produces a televisual social script that reaffirms dominant real world, communal Malayness.



Figure 6.3

Still from *Ta Ti Tu*. From left: Eja reciting a Quranic verse before she gives a *doa* (prayer/supplication).

This Islamic social script is perhaps most explicit when Mak Aji instructs Eja to recite a Quranic verse. Eja starts off by merely reciting, which progresses to the placing of one hand over her ear, before finishing off by fluidly upturning both

<sup>291</sup> See Azmil (2012) for a broad overview of Islamic education (national or otherwise) in Malaysia.

palms in supplication for the recitation of an accompanying *doa* (prayer/supplication) (see Figure 6.3). Through this display of the associated actions, forms, and behaviour, Eja demonstrates the communally encouraged set of 'rituals' that accompanies the recitation of verses and prayers. As before, the matter-of-fact manner to its televisual presentation, normalizes the 'ritualism' of Islamic religiosity as part of the status quo.

The actions are thus featured as a part of Eja's and Achik's Quranic lessons which are guided by explicit strictures dictated through the Islamic authority signified by Mak Aji. This opens the discursive space for the normalization of both the practice of Islamic ritualism, and its adoption as a gauge for the degree of one's religiosity. This instructive articulation of Quranic recitations and forms is repeated several times with Eja and Achik before Mak Aji leaves to perform her afternoon prayers. The repetitive preoccupation with this process throughout the episode is perceivably deliberate, suggesting an attempt at strengthening the normativity of this Islamic ritualism.

Much like *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s internal structure of communal positions, *Ta Ti Tu*'s formation of a Muslim subject is similarly communally hierarchized. As previously indicated, Mak Aji inhabits the position of religious authority. The younger students Sarah and Nawfal, occupy a tier that is higher than the older students. Their higher position within the religious field when compared to the older students, can only be understood if we consider the formation of their characters from the national Islamic perspective and its associated significance in Malay *adat*.

Within an Islamic structure of influence, Muslims with wider and more in-depth knowledge of Islam are commonly accorded with higher prestige and respect. Wazir Jahan Karim suggests that these distinctions between the *alim*<sup>292</sup> (religious) and the non-religious have a social significance where a "Malay who

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<sup>292</sup> Wazir termed it as *halim*, though the Kamus Dewan Edisi Empat (Malay Dictionary 4<sup>th</sup> Edition) gives two separate definitions to *halim* and *alim* with the latter bearing the intended meaning.

is *beradat*<sup>293</sup> yet *halim [alim]*” occupies the “uppermost position of reverence in Malay society” within the “cultural continuum of *kasar* and *halus* (‘from vulgarity to refinement’)” (1992, 171, translation in original). This is a notion that is echoed by Suzanne Brenner (1995, 25-28) and broadly alluded to by Michael Peletz (1996). Within the nation’s cultural-political framework, it legitimizes the top-down structure of established Islamic bureaucracy that has state *muftis*<sup>294</sup> issuing *fatwas*<sup>295</sup> determining the discourse and narrative of Islam and faith within Malaysia. This structure is further replicated between the *Ulamas*<sup>296</sup> and/or *Imams*<sup>297</sup> and their congregations. Dominik Müller notes that this Malaysian religio-bureaucratic structure is based on an authoritarian system of knowledge transmission (2014, 39) which establishes a top-down flow of Islamic knowledge to the masses.<sup>298</sup> As we will observe in the following discussion, the dynamics of this normative subordination by those with Islamic credentials is mirrored in *Ta Ti Tu* by Sarah and Nawfal’s meta-narrative position.

The construction of the two younger students’ positions within this Islamic framework is clear. From the outset, viewers are informed about Sarah and Nawfal’s completion of Quranic studies, an act which is aimed at establishing their Islamic ‘credentials’. Moreover, the commendation from a source of Islamic authority (Mak Aji) on this achievement bears an implicit elevation of their standing within the classroom space. From an aesthetical perspective, their attire is religiously appropriate and well-kept. This is in direct contrast to the older students’ attires which are unkempt and worn in a manner that does not conform to Islamic requirements of male modesty (*aurat*) (see Figure 6.4 for example). From a behavioural perspective, Sarah and Nawfal’s conduct as

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<sup>293</sup> One who ‘has’ *adat* or practices *adat*.

<sup>294</sup> A Muslim legal expert empowered to give rulings on Islamic matters. In Malaysia, this is state-sanctioned through either the sultans or federal religious authorities.

<sup>295</sup> Ruling on a point of Islamic law, given by an Islamic authority; e.g. state religious departments or *muftis*.

<sup>296</sup> Learned Muslim scholars possessing formal qualifications in some aspect of Islamic study.

<sup>297</sup> Someone who leads a congregational prayer. In Malaysia, this title for the congregational prayer leader of a mosque is a formal appointment by the various state religious departments, and endorsed by the state’s *Sultan*.

<sup>298</sup> One reason legitimizing this power structure is the traditional Malay concept of *ilmu*, roughly translated to mean ‘knowledge’. *Ilmu* will be discussed later in this chapter.



demonstrated through their manner of speaking, is measured, composed, and respectful towards Mak Aji while the older students are mischievous, boisterous, and undisciplined (see Figure 6.4 for example). In this respect, both the younger students are constructed within the narrative as embodying the aspirational religious aesthetic – the *beradat* and *alim* ideal.

The differences in mannerisms and attitudes are further emphasized between the children when Sarah and Nawfal return in a later scene with the food from their parents. In that scene, the absence of the mediating force of Mak Aji (who is away praying), causes the true attitudes of both groups of children to come to the fore. In contrast to the undisciplined older students who are loud and unruly, Sarah and Nawfal still exhibit a composure and discipline that locates them on the higher ground of *halus* (refined) comportment.



Figure 6.4

Still from *Ta Ti Tu*. The older boys are horsing around in Mak Aji's absence. Note their *kain pelekats* (a version of the sarong) which traditionally covers their legs are instead worn on the neck (boy in front) or head (boy in the middle). Furthermore, their knees – part of their *aurat* (concealed anatomy), are uncovered.

While an argument exists for age being the primary cause for any difference in behaviour, this is never alluded to within the narrative of *Ta Ti Tu*.<sup>299</sup> In its

<sup>299</sup> Mak Aji's praise for the younger students are the only reference to the children's ages.

absence, Mak Aji's pre-emptive commendation to Sarah and Nawfal at the very start of the episode provides a stronger explanation for the behavioural contrast. I interpret Mak Aji's initial commendation as pre-emptive, since it organizes the ideological field (the master-signifier, in other words) for the entire episode. This pre-emptive act aligns the viewers' interpretation to its proposed meaning right from the start and inoculates the Islamic meta-narrative from any significant production of overt counter-meanings. This is aided by the repeated performative of instructional Quranic recitations throughout the episode which functions to preoccupy viewer attention with what is an explicitly relatable religious lived experience.

Islamic education and tangentially Islam, are consequently elevated as the mediating elements that provide balance to the Malay Muslim subject. The added presumptive benefit of mastering Quranic education at a young age – further demonstrated through the contrast with the unruly older students who have yet to complete their studies – qualifies the traditional normative argument for introducing Quranic studies to children when they are young. In addition to the cultural *halus* perspective, the religious dimension suggested by the meta-narrative of Sarah and Nawfal is that their discipline and behaviour is presumed to be engendered through an observance of Islamic *akhlaq*.<sup>300</sup> The practice of *akhlaq* through self-mediation, control, and discipline serves a higher Islamic function that reacquaints a Muslim to his/her *fitrah*.<sup>301</sup> This adherence to Islamic *akhlaq* functions to reaffirm the higher religio-social standing (*beradat-halus* status) of Sarah and Nawfal over the older students.

The significance of the younger children's completion of their studies is therefore prominent, for it is presumed to have enabled them to mediate their *akhlaq* through Islam. The contrast with those who are still learning, underscores Islamic education as a determinant for positive differentiation. Islam's civic function is thus emphasized through its deployment to shape

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<sup>300</sup> Adibah binti Abdul Rahim defines *akhlaq* as encompassing that which governs one's disposition, behaviour, attitudes, actions, and values (2013, 508).

<sup>301</sup> Ammar Fauzi from Indonesia's Islamic College describes *fitrah* as embodying the concept of the original state of purity when Man was created (2013, 34-35).

socially adept Muslim individuals within a communal Islamic environment. Much like the logic of observable or demonstrable 'reality' in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, the behavioural, aesthetical, and attitudinal contrasts between the two groups of students are meant to illustrate this civic function of Islamic education. In this regard – and embodying the dualism of the *beradat-alim* ideal – the utility and role of Islam within the Malay psyche and as a rubric constituting the fabric of communal living, is similar to the rubric of Malay *adat*.

Our discussions have thus far demonstrated the three dimensions of *Ta Ti Tu*'s Islamic didacticism. We observed how *Ta Ti Tu*'s dialogic Islamic instructions, demonstrations on recitations and ritualism, all work cohesively with its meta-narrative to introduce the grammar of discursive Islam which can subsequently structure or reflect quotidian expressions of faith. It was indicated in Chapter 2 that the start of Malaysia's Islamist agenda in the 1980s had the tangential consequence of institutionally legalizing<sup>303</sup> what Müller notes, was an orthodox brand of Sunni Islam (2014, 3). It was noted that the progressive stress on assimilating Islam with public governance has led to the considerable policing on expressions of faith and the close focus on Islamic ritualism. Taken as a televisual microcosm of these wider national developments, *Ta Ti Tu*'s performative dimension is therefore aligned with, and reflective of, this state of religious affairs as manifested within Malay domestic life.

The considerable hierarchization of *Ta Ti Tu*'s characters according to quotidian understandings of the state's brand of Sunni Islam and Islamic education helps to normalize the suggested unitary identity of Malaysian Muslim within national discourse. Taken broadly, *Ta Ti Tu*'s religious didacticism performs a positive social function. Its objectives are plainly to encourage a standardization, and thus homogenization, of Islamic observances and to demonstrate these sanctioned versions. In this respect, *Ta Ti Tu*'s aims were aligned with the administration's efforts to establish an Islamic bureaucracy that introduced

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<sup>303</sup> I refer to the significant increase in state and federal legislations and policies on Islamic affairs and Muslim rights, as well as the amendments to the constitution that introduced the dual legal structure of Islamic and civil law.

homogenizing national Islamic policies. Contextualized thus, *Ta Ti Tu*'s domestic expression of faith is in fact a constitutive component of statist Islam.

Moreover, whatever resultant ethnic or religious exclusion that was implicit in *Ta Ti Tu*'s televisual performative was arguably tangentially produced on an unconscious level. This supposedly peripherally-produced exclusion was however, not always unconscious or 'innocent' in *Senario*. As we will observe in the succeeding section, *Senario*'s exclusion of its non-Malay and non-Muslim 'others' became more strident in its later years, particularly in 2011, encouraging not only religious polarization, but also conflating it with communalist ideas of supra-racial and nationalist solidarity.

*(Re)Establishing the Tautology of 'Muslim Malay'*

One episode that was considerably articulate in its Islamic and racial othering was *Salah Sangka* (Ahmad, & Anniesafinas, 2011) that aired in 2011. The story of *Salah Sangka* (Mistaken/Misunderstanding) centres on an Indonesian *bomoh* (shaman) named Wak Jali,<sup>304</sup> who lives in a remote *kampung* presumably in the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan. The *kampung* only has three inhabitants<sup>305</sup> – the elder Wak Jali and two unnamed youths. Both youths rush to inform Wak Jali that their house is haunted, and they are invited to stay for the night. Before retiring to the house, Wak Jali establishes magical defences around the compound and the youths are asked to learn the associated rituals as he demonstrates them. At one point during the night when the youths are alone in the living room of Wak Jali's house, two wandering spirits stumble upon the abode. They gain entry to the house despite the magical defences and possess the youths before they are dispelled by Wak Jali. The reason for their presence is revealed when the spirits' father, who is himself a spirit, appears at the house to explain that his 'sons' were in fact searching for their baby pacifiers or dummies that were lost when they died.

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<sup>304</sup> Wak is a form of address for an older man, typically an uncle.

<sup>305</sup> This is mentioned in the dialogue.

There are three main themes in *Salah Sangka* that will be the focus of our discussions. The first is *Salah Sangka*'s articulation of fraternal association with Indonesia as part of supra-Malayness. The second further conflates this supra-Malay grouping with Islam<sup>307</sup> as part of an inseparable monolithic bond that attempts to transcend nationality such as Malaysian or Indonesian identities. The third is defining what lies external to the supra-Malay identity as 'threats'. All three themes demonstrate the various ways by which *Salah Sangka*'s overt prioritization of (supra)Malay and Muslim identity – even when they are articulated separately – functions to exclude those who have been communally evaluated as not belonging to these categories.

Unlike the previous episodes, *Salah Sangka*'s significations and meanings of its subtexts are comparatively more layered and complex. For this reason, I will be providing a much closer reading than the previous episodes. Furthermore, as discussed, every element (or paradigmatic unit) within a signifying chain is a bearer of meaning. Seemingly 'spontaneous'<sup>308</sup> actions or exclamations within the episode's dialogue must therefore not be brushed off as being merely random; even if our theoretical framework is not considered, that would be too convenient a dismissal. As signifiers, spontaneity does in fact reveal performers' true internalized understanding of their own communal socialization and acculturation.<sup>309</sup> This is the trajectory of our analysis for *Salah Sangka*.

Wak Jali's song from the opening scene is productive of the first theme on 'fraternal association with Indonesia'. This song is in fact, the master-signifier that frames all of the episode's subtexts within its ideological field.<sup>310</sup> Here, Wak

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<sup>307</sup> Note that the discussions on Islam in this chapter are contextualized to Malaysia's official interpretations of orthodox Sunni Islam as well as the communal internalized understandings of these official positions which were previously outlined in Chapter 2. The observation in Chapter 2 on the year-on-year increase in Malays choosing to identify first as Muslims, is particularly insightful for our following discussions.

<sup>308</sup> While not part of the analysis, my interview with Hisyam reveals that there are no improvisations that deviate from a script approved by the censorship board. As previously discussed, television content producers err on the side of caution since they cannot afford for an episode to be banned based on a careless 'slip' of unscripted dialogue or action.

<sup>309</sup> From the perspective of humour, this is also clear from our discussions on Humour Theory and its function as a barometer for culture and society.

<sup>310</sup> Once again, this is a recurring pattern where the episode's trajectory is contained within its very first scene; the narrative exposition, so to speak. Furthermore, this is necessary for, as

Jali sings, “Malaysia, Indonesia, *dua sahabat sama*” (Malaysia, Indonesia, two similar friends). To understand the basis of Wak Jali’s assertion of friendship, it is, once again, necessary to frame it through the supra-Malay movements in Malaysia. As discussed in Chapter 5, there is a recursive political rhetoric of the cross-Archipelago *Melayu Raya* (Greater Malaydom) supra-Malay movement in Malaysia (Milner 2011, 147, 148, 152, 155, 157-159; Roff 1967, 232-233).<sup>311</sup>

The Malaysian government has introduced numerous initiatives from at least the 1980s,<sup>312</sup> to achieve this ‘Malay World’ aspiration. Some notable developments<sup>313</sup> are the Malay World Assembly,<sup>314</sup> the cultural-economic *Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam* (Malay World Muslim World) initiative, and the establishment of *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*’s (National University of Malaysia) *Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu* (Institute of the Malay World and Civilization) that has centres in Indonesia (Milner 2011, 183-184). From a sociological perspective, from at least the 1920s (Milner 2011, 129, 147), Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula were regarded by the Malays as “one community, one people, with one adat (custom), and what is more, one religion” (Milner 2011, 147, translation in original). These realities demonstrate that the notion of *Dunia Melayu* (Malay World) alluding to a supra-Malay category does not merely exist on a state-political level, it is also present (to a degree) within the Malay social mindset.

Given this historio-ideological grounding, Wak Jali’s assertion of brotherly relations mnemonically activates the communal perception of this *Dunia Melayu* bond that transcends even nationality. As mentioned, this is the intended effect of the master-signifier that simultaneously features an absence of similar

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discussed previously, *Senario*’s non-recurring format requires that viewer relatability is achieved with the very first scene.

<sup>311</sup> While Farish Noor (2002, 92-100) refers to a *Malaya-Raya*, it refers to the same political concept.

<sup>312</sup> There are certainly other state initiatives that predate the 1980s. However, this period marks the start of a concerted effort by the state at introducing initiatives that directly address this *Dunia Melayu* aspiration.

<sup>313</sup> See Milner (2011, 182-184) for a more detailed list of developments.

<sup>314</sup> First held in the state of Melaka in 1982. Subsequent assemblies have been held in Sri Lanka, Vietnam, South Africa, Mindanao, and Madagascar (Milner 2011, 183).

national fraternal reference to the large number of non-Malay Malaysians.<sup>315</sup> The implicit historical reference of Wak Jali's assertion is key, for the initial establishment of this concept reinforces the episode's later subtexts as 'truism'. The narrative's ability to progress in this trajectory lies in the construction of Wak Jali (Indonesia) and the youths (Malaysia) as metaphors for each of the two nations.

Audiences are never explicitly told of Wak Jali's Indonesian roots. However, he speaks in Indonesian, using words like *kaget* (*terperanjat* – startled), *sosok-sosok siju* (*makhluk-makhluk halus* – supernatural beings), *ngomong gitu, sih* (*jangan cakap begitu* – don't say that), and Malay words like *betul* are pronounced or intoned as *beturr* (correct), *kenapa* as *kenaa-pahh* (why), and *jampi* as *jempi* (spell). The dialogues of the characters ensure that these differences do not go unnoticed by the viewers, for the Malay youths query Wak Jali on Indonesian terms that are unclear to them. Like a language lesson, the explanations are always followed by the mention of their Malay word equivalents. Any ambiguity about the characters' origins are addressed by Wak Jali's explanations of "*kalau di Indonesia ...*" ('if it's in Indonesia ...', or 'in Indonesia ...'), and the youths' "*kalau di Malaysia ...*". Moreover, after Wak Jali's explanations, the youths consciously repeat the Indonesian words as if trying to commit them to memory, a repetition which also serves to reiterate Indonesian-Malaysian difference yet sameness.<sup>316</sup>

Dialogic spatial metaphors are also mobilized to strengthen the proposed shared belonging-ness to a *Dunia Melayu*. In the same opening scene, one of the youths

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<sup>315</sup> In *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* for example, this was alluded to with the vernacular papers.

<sup>316</sup> This paragraph may suggest that a reading of the episode's full dialogue would provide a better understanding of the text's alluded imaginary of Malay identity and its variations. My methodology however, prioritizes the quilting/representational framework. Thus, the inclusion of select dialogic segments or words/terms/phrases – effectively the master signifiers – can provide more substantive insight into understanding the dynamics of communal and intra-communal identity within *Senario*, especially when considering other elements of its *mise-en-scene*. An example of this was *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s 'stirring the pot' analysis which accounted for not just the dialogue, but Nenek Yan's pointing, and the grandchildren's physical act of stirring. Through this analytical framework, *Senario*'s replication of popular understandings to these different variations of identity is consistently addressed throughout the three chapters of analysis.

explains, “*dekat kampung kita ini, kita tiga keluarga*<sup>317</sup> *aje duduk kat sini*” (in our *kampung*, only our three families live here). The use of the inclusive ‘*kita*’ (we) tells the viewers that Wak Jali is ‘one of us’. It is interesting that a similar metaphor is observed in P. Ramlee’s 1956 film *Semerah Padi* (As Red as Rice) where the inhabitants of the *kampung* are the ‘us’ who are united against the threat of ‘them’ – “non-Muslim wild men from the nearby jungle (*hutan*)” (Kahn 2006, 117-122).<sup>318</sup> In effect, the episode’s construction of shared belongingness establishes the basis for the third part of *Salah Sangka*’s theme of ‘threat’, which will be discussed later in this section. This deployment of language as signification-metaphor is again observed with the two spirits’ language that further conflates ‘language’ with ‘land of origin’.

The spirits communicate with words like ‘*den*’ (*saya* – I), ‘*kator*’ (*kata* – say), and ‘*ehkau*’ (*kau* – you) that are unique to the state of Negeri Sembilan.<sup>319</sup> This is significant for the earliest permanent settlers in that state are supposedly Minangkabau<sup>320</sup> in origin (Peletz 1995, 80-81; 1996, 15-16; 2009, 63-64; Stivens 1996, 2-3, 11, 48). We learn towards the end of the episode that the spirits’ childhood home was on the same land where Wak Jali’s house is built. Their use of Negeri Sembilan dialect thus establishes; (1) the spirits’ origin and Wak Jali’s house are in Negeri Sembilan, (2) the Negeri Sembilan-Minangkabau heritage is what connects to Wak Jali’s Indonesianness. Both these points strengthen the characters’ shared heritage of supra-Malayness.

The relationship between Indonesians and Malays is however, tiered. As a metaphor, Wak Jali the elder is reflective of Indonesia as the older of the two nations.<sup>321</sup> From a historical perspective, there have also been “large numbers of people of Indonesian origin” in Malaysia since at least the 1960s (Milner 2011,

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<sup>317</sup> While the youth says ‘family’, the narrative seems to suggest that each of the three characters live alone.

<sup>318</sup> It is instructive that the opening of *Semerah Padi* features a map of the archipelago, and as the camera zooms in on the map, it suggests that the Malaysian Malay *kampung* in the film is in fact set in Indonesia (northern Sumatra to be precise). The film can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqVdH6XvZyA>

<sup>319</sup> The youths’ non-use of the Negeri Sembilan dialect will be addressed in a later discussion.

<sup>320</sup> West Sumatra in Indonesia.

<sup>321</sup> For one, the Republic of Indonesia was formed in 1945 which predates Malaysian independence by 12 years.



159). During the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation, this has even led many Malays to regard then-Indonesian leader Sukarno as a “more authentic Malay person” than the “UMNO prime minister” (Milner 2011, 159). Through the performances of Wak Jali as elder, teacher, and *bomoh*, Indonesians are thus constructed as what can only be deemed as being culturally more ‘authentic’. This point will become clearer as we discuss Wak Jali’s role as a *bomoh*, and as a teacher.



Figure 6.5

Still from *Salah Sangka*. The youths mimic Wak Jali move-for-move as he instructs them on casting a spell.

As a *bomoh*, Wak Jali commands communal deference similar to that of Mak Aji in *Ta Ti Tu* where possessing religious or spiritual knowledge confers upon the subject a certain degree of authority or communal prestige. His role as a teacher is demonstrated by his religious or shamanic<sup>322</sup> instructions to the youths in casting a *jampi* (spell),<sup>323</sup> and by his explanations of Indonesian words. His

<sup>322</sup> Wak Jali’s spell is facilitated through the recitation of Quranic verses accompanied by a specific set of performatives or rituals. Since the Islamic revivalism of the 1970s, Malay *bomoh* have had to evolve their craft to solely rely on the Quran. Even so, whether this is Islamic at all, is a question that has yet to be decisively answered by the Islamic community. Within the episode, Wak Jali is however, positioned as an individual with superior Islamic knowledge (*orang yang berilmu*).

<sup>323</sup> Wak Jali’s casting of a spell is meant to be humorous and is therefore comprised of outlandish physical movements in the slapstick comedy tradition. One possible interpretation to the

elevated status within the *kampung* is further strengthened later in the episode where he alone is responsible for exorcizing the youths who are possessed.<sup>324</sup> The reason for constructing Wak Jali's superior position is made clear in the very first scene when the youths are told to learn the spell by following Wak Jali – “*kena ikut; kalau tidak macam mana kamu nak praktik-kannya?*” ([you] have to follow; how else will you be able to put it into practice?). (see Figure 6.5).

This explicit directive on learning from him, is in fact alluded to at the very start of the episode where Wak Jali sharpens his *parang*<sup>325</sup> (see Figure 6.6). Like the preoccupation with Jeri's stars in *Gong Xi*, the significance of this sequence is revealed by the deliberately lengthy deviation from the actual narrative, for the *parang* and this act of sharpening are never referred to again. In this sequence, Wak Jali sharpens the *parang* on a wooden bench, saying, “*Udah tiga hari aku mengasah, tidak tajam-tajam. Kenapa pulak tidak tajam-tajam ya?*” (I have been sharpening for three days and yet it is not sharp. Why is it still not sharp?). He then exclaims, “*oh patutlah tak tajam. Diasahnya diatas kayu!*” (Oh, no wonder it's not sharp. I've been sharpening it on wood!). He moves to a rock and says, “*asah batu baru betul*” (sharpening on stone is [the] proper [method]), and sings “*Malaysia, Indonesia, dua sahabat sama*” (Malaysia, Indonesia, two similar friends) while he sharpens it on the rock.

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comedic nature of his spell casting is that he is a fraud. However, this is discounted since his defences actually do stop the spirits from entering, and he also exorcises the youths in a later scene, both of which proves his shamanic ability.

<sup>324</sup> An argument can be made that there are only three people in the *kampung* and thus only Wak Jali can exorcise the possessed youths. However, exorcisms can only (arguably) be performed successfully by “ritual specialists” (Peletz 1996, 158) (more is detailed in Peletz 1996, 158-161). Furthermore, Wak Jali's character could have been conceived as a Malay instead of an Indonesian. These two points support my assertion about Wak Jali's elevated position within the narrative.

<sup>325</sup> A type of machete commonly used in Malaysia and Indonesia.



Figure 6.6

Still from *Salah Sangka*. Wak Jali sharpening his *parang* while singing about Malaysian-Indonesian friendship.

I suggest that the interpretation of this sequence lies in its symbolic reference to the old Malay *peribahasa* (proverb), '*tajam pisau kerana diasah*' (a knife is sharp because it is sharpened).<sup>326</sup> The Malaysian *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (Institute of Language and Literature) defines the meaning of this proverb as "*Jadi pintar (berani) kerana selalu diajar (diasuh)*" ([To] become smart (brave) because [one is] continually taught – bracketed Malay words are from the original source) (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 2017). Moreover, his realization of the futility in sharpening on wood (in contrast to stone) places further emphasis on the importance of one's source(s) of learning.

Framed through the proverb, the explicit directive (in spell-casting) to follow, and learn from, the signifier of Wak Jali-Indonesia thus emphasizes Malay learning from Indonesians possessing similar *adat-ilmu* who are narratively proposed to be the 'right' source for the purpose. Wak Jali's last sentence "*asah batu baru betul*" (sharpening on stone is [the] proper [method]) is meant to foreground this fact, which is then immediately framed through its context – the master-signifier of the Indonesian-Malaysian song. This proposition is fully catalyzed within the signifying chain when Wak Jali says that they *must* follow

<sup>326</sup> This proverb also exists in Indonesia with a similar meaning – '*tajam pisau karena diasah*'.

(and learn) or “how else will you be able to put it into practice?”. It is interesting that this construction of an elderly Indonesian *bomoh* with similar prestige within the *kampung* structure, is not unique to *Salah Sangka*. This metaphorized character is, for example, reprised through the Indonesian *bomoh* character Wak Dol in another 2011 *Senario* production<sup>329</sup> called *Senario Misteri Bamboo* (Azean, Fauzita, & Anniesafinas, 2011).

We have thus far discussed how *Salah Sangka* constructs the fraternal association with Indonesia as part of a shared supra-Malay heritage. The scene mobilizes language as spatial metaphors, alludes to similarities between identities, and deploys a traditional Malay proverb, all of which is meant to strengthen its premise of shared supra-Malay cultural heritage. Furthermore, the inclusion of the proverb and Wak Jali’s performance of knife-sharpening seems to subtly suggest that, culturally at least, Malays should look to Indonesia for a more ‘authentic’ Malayness.<sup>330</sup> To reiterate, the narratives of each *Senario* episode works to quickly establish viewer relatability since it does not have recurring stories or characters. In this respect, *Salah Sangka*’s construction of this supra-Malay subject within just this first scene, must be contextualized as the narrative’s exposition for the entire episode. This quick-exposition approach was in fact identified as a recurring strategy in all the episodes previously discussed.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> To reiterate, *Misteri Bamboo* is the only *Senario* production that runs as a series.

<sup>330</sup> This brings up a question about which culture (Malay or Indonesian) should be the subject of learning in reality. A discussion of that topic would exceed the scope of this thesis which, to broadly reiterate, is to identify the meanings contained in *Senario*.

<sup>331</sup> This was first mentioned in Chapter 5.



Figure 6.7

Still from *Salah Sangka*. The two wandering spirits who stumble upon Wak Jali's house.

*Salah Sangka's* second theme – the conflation of Islam with this supra-Malay category as a monolithic identity – is encapsulated perfectly by the opening dialogic excerpt at the start of this chapter. Once Wak Jali establishes magical defences around the compound, all three men retire into the house. Two wandering spirits (see Figure 6.7) stumble upon the house and try to get past Wak Jali's magical defences.<sup>333</sup> They realize that Wak Jali's spell was only cast in the front portion of the compound and they eventually gain entry. While deciding how best to enter the house, one of the spirits says:

*Kita sekarang ni, buat cara baik. Kita bagi salam bagi dia. Den kata, ini orang Melayu punya rumah; orang Islam. Jadi jika kita bagi salam, dia mesti jawab. Kalau rumah bukan Islam, kalau dia tak jawab, anjing yang jawab; salam kita.*

<sup>333</sup> It is worth noting that at this narrative juncture, one of the spirits realizes it is "*Malam Jumaat*" (literally means Friday night. Islamically, *Malam Jumaat* starts on Thursday night after the call to prayer for *Maghrib*, the fourth prayer of the day) which he takes as license to "*berpesta*" (celebrate/be festive) by disturbing the people inside the house. There is no real Islamic basis for the popular Malay superstition of "*Malam Jumaat*" being rife with departed souls/spirits returning to exact revenge on the living, to work mischief, or returning to visit their families. This may in fact, be an old non-Islamic assimilation. Ustaz Abdullah Bukhari Abdul Rahim Al-Hafiz of the International Islamic University Malaysia explains there is no Islamic concept of a revenant or any departed soul being able to return to the living realm, asserted in 23:99-100 of the Quran (Abdullah 2015). He further addresses the "*Malam Jumaat*" belief in Abdullah (2015). Nonetheless, Thursday night is understood to be an Islamic 'holy' night, though for reasons entirely different from those suggested by *Salah Sangka*. This is an indicator of Malay Islam's syncretism as practised, and demonstrates how it is presented as common unquestioned knowledge by *Salah Sangka's* religio-cultural production.

We'll do it the proper (or good) way. We'll give our *salam*.<sup>334</sup> I say, this is a house owned by Malays; by Muslims. If we give our *salam*, he must answer. If this is a non-Muslim's house, if he doesn't reply, a dog will reply; will give us *salam*.

Several assertions are implicit within the dialogue; (1) Muslims *must* answer a *salam* for it is the 'proper' (or good) way of Malays and Muslims, meaning (2) only a non-Muslim will not answer a *salam*. (3) Only non-Muslims will have dogs as pets,<sup>335</sup> and (4) even if a non-Muslim does not return a *salam*, his dog will. Each of these assertions will be discussed in turn.

The assertion that (1) Muslims must answer a *salam* is grounded in the dialogue's signifying chain of 'Malays', 'Muslims', and 'proper (or good) way' (the *beradat-alim* rubric). This reinforces the presumption that only Muslims will greet other Muslims in a communally and religiously prescribed way, which is further equated as the 'proper' way. A similar 'our ways' was previously identified in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* where it was also deployed to differentiate Ah Fatt, the non-Muslim Chinese, from the Muslim-Malay characters.

The assertion that (2) only a non-Muslim will not answer a *salam* strengthens the first assertion that by not answering a *salam*, one situates oneself outside of the Muslim community. Furthermore, the normative myth that all Malays are Muslims is tangentially strengthened, for by saying "this is a house owned by Malays; by Muslims", the former is constructed as being synonymous with the latter. The Malay-Muslim-proper signifier is thus given an additional layer of connotative meaning that hinges on the interchangeability to the terms 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims', to allow for synonymy with the terms 'Malays' and 'non-Malays', respectively.

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<sup>334</sup> In Malaysia, this is commonly understood to be an Islamic greeting between Muslims. The greeting of "*As-Salaam-Alaikum*" (peace be unto you) would be replied with "*Wa-Alaikum-Salaam*" (and unto you, peace).

<sup>335</sup> The inference from the dialogue is that the dog is presumed to be inside the home, as opposed to work or guard dogs that are kept outside. The religious opinions on dogs will be discussed in a later section.



The conjunction of Malay *adat* and Islamic tenets is consequently codified and suggested as a communal religio-social script. Non-Muslims – and by (constructed) default, non-Malays – are consequently imagined as having ‘improper’ ways and behaviour. This was, for example, previously observed in our discussions on ethnic minorities in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*.<sup>336</sup> It is instructive that while the pivotal position of the Malays and Muslims was certainly alluded to in earlier episodes, the words ‘*kami*’ and ‘*kita*’<sup>337</sup> was always used instead of ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’. In *Salah Sangka*, however, the (supra)Malays, Muslims, and their conflated condition are explicitly ‘named’. This ‘naming’ is the true act of primacy for it carries an implicit communal dimension that determines the outgroup through the act of naming the ingroup.

There seems to be a reprisal of *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*’s antagonistic position when the metaphor of a dog is mobilized in “[i]f this is a non-Muslim’s house, if he doesn’t reply, a dog will reply; will give us *salam*.” To understand its significance, we need to understand how dogs feature within contemporary Malay Muslim consciousness. Malaysia’s official interpretation of orthodox Sunni Islam on the topic of dogs is that they are permitted as animals of utility and not as domesticated pets<sup>338</sup> (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia 2013, 5-6). Given this official religious position, the assertion that (3) only non-Muslims will have dogs as pets<sup>339</sup> is thus qualified by this simple, and visibly identifiable difference between a Muslim and a non-Muslim household.

The meanings of (4) even if a non-Muslim does not return a *salam*, his dog will, are comparatively more complex. Scattered throughout the Quran and *hadith* are several mentions of dogs.<sup>340</sup> While there are variations of Islamic interpretations to dogs, for our context, we will focus on Malaysia’s official religious position.

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<sup>336</sup> Discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>337</sup> ‘*Kami*’ means ‘we, but not you’ or ‘us, but not you’. ‘*Kita*’ means ‘all of us’, which includes ‘you’.

<sup>338</sup> For example, work, hunting, and guide dogs.

<sup>339</sup> For example, the controversy caused by a Muslim activist who organized the 2016 ‘Touch a Dog’ event that aimed to change negative Malaysian Muslim attitudes toward dogs. It was primarily the overwhelming public anger and denouncement that spurred the religious authorities to view the event negatively. Death threats were even made against the activist that forced him to go into hiding. See “Syed Azmi, the,” (2014).

<sup>340</sup> For example, Surah (Chapter) 5 verse 4 (5:4), 7:176, 18:18, and 31:15 in the Quran. The most commonly known example from the *hadith* is Bukhari 4:538.

The *mufti* for the state of Perlis,<sup>341</sup> Mohd. Asri Zainul Abidin, explains that the dog in Surah<sup>342</sup> 7 verse 176 (7:176)<sup>343</sup> is a simile for the unchangeable condition of the hypocrite, some of whom are the *ulama* who prioritize self-interest over Islam (Mohd. Asri 2013). He further asserts that it is an insult to be equated (*menyamakan*) to a dog, even if it refers to 'loyalty', for it is only blind loyalty (*kesetiaan yang membuta tuli*)(Mohd. Asri 2013). However, a very different account of dogs appears in 18:18.<sup>344</sup> Mohd. Asri (2013) explains that the dogs in this passage symbolize virtue, for they accompany those who are 'fighting for truth' (*para pejuang kebenaran*), where contextually to the Quran, 'fighting for truth' refers to the Islamic monotheists who were fighting against the polytheistic regime at the time.<sup>345</sup>

Both these accounts reveal a fluid meaning to the signifier 'dog'. Framing our reading of the scene to the two Surahs above, *Salah Sangka's* deployment of 'dog' is dual-edged. It connotes the negative; (a) the irredeemable hypocrite if he is a Muslim and did not return the *salam*, and (b) the non-believer. It also connotes the positive; a similitude to the virtuous dogs aligned to Islam. This is alluded through the expectation of *Salah Sangka's* dog's ability to, and obligation to, return the *salam*, if the 'hypocrite' or 'non-believer' did not.

Considered together, it would not be too much of a conceptual leap to suggest that the scene's fourth assertion – (4) even if a non-Muslim does not give *salam*,

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<sup>341</sup> The *mufti* of Perlis was referenced because he seems to be the only state *mufti* who is actively engaged with disseminating Islamic teachings through various social media platforms (twitter, Facebook, blogs, and Youtube videos, for example). He is thus the most likely to feature in public discourse since his 'opinions' on Islam are the most accessible. Popularly referred to as 'Dr. Maza', he has been *mufti* since 2006, and his blog on Islam was started in 2007.

<sup>342</sup> A Chapter in the Quran.

<sup>343</sup> In the Quran, 7:176 states "If it had been Our will, We should have elevated him with Our signs; but he inclined to the earth, and followed his own vain desires. His similitude is that of a dog: if you attack him, he lolls out his tongue, or if you leave him alone, he (still) lolls out his tongue. That is the similitude of those who reject Our signs; So relate the story; perchance they may reflect" (Yusof 2000, 170-171).

<sup>344</sup> 18:18 states "Thou wouldst have deemed them awake, whilst they were asleep, and We turned them on their right and on their left sides: their dog stretching forth his two fore-legs on the threshold: if thou hadst come up on to them, thou wouldst have certainly turned back from them in flight, and wouldst certainly have been filled with terror of them" (Yusof 2000, 293).

<sup>345</sup> It is interesting that this duality of meaning is similar to how non-Malays are imagined in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*; minority inclusion only occurs when framed through the colonizer-colonized discourse.



a dog will give *salam* – is meant to establish a ‘natural’ implicit hierarchy. Central to this notion are the irredeemable quality of the hypocrite and non-believer which is contrasted to the dog’s potential for choosing ‘virtue’ over ‘reprehensibility’ through its ‘actions’.<sup>346</sup> This is the scene’s fourth presumption; (4) even if a non-Muslim does not give *salams*, a dog will give *salams*. The mandatory<sup>347</sup> and voluntary<sup>348</sup> exposure to Islamic-Quranic education from an early age would mean that the Islamic simile of the dog and the implied hierarchy within the dialogue is presumably inferred and understood – at least on an abstract level – by TV3’s Muslim rural demographic.<sup>349</sup>

The third theme of *Salah Sangka* – defining what lies external to the supra-Malay identity as ‘threats’ – is alluded to, within a series of events in the scenes after the spirits gain entry into the house proper. For the discussion of this third facet, I employ the terms ‘foreign threats’, or ‘external threats’ contextually to encompass all elements that are communally deemed as not a part of supra-Malayness or the *Dunia Melayu*. These ‘threats’ are thus communally presumed to dilute the shared unifiers of language, religion, culture, religion, and tradition.

The spirits eventually give their *salams*, and the youths reply appropriately. While the youths can hear the spirits, the spirits are not visible to the humans. Thus, when the youths open the door, they find no one there even when the spirits are right in front of them. The youths go into the compound for a better look, at which point, the spirits walk into the house since they interpret the open door as an invitation to go in. When the youths enter the house again, they are now able to see the spirits. Both parties are shocked.<sup>350</sup> The spirits eventually run out of the house into the outer compound while both youths faint on the sofa. Wak Jali returns to the room and mistakes them for lazing around. He

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<sup>346</sup> Fundamentally, I view this as being predicated on the notion that the profession of faith is key to one’s redemption, where ‘profession’ is not mere lip-service, as illustrated by the ‘hypocritical *ulama*’. However, this is not signified in the scene, though it may be interesting to note.

<sup>347</sup> All Muslim school children are required by Malaysian law to take Islamic religious studies in school, where it is an official school subject.

<sup>348</sup> Most parents supplement school religious classes with Islamic-Quranic classes outside of school hours, as reflected in *Ta Ti Tu*.

<sup>349</sup> The rural demographic is discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>350</sup> The narrative logic is questionable since the spirits know the house is occupied by humans.

wakes Youth 1,<sup>351</sup> and in response, Youth 1 sits up, stares into the distance, and starts blabbering in Thai<sup>352</sup> and Chinese languages (see Figure 6.8). Wak Jali thus concludes that they have been possessed and attempts to exorcise Youth 1.<sup>354</sup>



Figure 6.8

Still from *Salah Sangka*. Possessed, Youth 1 is speaking in Thai and Chinese languages.

When Youth 1 falls back into a daze, Youth 2 sits up and starts singing the hit song ‘Nobody’ by the popular K-pop (Korean pop) girl group Wonder Girls, accompanied by effeminate hand gestures and shoulder movements from the dance routine in the official music video<sup>355</sup> (see Figure 6.9). Youth 2 starts singing from the chorus which is in English, but when it reaches the Korean verses, he sings in something that sounds similar to Thai<sup>356</sup> before transitioning fluidly to the Chinese Hainanese dialect. Wak Jali repeats the previous process of exorcism and Youth 2, presumably still in character as one of the Wonder Girls’

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<sup>351</sup> I refer to them as Youth 1 and Youth 2 only to facilitate our discussions.

<sup>352</sup> Given that I am not a Thai speaker, I checked with fellow PhD researcher Treepon Kirdnark, who is Thai.

<sup>354</sup> Again, the narrative logic is questionable since the spirits have already exited the house, unless it refers to some residual possession by virtue of the youths’ proximity to the spirits. I am, of course, operating under the assumption that the possession in the episode requires a spirit to enter and take control of a physical body.

<sup>355</sup> For Wonder Girls’ official Youtube channel and the music video of ‘Nobody’, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZBn1e9pr2Q>

<sup>356</sup> The feedback from Treepon (see footnote 352) is that Youth 2 is doing a very poor imitation of Thai. Unlike Youth 1’s imitation, the only Thai word that can be identified is ‘love’.

female singer, says effeminately, “*eh, buat apa tu?*” (eh, what are you doing?) (see Figure 6.10).



Figure 6.9

Stills from *Salah Sangka* and the Wonder Girls video. Youth 2 (left) mimics dance routines of the Wonder Girls in the ‘Nobody’ music video (right).

With the exorcism, Youth 2 eventually falls back dazed and Wak Jali subsequently asks the comatose youths their names (see Figure 6.11). Youth 1 says “Wonder”, and Youth 2 says “Wonder Girl”, to which Wak Jali asks, “*Nak tukar jadi siapa?*” (‘Who do you want to change into?’ or ‘Who do you want to become?’). Youth 2 replies, “Wonder Man”, before Wak Jali eventually returns them to their ‘normal’ selves.





Figure 6.10

Still from *Salah Sangka*. Youth 2 is still in character as the female Wonder Girl singer.



Figure 6.11

Still from *Salah Sangka*. Wak Jali performs the final exorcism on the youths.

While the preceding scenes establish and nuance the specificities of the ideological Indonesian-Malaysian supra-Malay fraternity, I suggest this scene metaphorically coalesces the ‘threats’ that legitimize the need for closer fraternal relations. Defined through Youth 1 as Thai and Chinese, and through

Youth 2 as Korean, Thai, Chinese, and effeminacy, these ‘threats’ are proposed as foreign, external, and transgressive to the shared autochthonous tradition, culture, and religion of the *Dunia Melayu*. Youth 1’s and Youth 2’s performances will each be discussed in turn.

Youth 1’s Thai dialogue is part of the lyrics of a famous 1990 Thai pop-song called *คู่กัด* (Adversaries)<sup>357</sup> by Bird Thongchai.<sup>358</sup> Speaking the lyrics, Youth 1 says (in Thai), “whenever tooth meets tongue, it’s a big problem. It’s better to keep oil and fire separate. Whenever a dog and cat meet each other, they fight every time”.<sup>359</sup> This is promptly followed by the Mandarin word ‘*bàozhà*’ (explode), before Wak Jali interjects by saying “*udah!*” (enough!). There are three points that must be established for us to understand Youth 1’s performance; (1) the Malaysian socio-political climate in 2011, (2) how the song alludes to the conflicts in southern Thailand, and (3) how it is relevant to the Malays.

We had previously noted the 2009 *Alkitab* contentions<sup>360</sup> (Lopez 2015, 327) that rapidly became a national focal point for religious contestations. When the High Court decided in favour of the Church in 2010, some interpreted it as a failure to safeguard the position of Islam within the country (Neo 2014, 754). Muslim-Christian relations consequently deteriorated to a point where there were cases of arson attacks on churches in 2010 (“Malaysia men guilty,” 2010). In March 2011, the Malaysian Home Ministry finally released 35,000 bibles that had been impounded (“Malaysia to release,” 2011) – a decision that was again, not viewed kindly by segments of the Malay community. It should be noted that, at the time, the Chinese were the largest non-*bumiputera*<sup>361</sup> Christian ethnic-group in Malaysia (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2011, 82).<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> The official music video can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0CG2PYo1cA>

<sup>358</sup> Thanks are due to Treepon Kirdnark for helping me to identify the origins of these lyrics

<sup>359</sup> The lyrics in English can be found at: <http://deungdutjai.com/2014/05/06/googutbird/>

<sup>360</sup> Malay-language versions of the Bible were seized on the grounds that they would be used to proselytize to Muslims or confuse them. This was mentioned in Chapter 2.

<sup>361</sup> A large number of East Malaysians of *Orang Asli* ancestry (hence *bumiputera*) are Christians.

<sup>362</sup> The 2010 findings indicate that Christianity is the faith of 1,549,193 non-Malay *bumiputera*, 706,479 Chinese, 114,281 Indians, 22,870 ‘Others’, and 224,336 non-Malaysian citizens.

In April 2011, a month after the release of the bibles, leading Malay daily *Utusan Melayu* published an article titled ‘Ayuh! Gerakkan segera 1Melayu, 1Bumi’ (Quick! Promptly mobilize 1Malay 1Bumi<sup>363</sup>) (Zaini 2011). The article proposed evidence of Chinese solidarity and superior political-economic positions, both of which were supposedly detrimental to the Malays. It referenced another article published a year before (at the height of the Christian-Muslim contentions) which told readers to look at the Chinese in Singapore and the subordinated positions of Singaporean Malays (Zaini 2010).<sup>364</sup> All these, the author asserts in the 2011 article, are concerns that should unite the Malays who are “*satu bangsa yang cukup selesa, kompleksen, alpa dan tidak peduli*” (a race that is too comfortable, complacent, lazy, and unconcerned).<sup>365</sup> The article’s rallying call started with its very first sentence – “*ORANG Cina telah bersatu*” (The Chinese have united). Accounting for production and censorship processes,<sup>366</sup> *Salah Sangka* (first airdate on 3 May 2011) would have been scripted in March-April 2011. This coincides with the time of the decision to release the bibles, and with *Utusan Melayu*’s article. The relevance of this first point will become clearer as the discussion progresses.

The lyrics of Youth 1’s Thai pop-song describe a couple’s relationship that is plagued with fights. I suggest that Youth 1 uses this song to allude to the southern Thais who are self-defined Muslim Malay from the old Malay Muslim sultanate of Patani (Bajoria & Zissis, 2008). Their primary contention is that of identity subordination by a dominant Buddhist-Thai identity. One primary reason for the continued conflicts in the south are these provinces’ demands for autonomy which the Bangkok government has consistently refused (McCargo 2011, 844).<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> *1Melayu* and *1Bumi* are meant to parody the official 1Malaysia nation-building initiative that aimed to unite Malaysians regardless of race or religion. However, instead of all Malaysians, both terms propose that only the Malays and the *bumiputera* should be united instead.

<sup>364</sup> The 2010 article was titled, “*Orang Cina Malaysia, Apa Lagi Yang Anda Mahu?*” (Malaysian Chinese, What More Do You Want?).

<sup>365</sup> The character of the Malays outlined by the article seems similar to the description in UMNO’s book *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution) that was published in 1971. In *Revolusi Mental*, the Malays were described as backward, lackadaisical, oppressed, and exploited (by other races). This was discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>366</sup> This was discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>367</sup> For a detailed study, see Abuza (2011) and McCargo (2011).

The allusion seems clear from ‘whenever a dog and cat meet each other, they fight every time’, which then promptly segues to the Mandarin ‘explode’. That it refers to Thailand is clear from the Thai pop-song spoken in Thai by Youth 1, and specifically the parts of the lyrics chosen for the dialogue.<sup>368</sup> Youth 1’s fluid segue to the Chinese ‘explode’ as the master-signifier, frames it through the Patani Malay insurgents’ primary form of attack – Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and grenades – almost to the exclusion of other weapons (Abuza 2011, 8-11). In this respect, Youth 1 saying, ‘it’s better to keep oil and fire separate’ thus seems to aptly summarize *Senario*’s position on this issue.

It should be noted that Patani Malay Muslims – also called *Nayu* (McCargo 2011, 836) – have lived in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, since at least the 1970s (Bunmak 2010, 200). Furthermore, many Malay and *Nayu* “families in both countries have relatives across the border” with decades of cross-border movement (*Nayu* to Malaysia, Malays to South Thailand) (Funston 2010, 236). Led by PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), the state government of Kelantan in particular, has been an open supporter of the *Nayu*, and has had close Islamic ties to the southern Thai region (Funston 2010, 236). Moreover, since the introduction of the Joint Development Strategy<sup>369</sup> in July 2003, the southern Thai provinces and the northern states of Kedah, Perlis, and Kelantan have had an increase in cross-border interaction (Funston 2010, 241). These would all suggest that the plight of the *Nayu* and the southern Thai conflicts are not unknown to wider Malay society. In fact, most Malays feel “considerable residual sympathy for Patani Malays, viewing them as a kindred and repressed minority” (McCargo 2008, xiii).

Framed through these realities – and especially through the episode’s explicit articulation of supra-Malay unity – the inclusion of the Chinese ‘explode’ is thus a

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<sup>368</sup> It would be disingenuous to propose that this Thai song was chosen only because no other song in any other language (especially Malay) addresses a similar troubled relationship.

<sup>369</sup> This was an initiative aimed at “a degree of integration” for the states involved in both countries, and “envisaged cooperation across a wide range of economic and social issues in the border region” – among which are the development of education, tourism, and the promotion of “people-to-people relations” (Funston 2010, 241, 254).

calculated decision that is meant to transpose the subordination of Patani Malays to the tensions between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia. This echoes the persistent warnings by Mahathir that without UMNO, Malays will eventually be subjugated and emancipated under the yoke of the Chinese.<sup>370</sup>

Fundamentally, this argument is similar to Prime Minister Najib's assertion that Malays will be destitute or 'bastards' without UMNO's protection. This polemic is also found in the 2010 and 2011 *Utusan Melayu* articles that called for Malay solidarity (*1Melayu* or *1Bumi*) against a perceived 'Chinese threat'. While it is an inversion of roles, the fundamental warning remains; the fragmentation of supra-Malay fraternal relations will lead to the subjugation of Malays as reflected in the plight of the Patani Malays. What is perhaps the catalyst for these sentiments on *Senario* are the Christian-Muslim tensions at the time, the outcome of which was regarded by certain Malay socio-political actors as evidence of encroachment into the status and sanctity of Malays and Islam within the nation. This sentiment is perfectly encapsulated with *Utusan Melayu*'s 2010 article title asking the Chinese '*Apa Lagi Yang Anda Mahu?*' (What More Do You Want?), and the title of its own rejoinder in 2011, '*Ayuh! Gerakkan segera 1Melayu, 1Bumi*' (Quick! Promptly mobilize 1Malay 1Bumi).

Youth 2's performance is subtly different in its othering where the song by Wonder Girls functions to intertextually reference the K-pop craze<sup>372</sup> within the nation. The choice of song is not incidental for it was highly popular in Malaysia (Seto 2010b) and is thus readily identifiable when reproduced on-screen. Its deployment by Youth 2 is however, meant to connote the wider discourse of K-pop's unsuitability to Malay(sian) culture.<sup>374</sup> Central to this connotation of 'unsuitability' is Youth 2's utterance of the old Hainanese phrase "*nang bo ti nang, kui bo ti kui*" (human not like a human, ghost not like a ghost) which is qualified by his random singing of the K-pop song while possessed, and acting beyond the acceptable rubric of communal *adat* and Islam.

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<sup>370</sup> Discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>372</sup> See Haryati (2010, 258-259, 277-279), Seto (2010a) for examples of reception of Korean popular culture in Malaysia circa 2010-2011. See Müller (2015, 335-337) for examples of how K-pop has been popularly adopted in the years 2012-2013.

<sup>374</sup> For examples of criticisms of the K-pop phenomenon in Malaysia, see "After BigBang show," (2015) and "JAWI to seek," (2015).



This is yet another invocation of a Chinese phrase instead of an Indian or Malay phrase. Connotatively, this extends the meta-narrative of unsuitability to the signifier 'Chinese'. This is consistent with the rhetorical attribution of liberal and Western influences, which contemporary Korean popular culture is perceived to aesthetically adopt, to the Chinese urban category which was previously discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.<sup>375</sup> The signifier of 'unsuitability' is further associated with the suggestion of effeminacy signified by Youth 2's adoption of a discernibly feminine persona. The notion of Youth 2's effeminacy is further strengthened by his request to turn from 'Wonder Girl' to 'Wonder Man' just before the exorcism is complete.

Considered syntagmatically, the fluid movement from the themes of 'K-pop' to 'unsuitability' to 'effeminacy', crystalizes the association between all three. With Youth 2's express intention to change from 'Wonder Girl' to 'Wonder Man', this meta-narrative association becomes dialogically explicit for the viewers. Where the sign 'Wonder Girl' signified 'K-pop' before, it is now mobilized to connote effeminacy. Both concepts of unsuitability – K-pop and effeminacy – are therefore thematically sutured by this fluid segue of the former's connotation to an entirely different signified. In this manner, the exclusionary 'not our way' or 'proper way' from an earlier scene is thus ideologically extended to the Wonder Girl-K-pop and Wonder Girl-effeminate signifiers.

One does wonder why these two themes were associated with such seamless dialogical fluidity, especially when they are quite thematically distinct. Given that the government prosecution of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for sodomy<sup>376</sup> met a major obstacle in 2011,<sup>377</sup> perhaps this was part of the contest of perception in canvassing popular support against Anwar and his

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<sup>375</sup> The persistence of this rhetoric in the public sphere is exemplified by recent reports such as "In Friday sermon," (2015), "Infidels backed by," (2015), and "NGO coalition alleges," (2015).

<sup>376</sup> He was first charged with sodomy in 1998 and found guilty, only to be released in 2004. See "A crisis unfolds," (1999), and Marzuki (2008, 35-40) for this initial charge. See "Anwar Ibrahim sodomy," (2010) for the new sodomy charge. This was briefly discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 (in relation to Chinese visual representations in *Senario*).

<sup>377</sup> See "Malaysian judge rules," (2011).

political associates.<sup>378</sup> With the widespread speculation that these sodomy charges are politically motivated under the direction of UMNO and the Prime Ministers<sup>379</sup> themselves (for example, see Marzuki, 2008, 35-41), this may not be too great a presumption. It also aligns with the ‘anti-gay camp’ issue that arose in the same year, where the conservative Malaysian state of Kelantan ‘identified’ 66 schoolboys for an “anti-gay camp”, allegedly for displaying ‘feminine mannerisms’ (Buncombe 2011; “‘Effeminate’ boys in,” 2011; “Malaysia’s anti-gay,” 2011). It was felt that if uncurbed, the 13 to 17 year-old students “could end up gay or transsexual” (“‘Effeminate’ boys in,” 2011). Even if this was not an apparent consequence of Anwar’s trial, it is indicative of concerns in that particular year regarding non-normative gender and sexual identities/behaviours in both socio-national discourse as well as popular Malaysian consciousness. This is a strong explanation for *Salah Sangka*’s<sup>381</sup> invocation of gender deviance in its construction of the ‘other’.

Taken collectively, the readings on both Patani Malays and K-pop reveal a communal anxiety of Malay cultural and religious erosion. This is in fact, explicit in the association between Youth 1’s performance and Christian-Muslim contentions at the time. Curiously, Youth 1’s and Youth 2’s dialogues can be further explained by the Malay cultural startle reflex called *latah*. *Latah* is described by Michael Peletz, among others,<sup>382</sup> as a behavioural complex involving “pathomimetic behaviour” (1996, 177). As a cultural elaboration of the startle reflex, *latah* is widespread in the Malay-Indonesian world (Peletz 1996, 177). The last parallel to *latah* is interesting, for some Malay rural communities hold the belief that it is one phenomenon caused by spirit possessions (Peletz 1996, 186), which is the condition of both youths in the scene. The veracity of the association notwithstanding, Peletz<sup>383</sup> suggests that *latah* serves a social

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<sup>378</sup> See AFP (2015) and “Court upholds five-year,” (2015).

<sup>379</sup> Anwar’s numerous trials and charges span the Prime Ministerships of Mahathir Mohammad, Abdullah Badawi, and the incumbent (as at June 2017), Najib Razak.

<sup>381</sup> I am not suggesting it has ever left the discursive terrain. Rather, like most discourses, the popularity or ‘top-of-mind’ nature to certain topics are cyclical and related to current affairs.

<sup>382</sup> Michael Kenny (1990), and Robert Winzeler (1984) for instance, have provided more critical studies on the phenomenon.

<sup>383</sup> Peletz’s anthropological observations were based on a *kampung* in Negeri Sembilan, the same state in the episode’s narrative.

function where it allows for women to “articulate and dramatize” their concerns, which often include “critiques of the social order” (Peletz 1996, 177).<sup>384</sup>

In many respects, the presumed intention behind the proposed meanings of this scene parallel Peletz’s suggestion that *latah* is a means to ‘articulate and dramatize concerns’, often as ‘critiques of the social order’. In this context, ‘social order’ needs to be understood alongside perceived wider Malay apathy towards the erosion of communal cultural, religious, and thus, ‘racial’ identity, all of which was in fact, clearly identified in the 2011 *Utusan Melayu* article, ‘*Ayuh! Gerakkan segera 1Melayu, 1Bumi*’ (Quick! Promptly mobilize 1Malay 1Bumi) (Zaini 2011). It is evident the scene proposes that current practices of Malayness in the face of global challenges such as the K-pop influence, and local challenges exemplified by Chinese and/or Christian agency, are considered detrimental to Malay and Muslims values. That the articulation of these concerns takes the form of *latah* engendered through spiritual possessions – both linked in traditional Malay consciousness – is itself a nod towards the *Dunia Melayu* that the first scene set out to establish.

The constant in the entire scene is Wak Jali, who can only be contextually construed as a metonym for Islam. This is signified symbolically through his utterance of the Islamic verse “*B-ismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi*” (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful)<sup>385</sup> that precedes both instances of exorcism. The significance to this performative establishes Wak Jali’s authority and ability to expel from the Malay Muslim subject that which is foreign, as a power conferred by God; tangentially establishing the correlative signified of ‘sanctioned by God’. Since it is mediated through Islam, and normalcy is recovered through Islamic piety (metonymically Wak Jali), it proposes that redemption can only be effected by a return to the Islamic faith, which ironically is the motivation behind the 2011 anti-gay camp. Furthermore, as seen in the previous chapter with Basiron in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, this conforms with a recovery of the Malay subject through a return to the conflated condition of

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<sup>384</sup> The gendered dimension of *latah* and thus possessions, is discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>385</sup> It is not uncommon for Muslims to start any endeavour with this statement.

Malay and Muslim signifying traditional Malay values – and synonymously, Muslim values.

In either case, what is foreign and needs to be expelled, is presented as a spiritual ‘possession’ because it imbibes the Malay subject to act outside of the prescribed norms of the *Dunia Melayu*. The possessions allow for a demonstration of the features that are external to supra-Malay, much like the demonstrative effect in the example of the Patani Malay. This certainly aligns with the notion of possession-*latah* as an outlet for the articulation and dramatization of social concerns in a manner and form that would otherwise be inappropriate in Malay *adat* (Peletz 1996, 177). By referencing the ideological constructions of the opening scene, Indonesian-Malaysian-Patani solidarity is thus proposed as a defence against these ‘possessions’. The previous act of ‘our way’, ‘proper way’ being the Malay Muslim way, expresses the narrow boundaries that are determined through this metonymic conflation of ‘(supra)Malay’<sup>387</sup> and ‘Muslim’. Through their articulation by an authority figure like Wak Jali, these boundaries are thus signified as an act sanctioned by God, for it is through the Islamic verse that the ‘foreign’ is expelled.

By extending this trajectory, the house is therefore a spatial-symbol of the *Dunia Melayu* writ-large on-screen as a closed-off Malay abode (articulated explicitly by Wak Jali’s magical fencing of his compound through the Islamic ‘spell’, however flawed its implementation).<sup>388</sup> The expulsion of what is presented as foreign from the house, symbolically the Malay subject and the wider *Dunia Melayu*, signifies a rejection of all that does not meet the shared unified criteria, to be external to the Malay imaginary of supra-Malayness.

In the scene following Wak Jali’s exorcism of the youths, they are queried by Wak Jali about their spiritual possessions and the reason for the open front door. After being told that the events that unfolded were preceded by the giving of a *salam*, Wak Jali explains, “*Kalau hantu yang beri salam, itu tandanya, hantu itu*

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<sup>387</sup> Contextually, *Salah Sangka* constructs all Malays as supra-Malays, so the signifiers ‘Malay’ and ‘supra-Malay’ are ideologically sutured.

<sup>388</sup> Suggesting again, the fallibility of mortals, regardless of the breadth of religious knowledge.

*berilmu*” (If a ghost gives a *salam*, it is the mark of a ghost who has knowledge). Key to understanding this statement is the cultural significance of *ilmu*. The exact translation for ‘*ilmu*’ is not ‘knowledge’ – ‘*pengetahuan*’ is ‘knowledge’. Instead, it means, in a non-literal sense, ‘art’ or ‘science’ or ‘understanding’. The word has a broad range of cultural meanings, some of which Peletz interprets as ‘esoteric or mystical knowledge’ (1996, 25, 311) and ‘spiritual potency’ (1996, 104-105). More importantly, one’s possession of *ilmu* is culturally regarded as a virtue, or “‘meta-virtue’ in the system of moral evaluation as a whole” (Peletz 1996, 158). With respect to its cultural indication of ‘virtue’ and ‘knowledge’, possessing *ilmu* is thus broadly regarded as a mark of socio-cultural prestige.

Wak Jali’s explanation therefore explicitly legitimizes the otherworldly or ‘foreign’ through the mediation of virtuous *ilmu* – for what were ‘mistakenly’<sup>389</sup> regarded as ‘foreign’ or otherworldly, have now demonstrated their Malay acculturation. The notion of *latah* is thus made more relevant, for precisely because the spirits have *ilmu* and are part of the *Dunia Melayu*, they adopted behaviours (possessions) to signify potential threats to the Malays in order to foreground their critiques against the present social order. It is through the spirits’ demonstration of understanding of ‘proper way/our ways’ (the *beradat-alim* ideal) that hostility towards their presence is diminished. The sudden acknowledgement of kindred familiarity is articulated in the episode’s last scene where the spirits are explicitly invited into the house. Now joined by their father who is also a spirit, all three spirits are invited into the home of Wak Jali, where it is explained that the two younger spirits were in search of their baby pacifiers, or dummies, that were buried in the vicinity (see Figure 6.12).

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<sup>389</sup> Presumably, the reason for the episode’s title.



Figure 6.12

Still from *Salah Sangka*. The father (also a spirit) to the two wandering spirits, explains their presence at Wak Jali's home. It is interesting that like the gendered nature of possessions, even while the spirits are male, they feature typical feminine aesthetic motifs like long hair, long nails, and flowers. This can be explained in part by popular aesthetics of mythological Malay entities such as the *pontianak* (female vampiric ghost).

Symbolically, this reprises the house's metaphor as *Dunia Melayu*. The invitation into the interior, is achieved only by conforming to the criteria of religion and ethnicity, both of which are shared elements as acknowledged by the spirits at their initial discussion for entry. The spirits are therefore included within the Malay imaginary of supra-Malay even in death, for the belief in an Islamic afterlife, extends the intransigence of supra-Malay dictates beyond the worldly. Within this context, I suggest that the baby pacifiers are symbols of temporality. With both of the 'son-spirits' being grown men, their baby pacifiers on Wak Jali's land imbues the location with a Malay historical past. This allusion to the spirits' 'historical past' on Malay land, can be transposed contextually through the master-signifier's theme of autochthony. This in turn, strengthens the historical Malay-Indonesian heritage, specifically when considered through the signified Negeri-Malay-Minangkabau ancestry of the spirits.<sup>390</sup>

<sup>390</sup> More domestically, this also connotes the notion of ancestral lands or *tanah Melayu* (Malay land). These were effected through the enactments of the British colonial administration with the purpose, among others, of protecting Malay land. These Malay land restrictions have been upheld till the present. For a more critical discussion, see Shamsul & Athi (2015). For an example

If we view these narrative motifs as temporal metaphors for Malay personhood, the baby pacifiers signify the past, while Wak Jali and the youths are metaphors for the present lived-experience. The otherworldly condition of the spirits' existence – that of death – symbolizes human mortality, that of an impending future. In all three significations, they are bound by the rubric of supra-Malay unifiers – 'our way' of religiosity and Malayness – which broadly establishes a kinship that is actualized on-screen through their solidarity against external threats to this fraternity. Within this temporal signification chain, the future condition of death can therefore be read metaphorically as the supra-Malay ideal's prophetic death unless a recovery of the *Dunia Melayu* is effected – signified through a recovery of the symbolic pacifiers that have long settled in Wak Jali's compound. This would encapsulate both Anthony Milner's assertion that the Malays are anxious over their disappearance from the world, and the manifestation of that fear in the need to 'preserve' this perceived Malayness (Milner 2011, 16, 186, 217, 220, 227, 237-238). This theme of anxiety was also observed in my earlier readings on Patani Malays and K-pop.

Further, it is ironic that while Islamic 'orthodoxy' does not believe in the return of departed souls, *Salah Sangka's* central narrative vehicle is premised on the idea of returning souls who are tied to a worldly, physical object that is in fact, Islamically deviant (see Abdullah 2015 for an Islamic explanation of this impossibility). Yet the souls are conceptualized as pious Muslims with an Islamic bond to the living characters. Like Wak Jali's practice of Malay magic, this arguable 'deviancy' appears to be the normative to Malay Islam as understood by the 'traditional' community, for the idea of a returning soul and its manifest tie to a physical material object that motivates its return, is a belief fostered through non-Abrahamic religions or beliefs. This can therefore be viewed as yet another indication of the normalization of syncretism within Malay Islam.

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of how perceived encroachment on these lands has elicited violent reprisals, see Lopez (2015, 328).

As part of a discursive formation, these themes in *Salah Sangka* are shaped and governed by the same narratives, polemics, and rhetoric that are propagated by the state. This reproduces religious orthodoxy and dogma, for the state, as we have seen, also controls much of the nation's official religious infrastructure through legislature. It is almost impossible to examine Malay identity and culture without discussing its synonymy with Islam. As such, *Salah Sangka* clearly articulates the central themes that were discussed in Chapter 2 – Malay traditions, culture, Islam, supra-ethnicity, autochthony and irredentism, as well as exclusionary ideals. It must be said that there is neither a real discursive shift, nor a reorientation of the historical discourse in this narrative, since as we have observed in Chapter 2 and the previous chapter, these form the discursive terrain already in existence within Malay(sian) popular consciousness.

### *Conclusion*

It is evident from this chapter's discussions that Islam is the central theme of *Ta Ti Tu*. The explicit quality of its instructional Islamic narrative is however, unique within the whole run of *Senario*. It is comparatively less clear how *Salah Sangka* encapsulated Islamic themes. At first sight, *Salah Sangka's* themes are overtly about the sanctity of Malayness and its intertwined irredentist ancestry with Indonesia and other diasporic Malays. However, our discussions demonstrate that *Salah Sangka's* Islamic themes are not merely present but they are intricately assimilated within its articulation of ancestry and irredentism.

In almost every scene of the episode, the narrative is inflected with an Islamic tenor, even if it is often deeply embedded within or articulated through performatives of irredentist aspirations. Yet, it is only with a fore-knowledge of Islamic lore (*hadith* and Quranic knowledge) – precisely the function of early Quranic and Islamic education proposed by *Ta Ti Tu* – that any real sense can be made of *Salah Sangka's* subtext. In these respects, *Salah Sangka's* Islamic accents were sublimated into the performances of (supra)Malayness. That Islam is 'invisible' is largely attributed to the degree of its naturalization as part of the discourse on Malay identity within the region.



It is instructive that the 14 years in between the first airdates of *Ta Ti Tu* and *Salah Sangka* demonstrate such a vast difference in Islamic expression. It must be reiterated that *Ta Ti Tu* was first aired to a viewership that was arguably still grappling with a national Islamization policy, while *Salah Sangka* was first aired to a demographic that was well on its way to identifying more as Muslims than as Malays.<sup>391</sup> Institutional Islam's intricate integration into social and domestic fields are thus reproduced within *Salah Sangka* to demonstrate how social codes are now heavily inflected with Islamic mores. That these Islamic inflections are performed conversationally as part of general speech, indicates the extent of naturalization to public understandings of Islamic practice and conformance. In this respect, while *Ta Ti Tu* seems most overt in its didactic intentions, *Salah Sangka* unapologetically presumes an Islamic viewership who are already Islamically literate.

On a syntagmatic level, both *Ta Ti Tu* and *Salah Sangka* are framed through religio-ethnic themes that similarly constitute the unifiers of the *Dunia Melayu*. The similarity is not coincidental. The primary assertion of fraternal bond between the presently disparate communities comprising this conceptualized Malay world are distilled into the sign 'our ways', that becomes the symbolic definer for Malay identity. This is juxtaposed against the almost adversarial position to Chinese agency that is revived in *Salah Sangka*. The inclusion of the Chinese through words and phrases, functions to implicate them in the episode's process of othering. Simultaneously, the Chinese 'other' is meta-narratively presented as a threat to supra-Malay irredentism. This apparently single-minded position towards the Chinese seems to strengthen Syed Husin Ali's observation that UMNO's stance had always been more anti-Chinese (and Indian) than pro-Malay (Ahmad & Kuttan, 2016). In this respect, *Salah Sangka* at least, demonstrates the slippage between UMNO and *Senario*. This position is however absent from *Ta Ti Tu*, which seems more concerned with the creation of an exclusionary ethno-religious space through its explicit focus on Islamic instructions. Of note is the absence of any reference to the Indian community

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<sup>391</sup> Take for example, the Merdeka Center report that recorded a shift towards a more Muslim rather than Malay identity. This was discussed in Chapter 2.

from both *Salah Sangka* and *Ta Ti Tu*. The focus on a potential erosion of state-perceived Malay identity will, in the proceeding chapter, pivot to the issues of gender dynamics where we will discuss the dominant conceptions of Malay gender relationships that are reproduced in *Senario*.

## CHAPTER 7

### A *Senario* of Gender Constructions

*Hey! Kau melawan lelaki ya? ... Kau, kalau nak jalan dengan aku, mata kau tu, jangan tengok jantan-jantan lain!*

*Hey! You are challenging a man, ya? ... If you want to walk with me, your eyes, [need to] stop looking at other males!*

*–Bina Semangat (Fauzita, & Anniesafinas, 2007)*

This chapter discusses three facets to dominant conceptions of Malay gender relationships that are reproduced in *Senario*: (1) Traditionally interpreted modes of gender and their alternative constructions, (2) the affirmation of these traditional gender modes as an assertion of masculine power, and (3) the constancy of normative traditional gender relations even with the inversion of male-female binary roles. Of specific concern are the perceived wider religio-cultural beliefs and practices that undergird traditional gender relations. Some of the questions on gender that emerged from the analysis in the previous two chapters were left largely unaddressed. I have previously noted several of these questions such as Mak Bedah's role in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* and a tendency towards representing 'foreignness' only by female characters. Other issues such as the tendency for male actors to play female roles, and the recurring trope of women characters performing a specific domestic role, were previously undiscussed. Questions such as these will be addressed in this chapter.

Given our focus on *dominant* understandings of gender-based relationships, this chapter's discussions will largely reference only the conflated form of two sets of gender ideologies – Malay and Islamic. This alludes to a popular dominant assertion that they are largely similar and thus mutually reaffirming. However, I am aware that some scholars (for example, Brenner 1995; Peletz 1995; 1996; Wazir 1992) have convincingly argued that the cultural dynamics to gender relationships may historically have placed less emphasis on male dominance, and thus not entirely as affirming of Islamic gender ideology. By discussing these two mutually (presently) complementary ideologies as a unitary Malay identity,

I am therefore alluding to the more contemporary, popular conflation of both ideologies as practiced. This in turn, alludes to the conflation of Malay and Islamic identity in general. One overarching statement which broadly directs our discussions is Suzanne Brenner's observation that both these gender ideologies,<sup>392</sup>

... present an unproblematic image of men as potent, self-controlled, and in possession of the higher mental and spiritual faculties that allow them to maintain order in their own lives and in the social and supernatural world. Women, on the other hand, are depicted as spiritually impotent, less rational than men, and lacking in self-control. Such categorical statements about the nature of the sexes are well in keeping with an ideological system that places men at the center of the social, moral, and symbolic order.

–Brenner (1995, 31)

I suggest that Malay gender ideology as observed on *Senario* proposes a similar set of dynamics to gender relationships. The gender figurations described by the statement above broadly manifest themselves in various forms throughout the episodes. The statement's underlying assertions are not dissimilar from the criticisms that were elicited by female Malay viewers of 'Asian soap-operas' who were deemed susceptible to an erosion of moral, cultural, and Islamic values<sup>393</sup> (Mohd Azlanshah, 2013). It also calls to mind the blame directed at Malay factory girls (*Minah Karan*) who attained new socio-economic status during the nation's period of industrialization, and the *bohsia* (girls with moral laxity) phenomenon in subsequent decades.<sup>394</sup> Similar attitudes of male UMNO members and religious authorities were also previously reflected in Chapter 2, with respect to the subordinated role of *Wanita* UMNO that appears to serve only male sectional interests.

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<sup>392</sup> Brenner's reference to Javanese culture (and Islamic) is relevant given the *Dunia Melayu* ideal, the large presence of Indonesians/Javanese in Malaysia (as well as their wide assimilation into the Malaysian *bumiputera* category particularly in the 1970s-1980s), all of which are manifested concretely in the Malays of Negeri Sembilan, among others.

<sup>393</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>394</sup> To reiterate, the term *Minah Karan* (Minah, the Electronic Lady), as these factory girls came to be known, was synonymous with "wantonness and promiscuity" (Wazir 1992, 201). Their male counterparts were called *Ahmad Spaner* (Ahmad, with the spanner) (Wazir 1992, 201). The *bohsia* girls emerged much later in the 1990s, and involved "heterosexual teenage girls and young women" (Ng, Maznah, & Tan 2006, 141; Peletz 2009, 198). These were discussed in Chapter 2.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section will establish how *Senario* reproduces each of the roles in the traditional gender binary, and what it envisions and presents as constructions that contravene or embody these gender differentials. The second section further explores the roles identified in order to understand how they reflect quotidian social-religious articulations of male power. The latter part of the second section pivots from these traditional depictions to identify *Senario*'s gender role inversions though noting that they still signify similar binary conceptions of gender, albeit with inverted dynamics. Primarily informing these discussions are the works of Suzanne Brenner (1995), Aihwa Ong (1995), Michael Peletz (1995, 1996), Maila Stivens (1996), and Wazir Jahan Karim (1992). Several episodes from the preceding two chapters will be revisited, while two previously unreferenced episodes will be introduced to the discussions: *Bina Semangat* (Fauzita, & Anniesafinas, 2007), and *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* (Zulkeflee, & Anniesafinas, 2011).

It bears pointing out from the outset that this chapter is not aimed at redefining the Malay-Muslim gender paradigm. Rather, it is to identify the reproduction of existing ideologies within *Senario* which, as will be evident, is largely patriarchal. It should further be made clear that this chapter's discussions on representations of gender are not meant to suggest they are unique to Malaysia or the Malays.<sup>395</sup>

### *Modes of Gender*

*Senario*'s representation of gender differentiation is often understated, a subtlety that perhaps reflects the extent to which these same gender functions are unquestionably accepted in lived-reality. Among the episodes previously discussed, one of the earliest to feature this inconspicuous reproduction of gender roles is *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. In this episode, the character Mak Bedah<sup>396</sup> is constructed as a 'domestic woman' whose one observable narrative function is as a homemaker. In the episode, just before the men begin their

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<sup>395</sup> In European and American class-based societies for example, women have been, and still are, associated with domesticity, among others (Blackwood 1995, 125).

<sup>396</sup> Wife of the Independence Leader Pak Ark who is interviewed by Jefri. They are later visited by Ucop and Daruih.

discussions, Mak Bedah excuses herself on the pretext of preparing tea and snacks. She only returns after Ucop and Daruih have answered Pak Teh's questions on the nation's independence. Mak Bedah is the only female character within this entire episode, and the men's conversation literally stops when she enters the scene with a tray of tea and snacks. Moreover, there is a narrative pause that emphasizes her act of passing cups of tea from her tray, before the conversation continues – though the episode ends shortly after (see Figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1

Still from *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. Mak Bedah serving coffee and *kuih* (Malay cakes).

It is evident that Mak Bedah is absent through most of the men's 'serious' conversation. She 'disappears' from view just as it starts, and 'reappears' just as it is about to end. In her absence, we know she is in the kitchen for this was explicitly expressed prior to her initial exit from the scene. Mak Bedah's role is thus relative to her function as a 'nourisher', which is in turn defined through her status within the domestic unit, for even in her absence she is bound to the imaginary of a domestic kitchen. Fundamentally, this function as 'nourisher' parallels Wazir's observation of women's responsibilities as the organizers of feasts at Islamic events (1992, 221), a communal role I had suggested was a mere extension or broadening of 'their responsibilities' as domestic

homemakers, albeit on a wider scale. Mak Bedah's relational function – for her role is determined as complementary to the position of her husband and other males – suggests her peripheral social and domestic position, in relation to the men.

On a symbolic level, the men's preoccupation with 'serious' issues suggests the relative freedom of mobility of husbands and males generally. For while the men engage themselves in expansive discussions about national and historical issues and their roles within these issues – an expression of achievements, prestige, and status – Mak Bedah is largely confined to her domestic grammar. This differentiation may be explained by the traditional notion that women's concerns should be focused on domestic specificities like "social relations", "order within the family", and "social reproduction", while men are thought to be occupied with wider, non-domestic issues (Peletz 1996, 187-189, 204).

This ascription of Mak Bedah to a domestic and social role conforms to the dominant Malay view of women's position relative to men's. As a basis for social relations in the Malay context, *Negara Chekpa Merdeka's* gender ideology is operationalized by its relatability to lived-experience. This explains its inconspicuousness with respect to how these gender modes are reproduced. More specifically, the replicated 'ordinariness' undergirds its considerable communicative ideological power. This relativist or relational role of female characters is however, not unique to *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. One reprisal of Mak Bedah's domestically-defined function is seen in Nenek Yan, the character of the grandmother in the episode *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*.

While Mak Bedah's social position is merely alluded to in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, Nenek Yan's domestic position in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* is clearly signified in scenes where her husband is not present. The signification of her position as 'matriarch' of the household is thus only possible in the absence of her husband. This in turn, connotes that her position is derived relative to her husband (as 'wife' to 'husband'), which allows for her domestic status relative to her grandchildren (as 'grandmother' to 'grandchildren'). In both dynamics, she is

defined contextually to the relationships within the domestic sphere.<sup>397</sup>

Spatially, the domestic televisual spaces are also clearly gendered to reflect this relational identity. Nenek Yan's authority is articulated almost entirely in scenes occurring in the kitchen, while Tok Nasir's scenes occur largely in the living room, where the arranged seating is reminiscent of a household head holding court (see Figure 7.2). Moreover, in one of the few occasions when we see her in the living room, her position in the mise-en-scene (Figure 7.2) symbolically signifies that Nenek Yan's authority in this male-gendered space is clearly marginalized or subordinated, for she is neither seated in the centre beside Tok Nasir, nor is she in full view, facing the camera.<sup>398</sup>



Figure 7.2

Still from *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*. From left: Cin, Nenek Yan, Tok Nasir, Ucu, Intan, and Ku.

*Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s conformity to 'traditional' gender modes is further reflected in the manner in which Nenek Yan and Tok Nasir interact with other members of the household. As was shown in Chapter 5, Nenek Yan's conversations with her grandchildren take the form of questions and answers that flow in both directions, indicative of each party's interest in the details of the other's social and domestic life. Tok Nasir however, mostly only voices his

<sup>397</sup> This alludes to kinship theory which is beyond the scope of this discussion. For a detailed examination of kinship theory and how it is imbricated in Malay social dynamics, see Peletz (1995, 1996), Stivens (1996), and Wazir (1992).

<sup>398</sup> Note that the granddaughters (Ucu and Intan) as represented on-screen, are more affectionate to the grandfather and are spatially located more centrally within the scene. At first glance, this would contradict our reading of the dynamics between Tok Nasir and Nenek Yan. However, the grandchildren act and speak in a way that suggests that they are young – not even teenagers – in which case, the cultural power dynamics represented by the children should not be factored into the reading.



concerns in general, and is at times almost monologuing. Nenek Yan's keen interest in the details and welfare of her grandchildren strengthens the notion of her 'domesticity', since this preoccupation with her grandchildren ultimately references her supposedly biological or reproductive function as a female, and her maternal role of nurturing the young.

With respect to their constructions as religio-cultural female ideals, the characters of Mak Bedah and Nenek Yan thus embody much of what is communally preferred of Malay women, or even women generally. However, *Senario*'s encouragement of traditional gender relationships has not always been performed 'positively'. As we shall observe, unlike the characters of Mak Bedah and Nenek Yan, *Senario* does frequently casts a negative light on any construction that departs from the traditional female domestic role. One episode that was especially explicit in its pejorative construction of non-domestic females is the allegorical *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* (In the Heart is a Garden) that first aired in 2011.<sup>399</sup> *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* tells the story of two friends, Superman and Batman, who are both a little overweight and generally do not conform to the popular aesthetics of typical superheroes (see Figure 7.3).



Figure 7.3

Still from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. From left: Superman and Batman.

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<sup>399</sup> Among the episodes viewed, *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* is the only episode to feature superhero characters. It is also the only episode with computer generated backgrounds (green screen) in some of its scenes. These are mixed with scenes with regular backdrops.

Catwoman appears one day, and despite attempts by both Batman and Superman to attract her, she remains unimpressed. Wonder Woman subsequently appears and is similarly unresponsive towards Batman's and Superman's expressions of interest in her (see Figure 7.4). He-Man then makes his appearance. He-Man's looks and physique are attractive to Wonder Woman and Catwoman,<sup>400</sup> and they start flirting with him (see Figure 7.5). Both Wonder Woman and Catwoman compete for his attentions before they decide to 'share' him, which is a decision He-Man welcomes. After a brief period of being a 'trio', He-Man disappears and leaves both Wonder Woman and Catwoman in an old and decrepit state.



Figure 7.4

Still from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. From left: Wonder Woman and Catwoman.

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<sup>400</sup> Both Wonder Woman and Catwoman are played by female actors.



Figure 7.5

Still from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. He-Man appears and both Wonder Woman (left corner) and Catwoman starts to flirt with him.

*Dalam Hati Ada Taman's* synopsis suggests yet another cautionary tale that narratively focuses on notions of superficiality, material/aesthetical impermanence, and as the title suggests, the importance of inner beauty over external physical aesthetics. While these themes are positive and aspirational, they are communicated negatively by the meta-narrative. Broadly, two such constructions in the episode are of interest. The first is the construct of a Malay female who does not conform or adhere to 'traditional' notions of Malay female conduct – the adherence to what 'Asian soap-opera' Malay female viewers previously identified as the *santun* ideal.<sup>401</sup> The second problematic construct is the suggestion that foreign-external influence is generally associated with this deviatory behaviour. It will become clear in the following discussions that both function on different levels to reaffirm the primacy of 'traditional' hierarchical gender ideology as one recourse to the erosion of Malay identity.

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<sup>401</sup> Responding to criticisms that their consumption of 'Asian soap-opera' was eroding their cultural and religious values and morals, these women asserted that they could simultaneously still be *santun* - respectable, decent, well mannered, or conforming to accepted standards of what is proper (Mohd Azlanshah 2013, 655). This was discussed in Chapter 1.

The first construct of a non-*adat* conforming female broadly takes three forms; (1) the caricaturizations of Catwoman and Wonder Woman as figures of impropriety, (2) the narrative's construction of male characters as being comparatively more 'proper' than the women, and (3) the objectification of Catwoman's and Wonder Woman's sexuality, where they are in fact, only spoken of in terms of their attractiveness and desirability. Each of these three aspects will be discussed in turn.

Catwoman's and Wonder Woman's aural and visual caricaturizations are evident from the outset. Aurally, both Wonder Woman and Catwoman speak in a sultry and almost flirtatious manner, rolling their 'r's and aspirating non-existent 'h's in the enunciation of their words. This speech idiosyncrasy is accompanied by a constant use of the English 'I', 'you', and 'you-olss' (you all), the last with a sultry drawl of the 'olss'. When Catwoman first appears for example, she says "*nama I, Catwoman. I che-de-ra (cedera). I bar-rhu (baru) ajaa (aja) lepas lawan dengan Jho-ker (Joker)*" (my name is Catwoman. I am injured. I have just fought with Joker).<sup>402</sup> Wonder Woman's appearance is similarly followed by, "I, Wonder Woman. I *nak tah-nya khat you; tadi I sesat tauu (tau). I nak tau kat sini ke Planet Zoo-Hah-Rahh-Ree (Zuharari)?*" (I am Wonder Woman. I want to ask you; I lost my way earlier. I want to know if this is Planet Zuharari?).

These vocal idiosyncrasies occur throughout the episode and are intermittently accompanied by visual caricaturizations that are formed through the women's body postures and movements. In Catwoman's case, the effect is accentuated by the complementary flicking of her whip (see Figures 7.6 and 7.7 for example. Also note Catwoman's body posture in Figure 7.5). This emphasis on their bodies<sup>403</sup> is made further explicit in scenes designed only to showcase their dance routines (see Figure 7.7), though similar scenes are conspicuously absent for the men – even the supposedly attractive He-Man.

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<sup>402</sup> Arguably, a point can be made that Catwoman emphasizes her 'r' because she is in character as a cat. However, this does not explain the same excessive emphasis on the 'h'.

<sup>403</sup> Unlike their aural caricaturizations, these 'seductive' or flirtatious visual figurations are comparatively more restrained – presumably due to Malay-Muslim proprieties. In this regard, the performances of Wonder Woman and Catwoman tread a fine balance between being culturally tasteful, yet being obvious enough to suggest both characters' negative inclinations.





Figure 7.6

Still from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. Wonder Woman and Catwoman pose while they converse.



Figure 7.7

Stills from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. Wonder Woman and Catwoman do a short dance routine.

It is relevant here to provide a cultural context relating to the traditional Malay metaphysical beliefs that undergird the legitimization of Malay gender binaries. According to Michael Peletz, primary among cultural beliefs that encourage a

dichotomization of gender roles is the notion of *akal* (reason) and its diametric opposite *nafsu* (desire/passion)(1995, 88-93; 1996, 205-207). The perpetual struggle for dominance between bodily passions-desires and reason-rationality consequently determines one's actions and behaviour. 'Proper' actions – that is to say, actions that conform to communal social and religious mores – are thus regarded as 'rationality's' dominance over 'passion' while 'improper' actions reveal a lack of, or inability to control, one's baser desires (Peletz 1996, 205). Therefore, it seems clear, even if not explicitly expressed by Peletz, that conformance to *adat* is indicative of *akal* while culturally deviatory behaviour reveals a *nafsu*-governed individual.

These notions are similar to pan-Islamic constructions that situate women as more “emotional, sexual, and irrational than men” and hence “must be carefully controlled by men so that they do not lead the latter astray from the proper path, thereby wreaking havoc on the social and religious order”<sup>404</sup> (Brenner 1995, 30-31). This belief that men have better controlled *nafsu* and women are predisposed to lead men astray,<sup>405</sup> is reflected in the episode's construction of its male characters. Both Superman's and Batman's behaviours and desires for Wonder Woman and Catwoman are expressed in a comparatively more restrained manner, reflecting their supposedly greater control over *nafsu*. This is in contrast to Wonder Woman's and Catwoman's sultry-flirtatious behaviour in general (even before He-Man appears).

He-Man's appearance triggers the women's culturally 'improper' or '*tak elok*'<sup>406</sup> behaviour that escalates into an unabashed competition for He-Man's attentions (see Figure 7.8). In addition to their flirtatious behaviour, both women's

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<sup>404</sup> I reiterate that Brenner is writing on Javanese culture. Her ideas are however still relevant given the *Dunia Melayu* ideal, the large presence of Indonesians/Javanese in Malaysia (as well as their wide assimilation into the Malaysian *bumiputera* category particularly in the 1970s-1980s), all of which are manifested concretely in the Malays of Negeri Sembilan, among others. This point was first mentioned at the start of this chapter.

<sup>405</sup> This seems contradictory. If men have better control of their desires/lust, it follows that they would not be easily swayed by the seduction of women which would render the notion of needing to 'carefully control' women unnecessary. This paradox of self-control is in fact, the focus of Brenner's (1995) article.

<sup>406</sup> By its contravening of social propriety, the behaviour resulting from the dominance of *nafsu* over *akal* is thus regarded as *tak sedap* (offensive/distasteful) and/or *kasar* (crass/unrefined)(Peletz 1996, 205).

inappropriately open admiration for his physique is signified through words like *hensemnya* (so handsome) and “*I suka lelaki, badhan yang berketul-ketul*” (I like men, with muscular bodies). This explicit articulation of the women’s physical attraction to He-Man functions to further reinforce the notion of their ‘*tak elok*’ behaviour. The focus on physicality is paralleled by Wonder Woman’s and Catwoman’s preoccupation with their own appearance, evidenced through scenes where Wonder Woman applies lipstick or where both women argue over who has the better figure based on their own criteria of ‘big chest’ and ‘slim waist’. These contrapuntally serve to foreground their awareness of personal sexual appeal and by extension, signifies their state of being governed by *nafsu*.



Figure 7.8

Still from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. Catwoman and Wonder Woman fight over He-Man.

Considered alongside the earlier caricaturizations, these significations connote the women’s non-*adat* adhering comportment that mnemonically associates with the ascribed nature of *akal-men nafsu*-women and corresponding Islamic gender ideologies. The resulting image is that of a Malay female who exudes and maintains an excessive amount of sexuality, and who is unembarrassed by her potency in attracting usually ‘proper acting’ males (and if Brenner is to be believed, the males would be led down a slippery slope of deviatory behaviour).



This meaning is in fact, implicitly proposed by the narrative. After He-Man's appearance elicits Wonder Woman's and Catwoman's excessive adorations and flirtations (see Figures 7.5 and 7.8), he places the hilt of his sword – without any objections from either woman – against each of their chins in turn (see Figure 7.9). This act is not mentioned in the dialogue nor is it explained by any possible context in the scene. Instead, there is a perceptible pause as this performance is brought to its conclusion before dialogue resumes. It would be disingenuous to try and interpret the symbolism of the sword as non-phallic, and the act as not connoting sexual improprieties between the three.



Figure 7.9

Stills from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. Top: He-Man puts his sword to Wonder Woman's chin while Catwoman excitedly handles her whip. Bottom: He-Man puts his sword against Catwoman's chin as she seemingly relishes the act.



Other than this phallic act however, He-Man does not attempt to court or attract the attentions of either female characters, unlike Superman or Batman. While the scene with the sword clearly connotes sexual relations between the three characters, I suggest that the master-signifier of 'improper women' frames the scene's signification to Brenner's observation that women must be controlled or they will lead men astray.<sup>407</sup> This becomes especially clear when we consider that Wonder Woman and Catwoman are not merely aware of their overwhelming sexuality, they are in fact consciously engaged in its enhancement. In this respect, the subtext suggests that it is Wonder Woman and Catwoman, with their effusive sexuality that is flaunted overtly, who seduce He-Man and 'lead him astray'.

This subtext is further strengthened through He-Man's own poses as he 'exercises' (see Figure 7.10). Instead of connoting *nafsu*, his performance of masculine sexuality is instead presented as an unavoidable consequence of exercise, which contrasts with the innate nature of the female characters' seductive behaviour. Symbolically, this establishes 'flirting' as a gendered activity even if 'attraction'-'desire' are not gender specific in the episode. The connoted gendered flirting is made more evident by the cultural significance of Catwoman's and Wonder Woman's open displays of laughter. Unchecked, female laughter is culturally interpreted as a sign of losing control to *nafsu*, further indicating 'cheekiness', all of which brings the woman's "morals into question" (Peletz 1996, 127). Laughter by itself is hardly negative and their laughter is not entirely unrestrained. When their caricaturizations of cultural impropriety and gendered flirting are read together however, it connotes that their laughter may actually allude to questionable morals.

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<sup>407</sup> Women are more "emotional, sexual, and irrational than men" and hence "must be carefully controlled by men so that they do not lead the latter astray from the proper path, thereby wreaking havoc on the social and religious order" (Brenner 1995, 30-31).



Figure 7.10

Stills from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. Top: He-Man explains that he is 'exercising'.

The women's connoted sexual deviancy and erotic aggression in these scenes calls to mind the same polemics that were levelled against the *Minah Karan* during the nation's period of industrialization.<sup>408</sup> To reiterate, economic improvements accorded these mostly rural Malay girls with relative freedom, mobility, and some autonomy. With newfound assertiveness of femininity, they were subsequently, and unsurprisingly, blamed for an erosion of traditional familial relations and the emergence of other domestic ills, all of which was compounded by the then reinvigorated Islamic conservatism. The polemics that undergird the examples of the *Minah Karan* in the 1970s-1980s and the *bohsia* of the 1990s, now seem to subtextually inform *Dalam Hati Ada Taman's* construction of female characters. The resilience of this female stereotype reveal a consistency to the normalized practice of ascribing moral decadence to Malay women, justified or otherwise, across a period of more than 30 years.

The narrative similarly constructs *Minah Karan's* deviant counterpart, *Ahmad Spaner*, in the character of He-Man. It bears repeating that while men constituting the *Ahmad Spaner* category often formed sexual liaisons with the *Minah Karan*, they were not viewed pejoratively (Wazir 1992, 201-202). In fact, while the *Minah Karan* were subsequently unable to find suitable marriage partners, the *Ahmad Spaner* were still viewed as suitable candidates by mothers

<sup>408</sup> This was discussed in Chapter 2.

seeking husbands for their daughters in the *kampung* (Wazir 1992, 201-202). These differing standards of communal judgement correspond to two concessions made for He-Man; He-Man's 'exercise' poses, and his accidental lapse of self-control that is understood to be a temporary dominance of *nafsu* over *akal*. The narrative certainly connotes the temporariness of *nafsu*'s dominance given He-Man's subsequent recovery of *akal*, demonstrated by his non-sexual comportment following the phallic scene.

*Minah Karan*'s and *Ahmad Spaner*'s differing reputations are also analogously reconstructed in the episode after He-Man, Wonder Woman, and Catwoman decide to become a 'trio' (see Figure 7.11). Following this decision, He-Man disappears in a flash of light and reappears back in Superman's and Batman's abode where he tells them it is time for him to move on. When the narrative cuts back to the scene where He-Man left Wonder Woman and Catwoman, we see that both women are now left in a decrepit state and their movements are rigid and stiff (see Figure 7.12). They are, for the lack of a better description, 'sucked dry', or 'used up', and they are left wondering where He-Man went, and what happened to them.



Figure 7.11

Still from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. The women decide to 'share' He-Man and become a 'trio'.



Figure 7.12

Stills from *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*. Catwoman and Wonder Woman left old and decrepit.

The connotations are abundantly clear. He-Man moves on in life like *Ahmad Spaner*, while Wonder Woman and Catwoman like *Minah Karan* (and *bohsia* girls), are changed by the experience and are left in a debilitating state that signifies their morally vacant and thus undesirable, 'condition'. This explains the metonymical 'used up' aesthetics as part of the consequent caricaturization of their deviancy. Their communal undesirability is made clear by Superman's and Batman's shock and disgust (they also faint) upon finding the women in this condition. On an overarching syntagmatic level, the continued moral erosion of *Minah Karan* – enabled through the city as signified by He-Man<sup>409</sup> – constitutes the previously discussed metonymic signification of the city as a locus of decadence. Reprising the same polemics that were mounted against the *Minah*

<sup>409</sup> This reference to the city, and its representation as a site of decadence will become clear when we discuss He-Man's connotative signification in the next few paragraphs.

*Karan* and *bohsia*, *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* therefore reaffirms the belief that an erosion of Malay cultural and religious values will occur through its womenfolk; qualified at least in part, through the belief in women's dominant *nafsu*.

One other dimension to the critiques against *Minah Karan* was their ethnically unbiased sexual relations with both Malay and non-Malay men (Wazir 1992, 201). The case of *Minah Karan* aside, the mixing of sexes among those of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds is often viewed with much trepidation.<sup>410</sup> From an inter-ethnic perspective, He-Man's metaphoric signification thus takes on a duality in its connotative meaning. In addition to his signification as 'men like *Ahmad Spaner*', it will soon become clear in the following discussions that he also connotes Western and Chinese influence/men. This is the second construct which suggests that deviant behaviour is generally associated with foreign-external influence.<sup>411</sup> It may well be that 'influence from the West' is connoted simply through the reality of the characters being 'Western' superheroes. However, this does not account for He-Man's differences from the other four characters. Further, the trio's deviancy does not implicate Batman and Superman and thus does not account for how Batman and Superman are 'influenced by the West'.

I suggest instead, that He-Man's second connotative signification is made explicit by his difference – both in appearance and in speech – when compared to the other four characters. His visual figuration in this respect, is achieved through his yellow or blonde hair, connoting 'Western men'.<sup>412</sup> He speaks idiosyncratically like a non-native Malay speaker, and mostly uses short, efficient sentences to communicate. This is in stark contrast to the other characters who

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<sup>410</sup> This will be discussed in more detail later in the following two paragraphs. While increasingly less so in Malaysia, it should be noted that this unease over inter-racial marriages – perhaps testament to the dominance of ethnic stereotyping and attendant prejudices – is not confined to the Malay community.

<sup>411</sup> It is unclear if this superhero episode is merely a consequence of the sharp increase in superhero movies within that period. In the same year when the episode first aired in 2011 for example, there were at least five superhero movies that screened in Malaysian cinemas; *The Green Hornet*, *Thor*, *X-Men: First Class*, *Green Lantern*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger*. If this is the case, it introduces another whole new facet to our discussion on 'Western influence'.

<sup>412</sup> The industrialization period which fostered the *Minah Karan* phenomenon was largely facilitated by the influx of multinational companies into Malaysia's free trade zones, which included their expatriate executives (Ng, Maznah, & Tan 2006, 117; Wazir 1992, 177).



speak fluent conversational Malay. Furthermore, when Wonder Woman and Catwoman compliment him on his looks and physique, he says “*tor-che, tor-che*” which is Cantonese for ‘thank you, thank you’. Here again, the Chinese are imbricated in the communal moral evaluation of negative external influence.

It should be reiterated that the signification chain of *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*’s associative terms ‘*kong si gelap*’ and ‘*gong xi fa choi*’ suggests that Malays who would seek riches within the business centres traditionally occupied by the Chinese, are relinquishing their position – their cultural and religious purity – to devote themselves to material success like the Chinese.<sup>413</sup> Thus, the Chinese as signified through He-Man’s ‘thanks’, metonymically reprises the same position that sutures ‘Chinese’ to ‘city’, since it is the city that enables the women’s decadence, and the city is perceived to be populated by the Chinese. The performances of collective anxieties thus transcend intra-ethnic concerns to connote the anxiety over a loss of ‘purity’ for the Malay race through Malay women’s sexual deviancy with non-Malay men, specifically Chinese and Western, in a morally vacant ‘city’. While similar articulations over the loss of Malay ‘purity’ were observed in preceding chapters, here it is specifically transposed onto the Malay womenfolk who are constructed as a category perceived to most likely allow for this ethnic ‘contamination’.

In reality, communal anxieties over a woman’s apparent role in the loss of communal ‘purity’ – or perhaps more specifically a loss of ethnic-cultural ‘authenticity’ – can take different forms. One example that illustrates this reality is the case of the Malay youth Kadir. Peletz (1996, 124-125) observed that Kadir’s parents were not overly concerned about his unchaperoned intermingling with a girl (and associated cultural stigmas). Their unease was instead, focused on the girl’s non-Malay ancestry, and her lack of the requisite domestic female traits or skills.<sup>414</sup> While Peletz does not explicitly say it, the

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<sup>413</sup> Discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>414</sup> Kadir lived in the city and frequently associated with a girl who was of Indian-Chinese parentage. She also did not know how to cook (Peletz 1996, 124-125).

parents' unease can be attributed to the girl's lack of relational identity.<sup>415</sup> This is interlinked with 'ethnic anxiety' since it is construed as a cultural disconnect from the typical Malay identity. Once again, even when the situation for a potential loss of 'authenticity' is created by the decisions made by a male, communal misgivings nonetheless focus on the female's culturally-perceived deficiencies. Of note is that Kadir's parents' concerns here are broadly consonant with what was previously observed as Nenek Yan's subtly conveyed unease of her son's Bangladeshi wife in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*.

Extending the trajectory across the episodes discussed, those that feature inter-racial marriages – *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, and *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* – share three common features. (1) The husbands are Malay or *bumiputera* men. (2) The wives are non-Malays, non-*bumiputera*, and foreign. And (3) the non-Malay wives are never Chinese. These three commonalities were clearly identified in our previous discussions concerning Jefri's 'white' mother and Basiron's Bangladeshi wife. *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*, *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, and *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* thus broadly share similar subtextual propositions relating to (1) ethnic-cultural dilution effected either by Malay women (Catwoman and Wonder Woman), or through Malay male association with non-Malay women ('white', and Bangladeshi mothers), and (2) the erasure of the Chinese from any variant of a Malay (domestic) imaginary. It is apparent that this problematizes women without signifying the same for men. This implicit articulation of masculine power within *Senario* will be the focus of our next section.

#### *Gender Relations as an Articulation of Social and Cultural Power*

This section will address Malay socio-cultural articulations of masculine power through three instances of their expression on *Senario*. The first relates to the performance of female characters by male actors. The second is the meta-narratively implied male appropriation of female cultural rights. The third is the enduring nature of the normative gender binary even when manifested within instances of gender inversion. Since these expressions are undergirded by

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<sup>415</sup> With her lack of domestic skills revealing a detachment from female domesticity, her identity is thus not relationally defined by her role within a household, nor through her kinship identity(ies).

cultural and religious gender ideologies, they demonstrate some of the various ways that *Senario*'s male characters ideologically articulate their masculinity as a form of socially and culturally-sanctioned power over women.

While *Senario* does feature women actors playing female roles, it also frequently features male actors performing female roles.<sup>416</sup> These male actors do not perform as cross-dressers or transvestites when playing female roles, nor do they exaggerate female mannerisms to create humour through the obvious gender incongruity.<sup>417</sup> In fact, while played by men, some characters like Nenek Yan, the grandmother in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, are completely convincing in their performance of female roles.<sup>418</sup> On this basis, it may be argued that viewers are neither meant to fixate on the gender incongruity between actor and character, nor does the gender disparity itself become, or contribute to, the comedy.

The unproblematic performances of these 'female impersonators'<sup>419</sup> and their reception by viewers can perhaps be explained in part by the long tradition of Southeast Asian male stage performers playing female roles. In Indonesian *Ludruk* for instance, integral female roles have traditionally been performed by men<sup>420</sup> (Brandon 2009, 48-49; Osnes 2001, 200; Peacock 1987, 19, 34, 77). These 'female impersonators'<sup>421</sup> (Osnes 2001, 200; Peacock 1987, 206) who were also invariably transvestites (Peacock 1987, 175, 204, 207), are historically similar to the transvestite performers of traditional *Mak Yong* in Malaysia (Peletz 2009, 186-188; Raybeck 1986, 65).<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> From the episodes discussed, the three females in both *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* and *Ta Ti Tu* are played by men. Interestingly, the converse – women playing male characters – has never occurred on *Senario*.

<sup>417</sup> Except for Youth 2's temporary (and thus exaggerated) effeminacy in *Salah Sangka* qualified by his state of spiritual possession.

<sup>418</sup> The performance was so convincing that I had to check the credits to confirm it was a male actor playing Nenek Yan.

<sup>419</sup> The 'origin' of this term is addressed later in my discussion of the Indonesian *Ludruk*.

<sup>420</sup> In broader Asian contexts, this calls to mind the *Onnagata* or *Oyama* male performers in Japanese Kabuki theatre who played women's roles, and Chinese male operatic performers who played female characters in Peking (or Beijing) Opera. Both are only mentioned in passing here, since regional and Malaysian art forms would be more relevant to our focus.

<sup>421</sup> Hereafter, I will refer to the performances of non-queer gender inversion on *Senario* and the performers as 'female impersonations' and 'female impersonators', respectively.

<sup>422</sup> Malay transvestism will be addressed in the next section.



These local traditions from the region suggest that *Senario*'s impersonations may be socially benign. However, I argue that they are originally based on gender differentials rooted in the assumed cultural legitimacy of male power and authority. By extending this historical practice to *Senario*, I assert that the Malay cultural rubric for male primacy is sustained, strengthened, and further normalized for the contemporary milieu. Central to this argument are the motivations legitimizing the historical exclusion of women from certain traditional performance styles. *Ludruk*<sup>423</sup> for instance, deemed it too taxing and physically demanding for women, since it traditionally lasts from late evening to early dawn (Brandon 2009, 48-49; Osnes 2001, 200). Two earlier forms of *Ludruk*<sup>424</sup> were also performed as dances of invulnerability to demonstrate strength and magical powers (Brandon 2009, 48; Osnes 2001, 200). These reflect two realities; (1) the implicit naturalized position of women as weaker than men, and (2) the cultural belief that *ilmu* (knowledge) and *akal* (reason) is concentrated in men, which functions to legitimize and naturalize the implicit position of male strength.

The gendered nature of the *akal-nafsu* binary was discussed earlier in this chapter. *Ilmu* was also previously described<sup>425</sup> as possessing a broad range of cultural meanings, two of which are 'esoteric or mystical knowledge' and 'spiritual potency' (Peletz 1996, 25, 104-105, 311). Of further salience to the term *ilmu* is its evolution from the older term *sakti* (magic) (Peletz 1996, 104). Taken together, the *akal-ilmu* cultural rubric determines that a dominance of *nafsu* in women impedes any potential female advancement in ascetic practices (Brenner 1995, 28-29; Peletz 1996, 158-168) which thus strengthens the perception of the mystical potency and strength of men. This mystical dimension would explain the cultural perception of women being unable to perform

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<sup>423</sup> There is a comparatively larger body of work dealing with the historical performances of *Ludruk* than *Mak Yong*. Moreover, the *Mak Yong* scholarship I've come across approaches it vocationally and refers only to its contemporary practice in post Islamic-revivalist Malaysia (for example, Shafi, Tye, & Baboo, 2015). I will thus be referring to *Ludruk*. The approximate 'synonymy' between both is qualified by Peletz's observation that much of Peacock's data on *Ludruk* demonstrate many commonalities with the Malaysian *Mak Yong* as well as other Javanese proletarian dramas (2009, 187).

<sup>424</sup> *Ludruk Bendang* and *Ludruk Lerog*.

<sup>425</sup> This was addressed in our discussion of *Salah Sangka* in Chapter 5.

*Ludruk*. From a physical perspective, the assumption that women are unable to physically sustain a performance seems logically suspect when we consider that, in addition to their domestic 'chores', women have traditionally been associated with agricultural work and other forms of wage labour (Brenner 1995, 24). I suggest instead, that this power appropriation can be better explained by the communal need to preserve women's domesticity since it is perceived to be a central constituent of their relational identity.

These rationales for men-only performances bear direct relevance to *Senario's* unproblematic female impersonation. While these impersonations' long historical tradition normalizes their performance on-screen, their original ideological motivations remain unchanged. By reproducing the practice on *Senario*, it is merely an subtextual extension of the same historical tradition for the appropriation of female agency. This is alluded to by *Ludruk* performer Mr Soenarto, who explains that this practice is "an artefact of the feudal era when people did not want to look at genuine women but at those who create an illusion of women's qualities" (Peacock 1987, 171).

This explanation introduces another symbolic layer which relates to the earlier normalized mistrust of women who, left unchecked, are likely to lead men astray.<sup>426</sup> Since women cannot be trusted to 'behave' and thus 'perform' the proprieties of *adat*, female impersonation realizes the male's imagined feminine ideal. The projection of a male-imagined feminine ideal is made discernible since, unlike female characters such as Wonder Woman and Catwoman who are played by female actors, none of *Senario's* impersonated female characters are culturally or religiously deviant. This male appropriation of female representation on *Senario* thus symbolically reasserts male authority and voicings with respect to determining the roles of women in both social (since they are performed publicly on stage and television), and domestic (since the performances are set within household narratives) contexts.

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<sup>426</sup> This again, refers to Brenner's observation discussed earlier.

The appropriation of power by *Senario*'s male characters is not merely confined to female impersonation. In *Salah Sangka* for example, male primacy is made explicit through the total absence of female representation in a narrative set in matrilineal Negeri Sembilan. The story's setting of Negeri Sembilan, and the spirits' associated Minangkabau heritage would suggest that, according to traditional Negeri Sembilan *adat*, it is not the men but the womenfolk who own land.<sup>427</sup> However, the spirits' return as a symbolic reclamation of ancestral Malay land and supra-Malay autochthony is realized by, what should have been, non-landed males (and thus they should have had no land to reclaim, or on which to stake a claim). This plainly 'natural' inversion of power to *Salah Sangka*'s gender-signification implicitly strengthens the common understanding that the privileging of men through Islamic gender ideology must be prioritized over any matrilineal *adat* practices.<sup>428</sup> This presentation of myth/ideology simply as normative, functions similarly to Daruih's compression of the independence timeline in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*; both are totalized discourses that foreclose any possibility of alternative interpretations.

Arguably, the only representation of non-male gender in *Salah Sangka* is the temporary effeminacy of Youth 2 when he is possessed. While this framing allows for an additional textual reading, it still aligns with the previous signification of a foreign-external threat to Malay, supra-Malay, and Islam. In this reading however, these threats gain 'admittance' into the Malay personhood through the upsetting of social gender norms – though invariably still linked to an 'affliction' of femininity. The effeminacy caused by a gendered possession<sup>429</sup> of an originally male host body is thus seen as the subordination of what should have naturally been male dominance, or simply, a female appropriation of male authority. Here, the traditional gendered nature of possessions is clearly

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<sup>427</sup> A discussion of Negeri Sembilan's *adat pepatih* (customary laws of Minangkabau origin that are bilateral in nature) goes beyond our scope. For close studies on the matrilineal *adat pepatih*, see Peletz (1995; 1996), and Stivens (1996).

<sup>428</sup> This would align with *Salah Sangka*'s primary thematic focus of supra-Malay and Islam.

<sup>429</sup> Spiritual possessions are culturally understood as being gendered. It is commonly believed that only Malay women are often possessed, for a variety of culturally-rationalized reasons. See Peletz (1996, 157-189) for closer studies of the phenomenon. The relevance of this gendered nature of possessions to *Salah Sangka* will be discussed later in the chapter.

signified through the temporary effeminacy, and male rationality is eventually regained through the exorcism.

The symbolism for each of the textual layers associated with possession thus becomes clear. For it is not simply the absence of females, but the oblique representation of a distorted femininity through the negative implications of gendered possessions that signifies a loss of male *akal*. The exorcism through Wak Jali's *ilmu* (believed to be concentrated in men) thus reasserts male authority by regaining *akal* and expelling the feminine distortion. The representation of a distorted femininity is key, for it signifies a distortion of the 'natural' gender order of Islam caused by matriliney's usurpation of male authority. At a meta-narrative level, these significations together with the previous readings of Catwoman, Wonderwoman, *Minah Karan*, and *bohsia*, all similarly reaffirm the loci of male dominance.

This section has thus far focused on identifying the different methods by which masculine power is imagined and articulated on *Senario*. The observed male appropriation of female agency, and the presence of male voices (female impersonations) to determine female cultural constructions, both reveal a similar underlying anxiety over the loss of male control over women. One explanation for this anxiety and its manifestation as an excess of control, lies perhaps with a communal anxiety over Malay masculinity itself. *Senario's* illustration of this male control and the underlying anxiety is however, not always as 'straight-forward' as we have observed thus far. One episode that subtextually communicates this male anxiety and control through an inversion of the normative gender binary, is the episode *Bina Semangat* (Build Morale/Motivation/Spirit)(Fauzita, & Anniesafinas, 2007) that first aired in 2007.<sup>430</sup>

The cultural meanings of the word *semangat* broadly refers to an individual's 'life force' (Peletz 1996, 105, 153), though it also relates to how 'spirited' one is,

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<sup>430</sup> To reiterate, I was unable to obtain a private copy of this episode. Therefore, no stills from the episode can be included.

or one's 'energy' and 'motivation'. This explains why a 'motivation camp' is termed '*kem bina semangat*' (building motivation camp) in Malay.<sup>431</sup> The episode *Bina Semangat* is thus a story of four youths who are sent to a *kem bina semangat*. The effeminate Kassim, the overweight Azim, and the former boy scout Razak, were sent by their parents for being *lemah semangat* (weak in motivation or unspirited). Seri Ayu, who is the only female, was sent by her parents because she is too spirited (*terlebih semangat*). *Encik* (Mister) Mat is the fierce, militant-trainer with a large, thick moustache that he wears with pride as a symbol of his overt masculinity. The five characters go through several tests to build their motivation and team spirit. Mat is revealed as a fraud when he starts bawling on hearing that his cat has died. His moustache is subsequently revealed as a fake stick-on.

The themes of this episode are primarily illustrated through three characters – the effeminate Kassim, the hyper-masculine trainer *Encik* Mat, and the masculine girl Seri. Each of these characters encapsulates one of the three dimensions of our discussions: Seri is the strong, non-relational/non-domestic female subject who resists being feminized; Kassim represents the negotiation between male-female binaries that conforms to the Other Malays in the urban-rural dichotomy; and Mat performs the 'masculine-ideal' who attempts to mediate both the 'affliction' of effeminacy, and the usurpation of male power when masculinity is performed on the wrong end of the gender binary. Each will be discussed in turn through the episode's narrative progression.

Like *akal* and *ilmu*, the metaphysical *semangat* (as opposed to 'motivation') is culturally believed to be concentrated in men (Peletz 1996, 105, 153, 177, 186, 200, 207). Ideologically, Seri's explicitly declared '*terlebih semangat*' thus names her as not merely too spirited, but also too masculine; her attitude and comportment is demonstrably more masculine than all the male characters. Her lack of the general qualities of Malay femininity thus disassociates Seri from the

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<sup>431</sup> Motivation camps are common in Malaysia and Singapore, among others in the region. These are usually introduced through extra-curricular activities in schools, often as part of a school-holiday camp. The activities are often similar to those implemented in outdoor team-building camps or workshops.

usual Malay construction of relational gender identity. On this basis, Seri's presence at the camp is presumably caused by her parents' wish for her to be feminized (since it was her parents who sent her). Meta-narratively, Seri's masculine power needs to be neutralized by Mat's hyper-masculinity, which is signified through his position of authority as a trainer. The camp's militarist quality is key,<sup>432</sup> for this mnemonically signifies an unchallengeable military hierarchy so that the signifier 'Mat' has adequate symbolic power to successfully counteract Seri's overt masculinity.

Mat's attempts at feminizing Seri are first introduced in a scene where Mat takes Seri's measurements on the pretext of obtaining sizing for uniforms. While traditional proprieties are respected – he only measures her shoulders and height, both from her back – he also conveys his lechery by rubbing his hands, inspecting Seri from head to toe, and paying extra attention to this measuring process that is starkly missing when he measures the boys. Seri however, is totally oblivious or indifferent to this overt sexualizing of her body, and even takes a deep breath to enlarge her chest, which is an act similar to men 'puffing up' their chests to simulate bigger pectorals. The boys start wolf whistling though that does not faze her either. Seri's single-minded focus on her own masculinization thus results in an unawareness that her body is being objectified. If she does notice but is indifferent to it, the signification is thus her disconnect from her female sexuality, for she cannot identify and relate to the thing that is objectified. She is instead, absorbed in becoming more masculine, by accentuating her symbolic maleness (puffed up chest).

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<sup>432</sup> The participants are all dressed in uniform white t-shirts that are tucked into cargo trousers. They also stand to attention, and are only allowed to be at ease on the trainer's command. This all resembles a cadet corp or national service rather than a simple non-military motivation camp for youths. An argument could also be made that this is a common Malaysian model for facilitating motivational training as part of a school's 'uniformed groups' co-curricular activities. Examples of 'uniformed groups' within the Malaysian context are the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides.

This objectification of Seri and her attendant feminization is observed again when Mat calls Seri “darling”. When Seri objects,<sup>433</sup> Mat chides, “hey, *kau melawan lelaki ya! Tambah dia jadi laki kau, kau nak?*” (hey, are you challenging a man? Do you want [me] to ‘add’ him as your man? [points to Kassim]). Mat’s imposition of a relational identity – since ‘romantic’ relations necessitate a counterpart – functions with the presumed inherent gender position of females as being subservient to men. Kassim, signifying this female subservience in contrast to the masculine Seri, is therefore a calculated reference by Mat that hints at the meta-narrative gender inversion. However, as the story unfolds, we will observe that even though genders may be inverted, the gender binary is rigidly adhered to.

Seri is made to choose a male partner and she chooses effeminate Kassim. Mat tells Kassim, “... *awak kena jadi kekasih kepada Seri. Sebab apa - bagi pengalaman semangat kepada Seri yang tak berminat pada lelaki.*” (... you need to be a love-interest to Seri. Reason why – give some *semangat* experience to Seri who has no interest in men). In spite of the inversion of normative gender roles with respect to biological sex, Seri’s choice of Kassim still conforms to conventionally understood categories of masculine-feminine binaries.<sup>434</sup> Likewise, the cultural *semangat* binarism is upheld, for Seri’s abundantly strong *semangat* (and hence masculine) is complementary to Kassim’s weak *semangat* (and hence feminine). Of note, is the inherent stronger-weaker power dynamics within this gendered ideological pairing that is also mirrored in Mat’s overt symbolic power to feminize the masculine Seri. The challenge posed by Kassim’s effeminacy is thus neutralized by Seri, and he is instead forced to reconnect with his maleness by roleplaying as a man. This will become clear later in the analysis.

When Seri breaks off their role-play handholding, Kassim retorts in a non-effeminate and brusquely male manner, “hey! *Kau melawan lelaki ya? ... Kau,*

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<sup>433</sup> Addressing someone as ‘darling’ – especially a man to a woman – is generally not a common occurrence in Malaysia. This is usually construed as flirtatious conduct if the parties are unmarried or not related. Furthermore, Mat says it in an obviously seductive tone.

<sup>434</sup> The reading would have been significantly different if Seri had chosen the hyper-masculine Mat for instance, since a homoerotic meaning would have been signified instead.

*kalau nak jalan dengan aku, mata kau tu, jangan tengok jantan-jantan lain!"*

(Hey! You are challenging a man, ya? ... If you want to walk with me, your eyes, [need to] stop looking at other males). This brusque retort further establishes metonymically that Kassim still possesses a degree of latent masculinity.

Signified through his tone and delivery, and by the actual message communicated, the narrative's hint at Kassim's latent masculinity seems to televisually reconstruct what Peletz observed was the communal belief that all transvestites or effeminate men need only to be "convinced they are men" (1996, 130).<sup>435</sup> This communal understanding of male gender fluidity presumes a suppressed or dormant state of masculinity which is largely consonant with our discussion of the Islamic motivations for the 'anti-gay camp' in the previous chapter. As such, the subtext proposes that Kassim's present gender orientation can be 'corrected'.

Subtextually, Kassim's outburst forces him out of the third space (as he is neither male nor female) since he is called to perform his gender in accordance with norms associated with the male sex. Kassim responds to Seri's challenge to his male authority by allowing his latent masculinity to come to the fore. Gender binaries thus remain stable and undisrupted, even if he is 'temporarily' afflicted with the possession of dominant *nafsu* – for the inherent strength of male *akal* will ultimately prevail.<sup>436</sup> The subtext thus draws upon the cultural and religious notion that 'men need only be convinced of their maleness' to inoculate against disruptions to the binary. However, Kassim's 'recuperation' of masculinity is signified by aggression towards Seri's agency – his tone and comportment when he warns Seri seem to contain a threat for violence. This seems to propose that an antagonistic male position is a legitimate form of power re-appropriation when faced by women who challenge their authority.

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<sup>435</sup> This also goes some way towards explaining the tolerance of *lelaki lembut* on-screen up until the 1990s (Hisyam, personal communication, October 10, 2015). Gender fluidity in men is traditionally tolerated since they were often regarded as being 'only' gender fluid and not sexually deviant. They were thus viewed more as a curiosity rather than stigmatized (unless overtly sexually deviant), since it is believed that they would eventually revert to their biological gender (Peletz 1996, 123, 129-131).

<sup>436</sup> Here I reference the significance of the gendered notions to both *nafsu-akal* and possessions that were established earlier on in our discussions in this chapter and in the previous two chapters.



This proposition of male aggression is made explicit (though an inversion of who is 'male') in the following sequence where Seri responds threateningly to Kassim's outburst, "*apa kau cakap tadi? Ulang balik, ulang balik*" (What did you just say? Say it again, say it again). Kassim recoils to his previous effeminate self and coyly says "*takda apa, takda apa*" (nothing, nothing). Seri then grabs him by his shirt collar while saying "*kurang ajar!*" (rude!) and throws him onto the ground while threatening to "*Pijak kau, kalau kata lagi. Faham?!*" (I'll step on you if you say it again. Understood?!). Seri's re-establishment of *her* masculine authority over Kassim is achieved through the same aggressivity implicit in Kassim's retort. Kassim's 'recuperation' of masculinity is thus a temporary performance and there is, ultimately, no true redistribution of power since the symbolic male – Seri – still exhibits the same strategies towards the symbolic female – Kassim. Even in the subtext's symbolic contestations over power, it demonstrably adheres to the rigid binarity of male-female, and the rivalrous structure of protagonist-antagonist. Interestingly, Seri – like Wonder Woman and Catwoman – is constructed as firmly ensconced in her 'problematic' position. In contrast to the women, the signifying of Kassim's latent masculinity illustrates the potential for a return to a 'true' or 'authentic' male Malay identity – like Basiron in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* and Jefri in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*. In this respect, the earlier observed problematization of women is repeated in *Bina Semangat*.

The power dynamic demonstrated by Seri over Kassim is similarly reflected in Mat's symbolic power over Seri. Both Mat's and Kassim's aggressive position towards Seri is introduced using the same words, "*kau melawan lelaki ya?*" (you are challenging a man, ya?). Subtextually, their aggressions are thus ideologically 'justified' as a legitimate male strategy to counteract subjective female agency. This same male aggression is similarly observed in Kassim's warning to Seri, which counteracts Kassim's own effeminacy. Moreover, Seri's biological sex as opposed to performed and identified gender, transforms her body into a representation of the binary in question. Mat's attempt at feminizing Seri through the sexualization of her body is in fact, meant to reconnect Seri with her

'latent' femininity, much like Kassim's latent masculinity. However, Seri's indifferent or oblivious response marks her out as being unable to identify with (or to resist) the 're-inversion'. While the dynamics of power remain similar, the awareness of performed gender is markedly different between Seri and Kassim; Seri 'knows' she is a 'man' even though society says otherwise, while Kassim is less confident and fluidly negotiates between both genders.

The question therefore, is whether *Bina Semangat* is simply a performance of 'correct' gender roles? Or is the episode a social commentary on how popular discourse attempts to (re)define 'traditional' notions of gender? More specifically, is *Bina Semangat*'s subtext merely reflecting quotidian developments of gender ambiguity, and inversions of binary roles in general? It is particularly enticing to read *Bina Semangat* from this perspective since the narrative demonstrates gender 'deviance' and the attempts at 'correcting' them, but acknowledges that the attempts are ultimately unsuccessful (Kassim and Seri are still 'unchanged'). This open-ended nature to *Bina Semangat* is a departure from *Senario*'s usual episodic formula for it does not attempt to prescribe a workable solution.

Mat's break-down signifies as much, for his hyper-masculine façade is a performance that cannot be maintained. His public bawling which leads to a reveal that his moustache – the symbol of his overt masculinity – is also a fake, suggests that Seri is after all, the most masculine amongst them. An antagonistic or overtly masculine insistence on clear gender roles is thus unsustainable and identified as an ineffective position – since Seri and Kassim are left 'uncorrected' even though they were temporarily made to perform 'correctly'. Kassim's momentary lapse into normative masculinity however, signifies the belief that non-normative gendered Other Malays at least, can return to their biological gender, reflecting the biological-psychological discourse that commonly undergirds gender 're-education' initiatives.

In hindsight, the episode's title plays on the duality of *semangat*'s meaning. We are told that this is a camp to *bina semangat* (motivate) though its cultural,

metaphysical meaning is never alluded to narratively. Subtextually however, the camp is a correctional facility that seeks to align each character's gender more 'properly' or 'naturally' to their biological sex as framed through the gendered signifier of *semangat*. This need for gender to be 'legible' in accordance with distinct poles of male-female is broadly consonant with the communal need to mark gender through traditional roles determined by both *adat* and Islamic gender ideologies.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter foregrounded three facets to *Senario's* reproduction of Malay gender relationships; (1) traditionally interpreted modes of gender and their alternative constructions, (2) the affirmation of these traditional gender modes as an assertion of masculine power, and (3) sustaining normative gender relations even with the inversion of binary roles. By correlating their performances with generally understood wider religio-cultural beliefs and practices, and with historical developments, the potential motivations for their televisual articulations were identified. These motivations were invariably found to be re-articulations of the gender ideologies of *adat* and Islam.

*Senario's* portrayal of female anomalous behaviour does however acknowledge that communitarian cleavages, not least in views on gender relations, exist within the Malay community. Viewed from this perspective, it is likely that *Senario's* re-articulations of *adat* and Islamic gender ideologies is a response to challenges to dominant conservative notions of gender modes. We observe in particular that it is the slippage between not just lived-reality, but customary *kampung* proprieties as practiced, and television's social reality that informs *Senario's* constructions of its female 'others'. On this point, there seems to be a specific focus on the imagined traits, comportment, or behaviour of women that is largely aligned with, and possibly informed by, quotidian encounters with the phenomena of *Minah Karan*, *bohsia*, and *Ahmad Spaner* that spanned several decades across Malaysian history. This strategy would appear to demonstrate Bhabha's theorization of the dominant's deployment of fixed stereotypes

longitudinally across time periods towards sustaining its own demarcations of gender roles.

Of particular interest is *Bina Semangat*'s unusual (for *Senario*) open-ended narrative. Theoretically, this does in fact illustrate my assertion in Chapter 2 of the Malay condition when framed through the Lacanian fantasmatic gap. With the *santun* Malay woman as the object of desire (the ideal), Malays are thus 'taught' 'how to desire' through the Lacanian fantasy of *adat*. The gap between the symbolic relevance of *adat* and the increasingly globalized realities of urban 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysia can never be closed, for the fantasy conceals the irreconcilability of both. As previously discussed, this irreconcilability is rooted in the fact that both the desire and fantasy are "arrested, fixated form[s] of representation" (Bhabha 1994, 107) that does not address the realities of the present. In this sense, *Bina Semangat* does not prescribe a workable 'solution' to sexual/gender deviancy precisely because it cannot identify a 'solution' apart from asserting the dictates of fantasmatic *adat*. Despite gender re-education initiatives for instance, non-normative gender identification continues to proliferate in Malay society, among others.

*Senario*'s expressions of cultural and religious gender ideologies demonstrate some of the various ways that Malay masculinity can be articulated as a form of socially and culturally-sanctioned power over women. While some may justify these televisual performances as being aligned with acts, behaviours, and social scripts found in lived-reality generally, these social scripts and attitudinal/behavioural codes are in fact, part of the patriarchal discourse on Malay Muslim women. With this reality, *Senario*'s performances of gender are not merely reflective of the subordinate female subject within a male patriarchal discourse, they function to further entrench and re-legitimize the implicit imbalance of power within the Malay religio-cultural rubric of gender relations.

## CHAPTER 8

### Summary of Chapters

This thesis has sought to reveal how the constituents of a dominant form of Malayness are reconstructed on the sitcom *Senario*. By exploring the correlation between socio-political issues and *Senario*'s representations of Malay identity, we foregrounded the relationship between Malay nationalist ideology and Malay social desires. Our analysis further yielded an understanding of the political expediencies of the state's interpretation of Malay identity. The primary focus was interpreting *Senario*'s significations of dominant and subversive meanings of Malayness as understood through corresponding political and popular civic pressures of the time. Overarchingly, we observed that *Senario* communicated the state's political rhetoric about a specific version of Malayness that was primarily focused on determining – for political expediencies – who is, and what it means to be, Malay and Muslim.

The historical and national context for this study was established in Chapter 2 where we broadly charted the post-independence evolution of Malayness as a national identity determined by UMNO's religio-ethnic discourses. UMNO's dominant position within the governing coalition was observed to have enabled the deployment of Malay historical narratives and race-encoded Islamic prerogatives to secure the support – at a primal, emotional level – of Malay and/or Muslim communalists. While non-state defined Malayness exists – such as the Other Malays category – the state under UMNO has gone to extensive lengths to ensure that a partisan interpretation of Malayness endures. It was observed that this often resulted in the subordination of ethnic and religious minority identities. Dominant Malay and Muslim gender ideologies have also largely prevailed through this partisan influence. We noted that while pro-women actors have actively challenged these Malay-Muslim hierarchies of gender that sustain the hegemony of male privilege, their successes in obtaining state concessions to women's rights is without real political will on the part of the state. An increasing number of women's rights groups – both Islamic and secular – have also emerged more recently, though they are often actively

demonized by ideological leaders of the mutually-affirming Malay and Islamic patriarchal superstructure.

In Chapter 3, we considered the relationship between UMNO and free-to-air (FTA) television stations. Our discussions revealed that the state under UMNO controls all FTA television stations, commercial or otherwise. As such, the pressures directly or indirectly regulating television productions were found to be invariably exerted through political decisions. Malaysian television thus often appears to serve sectional interests – that of the UMNO elites – rather than Malaysian society in general. Taking a wider perspective, we noted that the complex broadcasting legislative apparatus functions at an elementary level to normalize and maintain the state's influence over public discourse regarding Malay identity. In particular, we uncovered the importance of 'narrowcasting', which, in practice, allows for a racial and geographical categorization of Malaysian electorates. It was unsurprising to note that TV3's Malay and non-urban viewership is the largest viewership segment among all of MPB's FTA channels. We suggested that the close similarity between TV3's primary demographic and the range of characters in *Senario* allowed for a close reflection of its non-urban viewers on screen. This made *Senario*'s institutionally-constructed televisual myths and narratives highly relatable for its target audience.

Chapter 4 shifted to a more theoretical discussion that addressed the polysemy of television, the political form of the situation comedy genre, the social value of comedy and humour, and the different signifying methods by which all these are represented televisually. Drawing on arguments relating to representational or signifying systems (cultural or otherwise), it was shown that televisual signs or cues are central to the derivation of meaning on television. By transposing the Lacanian-Žižekian system to this signifying system, it was found that both similarly described the process by which dominant meanings are sustained within signifiers. This was also correlated to the idea that a televisual text's 'preferred meaning' encodes the dominant perception of reality as 'realism', a process consonant with the notion of myth-making. A complementary discussion

on Humour Theory further demonstrated sitcom's political relevance in circulating shared communal meanings preferred by the dominant ideology. Sitcom, and by extension *Senario*, was therefore identified as an ideological vehicle that depends on myth-making. Furthermore, it was shown that the Lacanian-Žižekian quilting process functions to frame the signifying system's dominant meanings in order for its comedic narrative to 'make sense'.

In Chapter 5, the first chapter of textual analysis, I examined the sitcom's replication of institutional Malay nationalism and related cultural binaries. In my analysis of scenes from *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, and *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, I demonstrated how *Senario* often deploys pseudo-historicism as a mnemonic and emotional trigger for the soliciting of cultural conformity and the legitimization of ethnic exclusionary spaces within the discourse of Malaysian identity. It was observed that the Malay *kampung* is constructed as a transcendental signifier for authentic Malayness; the nexus of *adat* and tradition. Communal anxieties over an erosion of Malay identity and values were identified in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* especially, an episode that deployed historical stereotypes of Chinese and Indians in a process of othering to strengthen its own representation of traditional Malay authenticity. Across several episodes aired between 1996 to 2011, it was observed that *Senario* recurringly constructed 'normal' Malay characters while ethnic minorities were largely represented as idiosyncratic caricatures. These essentialist performances of identity largely take three forms; the exclusionary and monolithic nature of national narratives pervading popular discourse, the construction of the Malay community as the idealized normative, and the disassociation of positive interest in minority cultures through de-assimilating narratives of 'othering'.

In Chapter 6, the idea of a synonymous Islamic and supra-Malay identity, with respect to how both related to everyday Malayness, was given greater clarity. The focus of my analysis was *Ta Ti Tu*'s explicitly instructional Islamic narrative, and *Salah Sangka*'s themes on the sanctity and irredentism of the *Dunia Melayu* (Malay World). Unlike the episodes from earlier years, it was found that *Salah Sangka*'s Islamic accents were sublimated into the performances of

(supra)Malayness. That Islam is 'invisible' is attributed to the degree of its naturalization as part of the discourse on Malay identity within the region. Thus, while *Ta Ti Tu* (first aired 1997) seems overt in its didacticism, *Salah Sangka* (first aired 2011) unapologetically presumes an Islamic viewership who are already religiously literate (perhaps reflecting the results of national Islamization policies). Articulations of Islam and a fraternal supra-Malay bond were also distilled into the sign 'our ways', constructed as the symbolic definer for Pan-Malay identity. The adversarial position to Chinese agency was also revived and juxtaposed against this Pan-Malay identity as a threat to the Pan-Malay ideal. *Ta Ti Tu* achieves the same insularity by creating an exclusionary ethno-religious space through its explicit focus on Islamic instructions. Of note is the absence of any reference to the Indian community, as a threat or otherwise, in both episodes.

The focus shifted to *Senario*'s implicit gender hierarchies in Chapter 7. Three facets to *Senario*'s reproduction of Malay gender relationships were foregrounded; traditionally interpreted modes of gender and their alternative constructions, the assertion of gender modes as an articulation of masculine power, and the adherence to normative gender relations even when gender roles are inverted. These performances of gender invariably coincided with the general understandings of *adat* and Islamic gender ideologies that mutually reaffirm the loci of Malay male dominance. A close textual reading identified a specific focus on the imagined traits, comportment, or behaviour of women that is largely aligned with, and possibly informed by, quotidian encounters with the phenomena and discourses of *Minah Karan*, *bohsia*, and *Ahmad Spaner* that spanned several decades of Malaysian history. The televisually-imagined feminine ideal and the transgressive female constructions in *Senario* were both found to be symptomatic of existing cultural and religious male anxieties. *Senario*'s constructions of gender are thus not merely reflective of the subordinate female subject within a male patriarchal discourse; they function to further entrench and legitimize the imbalance of power in the Malay rubric of gender relations.



## Conclusions

At its core, this thesis identified at a textual level, the methods by which *Senario* encodes the dominant tropes of Malay identity. Drawing on existing scholarship on Malayness in political discourse, I demonstrated how these tropes function in a television sitcom within the context of *Senario*. I posed three questions in Chapter 1 which formed the basis for this study:

- (1) What dominant narratives of Malay identity are performed on *Senario*?
- (2) Who are exteriorized through the differences hierarchized by *Senario* and how does *Senario* (re)construct this hierarchy of difference?
- (3) How does this affect the fixity of state-defined configurations to the nationalist Malay narrative?

While each of the chapters of analysis addressed specific aspects of these questions, I would now like to focus on ideas that are overarching concepts across the chapters. In sum, it is observed that there are three broad themes about Malayness that are communicated by *Senario*. These themes directly address the questions above.

- (1) *Senario*'s performances of Malay identity are consonant with popular notions of Malayness prevalent in the communal social mindset. These understandings of communal identity cohere with state narratives of Malayness and Islam, which includes an adherence to their related gender ideologies.<sup>439</sup>
- (2) Malay-Muslim characters are televisually represented as the imagined normative ideals. This includes non-Malaysians who are perceived to be part of the *Dunia Melayu*. Non-Malay and non-Muslim constructions are contrasted in varying degrees to establish those who are exterior to this Malay imaginary.

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<sup>439</sup> I make clear at this point, that I consider both Islamic and Malay gender ideologies as being a constitutive part of the dominant understanding of Malay identity. As such, I will not make specific distinctions between gender relationships and Malayness or Islam since I consider all three to be facets of one similar Malay-Muslim worldview.

(3) State-defined configurations of Malay-Muslim identity (and by extension non-Malay-Muslim identities) are consistently reaffirmed and strengthened on *Senario*. Given *Senario*'s ability to normalize related religio-political rhetorics on-screen, these televisual representations evolve with shifts in political polemics that reshape or reinstate formulations of Malayness.

These three themes about Malayness are, as observed in the three chapters of analysis, overtly communicated by, or reflected in, *Senario*. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn in the proceeding sections.

#### *Senario's Malayness as Consonant with Popular Notions of Malayness*

What aspects of *Senario*'s performances of identity are consonant with quotidian understandings of Malayness, all of which to a degree, reflect state narratives? One of the most evident is the sitcom's performances of identity that seem to conform to 'statist Malay', 'traditional Malay', and/or Islamic identity. From the close reading of the episodes, it seems clear that these performances refer to a notion of a monolithic Malay identity presented as unquestionably 'authentic' Malay. Given that varying forms of Malay *adat* exist (one which I drew attention to in *Salah Sangka* was *adat pepatih* that is Minangkabau-influenced), the notion of 'traditional' seems a vague reference to a distilled total sum of a multitude of Malay traditions.

Moreover, how historical or authentic is 'traditional Malay' when its material basis is determined by state (re)formulations which prioritize or deprioritize Islamic and cultural constituents of Malayness depending on the political discourse of the time? The pivotal position of Islam today can, for instance, be attributed to the broader currents of Islamic reinvigoration that were observed nationally in state Islamization policies from at least the 1980s. I have pointed out the televisual evolution of religious expression as reflected in the differences between Islamic representations in *Ta Ti Tu* (1997) and *Salah Sangka* (2011). Both episodes are prime examples of how *Senario*'s narratives evolve in accordance with changes in religious, social, and political interpretations of

Malayness as a way of life. Episodes that rely heavily on understandings of Malay *adat* (*Salah Sangka* and *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* for example), episodes that functioned to inculcate Malay Islam (*Ta Ti Tu* for example), and episodes reconstructing these communal lived realities further demonstrate that the potentially separate identities of ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’ have been televisually reinterpreted to mutually-affirm a unitary identity.

It bears repeating that both Malay *adat* and Islam are not as mutually affirming or complementary as commonly believed, or as suggested by *Senario*. That they are regarded as such, and have been since at least the 1970s, is largely attributable to the concerted 1970s Islamic revivalism and the subsequent national Islamization policies that started from at least the 1980s. It was mentioned in Chapter 2 that these national developments resulted in the progressive evolution of Malay traditional *adat* in order to be more congruent with Islamic beliefs. One central example embodying this shift – primarily because it features in our analysis of *Salah Sangka* in Chapter 6 – is the Malay *bomoh* (shaman). I had identified both the ambivalent attitudes of the Malays toward the symbolism presented by the figure of the *bomoh* in Chapter 6, as well as the *bomoh*’s shift from presumably paganist rituals to a sole reliance on Quranic verses as part of its ritualist Islamic evolution.

The figure of the *bomoh* thus bear direct relevance to my earlier questions about the authenticity of prevailing notions of Malay traditions as well as the state’s role in encouraging its propagation. It is more productive for our purposes to discuss the *bomoh* in terms of its dichotomous embodiment of both ‘old’ *Dunia Melayu* Hindu-Buddhist influenced traditions, and a comparatively more recent resurgent Islam. We are, in this sense, framing it fundamentally as an *adat*-Islam binary. However, these contradictions between *adat* and Islam have largely been resolved – or at the very least – found a compromise in, to use Wazir Jahan Karim’s terms from our discussions in Chapter 2, the state’s “*adatization* of Islam” or the “Islamization of *adat*” (Wazir 1992, 16) that allowed for a conciliation between Malay and Islamic identities. Michael Peletz’s observations are broadly consonant with Wazir’s, and further identifies that spiritual potency

– originally a pre-Islamic (Hindu-Buddhist) notion – is, in its more Islamic form, still highly valued post-Islamic resurgence (1996, 103-104).

Among others, studies by Aihwa Ong reveal that state – and by extension, communal – rhetoric of Islamic-Malay identity is frequently mobilized against a modern, liberal Malayness rather than questions about *adat*'s congruency with Islam (1995, 174-180). This tendency produces the prevailing unquestioning acceptance of *adat*'s complementarity to Islam which ensures that its dominant narrative is frequently framed through the traditional-modern or *kampung*-urban binaries instead (Ong 1995, 180-184). As observed throughout this thesis, the ideological role of the state, within the context of this form of identity construction, is inherently crucial to the conciliation of the dichotomous elements within both traditional 'Malay' and resurgent Islamic identities.

The meta-narratives of episodes such as *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, and *Gong Xi* further strengthen the presumption that *Senario*'s representation of communal lived realities are dictated by political polemics of the time. *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*'s nationalist assertions of Malay opposition to the British colonial administration as key to the nation's independence, and its subtle nod towards ethnic inclusivity moderated by Malay agency, reflects the key themes of the nation-building discourse proliferating in the 1980-1990s. The same reproduction of popular discourse is observed in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*'s encapsulation of generally understood themes on inter-racial, inter-cultural, and inter-faith relations, as well as its portrayal of traditional-modern positions. *Gong Xi*'s overt inclusion of the Chinese was identified as being potentially motivated by political expediencies.

Whatever form it takes, these televisual examples of 'traditionalism' contradict the reality of UMNO's trajectories of 'progressiveness' for the Malays. The attempts at 'modernizing', 'urbanizing', or perhaps more accurately, 'progressivity' of the Malays, is evidenced across the years through initiatives like *Revolusi Mental* in 1971, the New Malays, and the industrialization period of Malaysia Incorporated in the 1980s-1990s. I have demonstrated how these

contradictions are evident in *Senario* and the various ways by which these initiatives and their quotidian discourses informed the meanings of the sitcom's subtexts.

The symbolisms of 'city' and '*kampung*' for instance, are derived from the national collective understanding of the nation's evolving discourses of 'urban-modern' and 'rural-traditional', respectively. The discourse of New Malay is perhaps the most notable connotation for the 'city-urban-modern' signifier, for it encapsulated all that was meant to be 'modern' and 'urban' at the time. More broadly, the signifier also connotes the 'urban' and 'economic' policies of the Malaysia Incorporated initiative that was discussed in Chapter 2. The discourses of more traditional Malays that emphasized tradition, culture, and Islam, appears to be connoted through the sign *kampung*.

These meanings of 'city' and '*kampung*'<sup>440</sup> are connoted in almost all the episodes discussed. The sign 'city' as metonym for the entire ideological terrain of the 'corrupting West' and conjoined as a relational metonym for 'Chinese' or 'non-Malay' in general, draws upon these national narratives. Contrastingly, in the episodes discussed, the city is never represented as a site of progressive Malay modernity. More accurately, even if Malays are televisually represented as being from the city or bearing traits of modernity (lifestyles, behaviour, worldviews), they are invariably the characters who are culturally or religiously problematized (for example, Jeri in *Gong Xi*, and Basiron in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*). The symbolisms of these dichotomies were further sutured to the discourse of class. Among others, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* and *Kantoi* revived colonial structures of racial categories that were based on their economic position or function. In both these episodes, the Chinese are ideologically reconstructed as wealthy business owners while the majority of Malay characters are portrayed as economically disadvantaged.

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<sup>440</sup> To reiterate; the majority of episodes viewed featured a *kampung* locale. Common backdrops include the interior of a *kampung* house, its compound, and the environs of the entire village. In episodes with comparatively less provincial settings like *Tandas Awam* and *Salah Sangka*, viewers are often never told of the exact location, and *Senario*'s characters would invariably be conveyed as originating from a non-cosmopolitan part of Malaysia.

*Senario* thus presents a contradiction to UMNO's trajectories of Malay 'progressivity'. The sitcom's subtexts propose an adherence or a return to, 'traditional' or 'authentic' Malay by overzealously propagandizing the cultural and religious benefits of traditionalism. It is perhaps the viewer-relatable factor that is at play here, since the sitcom's Malay demographic is largely rural in mindset. Regardless of the reason, the subsequent episodic subtexts aggrandize the rural *kampung* and its associated symbolic meanings, often by contrasting its virtues against cosmopolitan centres that are reproduced as holistically diametric opposites. These kinds of significations do not reconcile the fundamental contradictions of 'traditionalism' and 'progressiveness' that afflict the contemporary Malay psyche. I suggest that *Senario*'s subtext is instead stating that these are irreconcilable positions and proposing that the former is deemed more virtuous by communal moral evaluation, and thus encouraged over the latter.

It may be argued that these reveal an unwaveringly relativist approach that is central to the Asian values political discourse. This argument would see Asian values and traditions (*adat* and Islam) as a central part of the mediating framework for communal 'progressive-ness'. Framed thus, the outwardly diametrical trajectories of 'traditionalism' and 'progressiveness' can potentially be reconciled. This 'middle-ground' argument would certainly align with official state discourse. However, our discussions in Chapter 2 on Homi Bhabha's theorization of the dominant's manufacture of 'ambivalence' suggest that the inconsistencies presented by being both 'progressive' yet 'traditional', are deliberately produced as an apparatus of power. Consider for instance, the official criticisms by political actors against the effects of 'Asian soap-operas' even when these television programmes were in fact imported by the state through the 'Look East' policy of modernization. This rejection of the 'values' inherent in these 'Asian soap-operas' and its supposedly negative effects on Malayness, contradicts the entire Asian values discourse as a mediating framework.

Further, if the New Malays are meant to encapsulate the ideal of 'Malay progressivity', this 'middle-ground' would in fact be the irreconcilable gap of the Lacanian fantasy for it conceals the impossibility of simultaneously being traditionally Malay, yet progressive (the New Malay ideal). *Senario* certainly makes this clear from the urban, overseas graduate (New Malay) Basiron in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* who could only 'recover' his Malay roots by returning to the symbol of Malay traditionalism (the *kampung*) to seek the forgiveness of his parents (communal figures of cultural authority). The criticisms against Ucop's and Daruih's adoption of non-Malay behaviour in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* similarly demonstrates the impossibility of reconciling this gap.

Framed politically, these contradictions are perhaps deliberately manufactured as 'distractions' to encourage the community's continuous preoccupation with clarifying Malay and Islamic identity. This was in fact suggested by Syed Hussein Alatas in his critique of both *Revolusi Mental* and *The Malay Dilemma* (2006, 147-185). Syed Hussein Alatas believed that the objective of both publications was to exonerate UMNO-BN coalition leaders for their lack of vision and subsequent failings in governance. It would explain the paradox of the 'traditionalism' and 'progressiveness' initiatives, both of which were encouraged by the UMNO-dominated government, and observed explicitly on *Senario*.

*Senario's* constructions of non-Malay and urban social actors as threats to the sanctity of Islam and authentic Malayness might potentially engender greater communal solidarity. However, this notion of 'Malayness under threat' also frequently manifests televisually as an anxiety regarding *Senario's* Malay female characters. The deployment of old frames of female reference such as *Minah Karan* and *bohsia* reveal the communal preoccupation with anxieties over female transgression of *adat*. *Senario's* significations of female deviancy as observed in *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*, and the inversions of gender in *Bina Semangat* both demonstrate that while these anxieties over an intra-communal erosion of Malayness do appear in multiple forms, they almost always problematize non-

*santun*<sup>441</sup> femininity. In the case of *Salah Sangka*'s possessions, it is not merely deviant females but femininity itself that becomes the issue.

From this perspective of gender relations, what communal solidarity is canvassed by *Senario*? The underlying rhetoric of *Senario* seems similar to the previously observed criticisms against rural female Malay viewers of 'Asian soap-operas' in the 1990s. As noted in Chapter 1, the official discourse of the time centred on fears of these women's deviation from *adat* and Islam, all of which would be a 'threat' to the cultural values of Malay women, and the 'purity' of Malay cultural identity. This discourse certainly correlates with our findings on *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* and *Bina Semangat*. Whatever the assertions then, 'communal solidarity' would, in this case, refer to the strengthening of communal moral policing of Malay women, as part of the revived emphasis on *adat*. While these realities may suggest that *Senario* is highly gender-biased (these anxieties are only projected onto females), it can be argued that the sitcom merely reflects popular and state discourse which, as I argued in Chapter 2, prioritizes Malay and Muslim men's interests over women's interests.

#### *Malay-Muslim as a Televisual Normative Ideal*

The themes identified in the previous section reveal that the hierarchies of differences constructed through *Senario*'s ethnically and religiously essentialist performatives function to entrench tiered relations as being natural. These effects similarly extend to gender relations since gender is a major facet of both cultural and religious ideologies. Apart from intra-communal fragmentation along each side of the *adat* and religious binaries, a central feature of *Senario*'s tiered relations is inter-communal divisions. Undergirding this discourse on external threats are Chinese agency and Western influence. The performances of a collectively 'homogenous' supra-Malayness engenders loyalty to race, religion, values and tradition, and partisan loyalty, rather than the fraternal bond of citizen-hood.

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<sup>441</sup> Women who are *santun* are respectable, decent, well mannered, or conforming to accepted standards of what is proper as outlined through *adat*.



It was observed that the Chinese are connoted frequently in *Senario* while there is an absence of any major consistent reference to the Indian community. This formula seems to illustrate Syed Husin Ali's observation of an anti-Chinese (and Indian) UMNO rather than a genuinely pro-Malay party as frequently self-declared (Ahmad & Kuttan, 2016). However, while the Chinese (and infrequently, Indians) are alluded to reductively, it is nonetheless, still an acknowledgement of Chinese (and Indian) presence within the Malay imaginary. The deployment of the Hainanese "*nang bo ti nang, kui bo ti kui*" in *Salah Sangka* for instance, is predicated on an intertextual link to a communal cultural bank that has assimilated the Chinese phrase into conversational Malay.

This same assimilation is apparent in reality where words such as *tauke* ('business owner' or 'boss'), and *ah pek* (uncle) are recognized by the Malaysian *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (Institute of Language and Literature) as part of the Malay lexicon (Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu, 2017) even when they are Hokkien (Chinese dialect) in origin. Furthermore, the title of the *Senario* episode *Gong Xi* itself, is transliterated from the Chinese words 'congratulations'. In these respects, *Senario* makes an indirect nod to cultural hybridity, even if they are often represented as a tiered intercultural structure meant to denote an erosion of state-perceived Malay identity. These do, however, suggest an inherent syncretism to quotidian Malay culture which indirectly acknowledges the potential for a positive Malay and Malaysian hybridity, if these identities can evolve without divisive state or religious interference.

Mnemonic and emotional triggers of nostalgia that are validated by pseudo-historicism were observed to be central features on *Senario*. While it may be argued that protection of *adat* and Islam will preserve the (supra)Malay race and thus address communal anxieties of 'vanishing', it does not follow that this will result in economically successful or (relativist) progressive Malays as envisioned in concept of the New Malay. While the blame for a recessive Malay economic position is directed at ethnic minorities, the state simultaneously maintains the conditions for communal insularity by encouraging 'traditionalism' without making significant strides at sustained Malay

competitiveness at the wider societal level.<sup>442</sup> With *Senario*'s narratives that contrast traditional rural Malays against caricatures of wealthy Chinese for example, the fact that poverty and wealth are conditions that are not race or culture specific is elided on-screen.<sup>443</sup> In its place, *Senario* reproduces the ambivalent position of the state without proposing that the undergirding logic of its many rhetorical assertions should be questioned. These issues are instead reframed by *Senario* as being attributable to racial, cultural, and/or religious differences. Once again, this recalls Syed Hussein Alatas' critique of UMNO's social (re)engineering that seems aligned with Syed Husin's observation of an anti-Chinese (and Indian) UMNO.

These realities provide an account of *Senario* that conforms to our earlier understandings of institutional pressures governing content production. As previously indicated however, with the administration's longitudinal process of normalizing statist Malay narratives, it would be difficult to determine whether *Senario*'s meta-narratives are largely a product of institutional pressures, or a reflection of communal discursive understandings of Malay. What is clear within the episodes, is the formulaic nature of *Senario*'s narrative structure observed throughout the episodes discussed in the chapters of analysis.<sup>444</sup>

At the start of each episode, *Senario*'s narrative exposition consistently pre-emptes the entire episode's meta-narrative for the viewers. I assert that these pre-emptive expositions function as the Lacanian-Žižekian master-signifier, which at the connotative level, ensures that the episode's signs are read through themes relayed from the outset. Meanings can then be anticipated by *Senario*'s ethnically and religiously homogenous demographic, for they are already cued to

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<sup>442</sup> To reiterate the point in Chapter 2; those who gained – and who are still gaining – considerable economic benefits from state and federal Malay initiatives are the elites and those well-connected to politicians.

<sup>443</sup> For example, the most recent Household Income Survey in 2014 (conducted every 5 years) by the government's Department of Statistics reveals that the "bottom 40%" income earners in Malaysia are comprised of all three ethnic groups in almost equal numbers (Economic Planning Unit, 2017). *Bumiputera* and Indian earners are both at the 17.1 mark, while the Chinese fare a little better at 16.3. In 2009, the *bumiputera* group was in fact, slightly better at 14.4 while the Chinese was 15.2, and the Indian earners at 15.5.

<sup>444</sup> It should be reiterated that with the exception of the 13-episode *Senario: Misteri Bamboo*, *Senario*'s episodes are mostly one-parter or two-parters with self-contained narratives and characters that have no association to other episodes.

frame their interpretations through the master-signifier. The different variations to the meanings and context of the traditional Malay proverb in *Salah Sangka* for example, are narrowed through the framing to ensure that the proverb's preferred set of meanings are understood, and that its interrelatedness to other signs within the episodes are interpreted through that framing. In effect, Malay viewers are not only shown how they should think (the function of the pre-emptive cues), they are also told what they should be thinking about (the function of the narrative's signification chains).

One illustration of this broad tendency to curtail viewer subjectivity is observed in *Senario*'s overly didactic narratives. While episodes such as *Ta Ti Tu* and perhaps, *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, seem the most overt in their intentions, the other episodes discussed are no less didactic, though arguably less overt. *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* for example, simplifies the nation's historical narrative with its proposition of a unitary version, an account that is broadly reprised by *Salah Sangka*'s implicit assertion of supra-Malay irredentism. *Raya ... Raya ... Raya* attempts to critique a broad range of issues involving the Malays, such as inter-racial marriages, erosion of cultural values, urbanization, and faith or race as moral indicators. These themes are similarly transposed onto gender in *Dalam Hati Ada Taman* and *Bina Semangat*. The ethnic caricatures in *Kantoi*, *Jejak Karun*, and *Tandas Awam* further present a visually 'legible' stereotype on which these themes can then be identified with. All these methods conform with the formulaic 'answer by example' that was introduced in Chapter 5 with *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* which in hindsight, represents the primary overarching didactic strategy of *Senario* across all the episodes discussed. This didacticism may however, be due to the censorship authorities' insistence on 'cautionary tales' or for narratives to depict negative characters turning over a new leaf through the guidance of *adat* or Islam.

Thematically, none of the episodes viewed that first aired before 2011 were explicit in their Malay exceptionalism. I had previously indicated in Chapter 6 that, from the pre-2011 episodes discussed, the pivotal position of the Malays and Muslims was certainly alluded to, though less overtly with the words '*kami*'

and '*kita*'<sup>445</sup> instead of 'Malay' and 'Muslim' that was present in the episodes from 2011. This explicit 'naming' is the true act of primacy in that it identifies the outgroup by naming the ingroup. This is similar to our discussion in Chapter 3 on TV3's method of identifying rural viewers through its identification of urban viewers. The dialectical paradox however, lies in the fact that the deployment of both the master-signifier and the act of naming opens up the space for counter-narratives to exist in reference to the dominant master-signifier. The discursive terrain for those struggling to uphold equal minority constitutional rights for instance, only exists in reference to the socio-political discourse of 'naming' the pivotal group.

Consider my previous point regarding *Senario*'s negative connotations of Chinese social actors through the deployment of Chinese words and phrases. This inclusion introduces the space for an oppositional reading that the Chinese *are already* assimilated within the Malay imaginary, as evidenced by the Chinese phrase in conversational Malay. More significantly – and this point runs across all the episodes discussed – the fantasmatic impossibility of UMNO's surface rhetoric of Malay 'progressivity' would not have been observable if *Senario*'s performances did not demonstrate that 'traditional Malay' is ultimately at odds with New Malay. In this sense, the paradox lies in the fact that this oppositional reading is made possible only because of *Senario*'s strategy of 'answer by example'. By aligning itself to state narratives however, even if *Senario* unearths these spaces, the question is whether the sitcom's largely rural Malay demographic can read beyond these proposed imaginaries of tautological Malayness.

#### *A Senario of Political Discourse*

With themes relating directly to the constituents of the Malay category, it would be easy to regard *Senario* as a comedy about Malayness or a satire on Malays – and following that notion – a form of 'ethnic humour'. This however, does not account for its evidently (supra)Malay Malaysia televisual imaginary. Is this a

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<sup>445</sup> '*Kami*' indicates the exclusive first person plural, the 'we, but not you' or 'us, but not you'. '*Kita*' indicates the inclusive first person plural, i.e. 'all of us', which includes 'you'.

satirizing of a supra-Malay society<sup>446</sup> or Malaysian Malay society? Can it even qualify as 'satire' or 'parody', or even parody to achieve satirical humour?<sup>447</sup> What qualifies? The K-pop possession in *Salah Sangka* definitely does, but certainly not the didacticism in *Ta Ti Tu* or *Negara Chekpa Merdeka* (except maybe the 'rapper boys'). In fact, as indicated, *Senario* seems to be more didactically driven than it is satirical, in any true sense of the word.

This vagueness about *Senario* tangentially foregrounds the point in Chapter 1 about its classification as a sitcom, for as previously noted, *Senario* is unusually sparse on actual humour, satirical, ethnic, or otherwise. Even in episodes with more on-screen laughter, the degree to which laughter/humour is featured is still comparatively lower than American sitcoms, for instance. As first mentioned in Chapter 5's discussion of *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, the humour in *Senario* serves an ideological role where it attempts to naturalize the dominant meanings of the text's signifiers by proposing when and what should be interpreted as funny. In effect, this humour aims at glossing over nuances of arguments like the privileging of the traditional over the urban-modern in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*, and *Bina Semangat*, as well as the Malay-Chinese narratives in almost all the episodes viewed. *Senario*'s humour also inoculates the text against contrarian questionings over its performatives, such as the sitcom's ethnic caricaturizing in *Tandas Awam*, *Jejak Karun*, and *Salah Sangka*'s, as well as its gender stereotypes in *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*, and *Bina Semangat*, among others.

The text proposes instead, that the positions/narratives put forth by *Senario* should be laughed at and are, in reality, not viewed as problematic by the wider Malay community. *Senario*'s humour thus serves a didactic function that socializes and familiarizes viewers on the terms of membership into the wider

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<sup>446</sup> It is ironic that despite Malay enthusiasm at including Indonesians as 'Malays' in Malaysia, Indonesians oppose any attempts at reductively categorizing them as 'Malays'. Joel Kahn for instance, noted how those who called themselves 'Indons' in Malaysia, see themselves as being culturally and morally superior to Malaysian Malays, as well as being not as close-minded (2006, xx)

<sup>447</sup> To put this into context, *Senario* 'parodies' an assortment of specifically Malaysian character types and like most satirical humour, depends on its audience recognizing the social groups to which the characters belong.

community of Malay for it homogenizes the worldview and values of the viewer/s presumably to that of the dominant group. As discussed in the previous sections, there are, among others, ethnic and religious hierarchies of differences featured within *Senario*. The text's humour in this sense, aids in entrenching these tiered relations as natural. That *Senario* aims to be didactic is a fact that becomes more evident when we consider the instances where there is an absence of laughter accompanying the sitcom's over-valourizing of pro-Malay communitarian narratives – for viewers are instead, encouraged to take these positions seriously. Therefore, even if *Senario*'s laughter/humour is deployed liberally in some episodes, the sitcom is still comparatively more didactic. This is especially evident when we account for both its considered absence, and deployment, of humour.

There appears to be a shift in *Senario*'s focus from Malaysian society in the earlier years, towards supra-Malay society in the later years. This change in focus specifically illustrated how Malaysian Malay lived-experience is imagined as imbricated in the wider supra category. Perhaps *Senario*'s shift is merely symptomatic of the increasing frequency in, or insistence on, speaking of Malaysian-ness solely as Malayness. This trajectory certainly aligns with national discourse. In this respect, we are discussing *Senario* in relation to its racialization techniques and how it reconstructs 'race' and/or 'Malay' in line with popular national discourse. The associability or interchangeability of these varying identities can and does subordinate national identities – both Malaysian and Indonesian.

It bears reiterating here that the *Dunia Melayu* (Malay World) movement is first and foremost, a political notion. By alluding to an imagined irredentist past on a regional scale, Malaysian Malay is recast with historical authenticity. I had previously proposed in Chapter 2 that, among others, this movement may be motivated by a notion that Malay identity needs to be more distinct. The shifting boundaries of Malayness from one transitional national milestone to the next imply that it would need to be constantly re-nuanced. I noted in Chapter 2 that this differentiation between Malay and non-Malay has, from at least the 1960s,

resulted in the evolving categories of *Melayu* (Malay), *Bumiputera* (Sons of the soil), *Bumiputera Melayu* (Malay sons of the soil), *Melayu Muslim*, Muslim *Melayu*, and Muslim. While these categories are an assertion of difference – of what Malay is not, of what is non-Malay and/or what is non-Muslim – they do not seem to include the category of New Malay. More specifically, these evolving categories do not seem to focus on ‘progressivity’ as a determinant of Malay identity. This aligns with what we have observed of *Senario*’s representation of Malayness.

We should recall from Chapter 2 that the New Malay identity was ideologically sutured to the economic growth of the 1990s Malaysia Incorporated initiatives.<sup>448</sup> By 1997, Malaysia had taken the full brunt of the Asian financial crisis that resulted in a pivot back to communalist ethnic nationalism and the rhetoric of Malay values and tradition.<sup>449</sup> The ideological collapse of Malaysia Incorporated consequently led to a popular belief that the accompanying progressive economic-based New Malay identity was unsustainable. By the time of *Senario*’s popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it would follow that *Senario* would have been dis-incentivized from any positive portrayal of the New Malay identity, as was in line with popular social discourse of the time. This may explain *Senario*’s tendency to construct negatively, characters that generally conform to the New Malay archetype while simultaneously staging more traditional characters in a positive light. As observed in our analysis, *Senario*’s negative staging of non-traditional characters is frequently sutured to the ideologically-broad signifiers of ‘the West’ and ‘city’. This negative stereotype is in fact, the only type of New Malay/Other Malay representation featured in all the episodes of *Senario* viewed for this research.

*Senario*’s central subtextual construction of a non-Malay axis of difference thus runs, to varying degrees, across all the episodes discussed. Performing a

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<sup>448</sup> The Malaysia Incorporated brand of economic nationalism was discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>449</sup> In Chapter 2, we discussed the immense dissatisfaction by large segments of the Malay community at the relinquishing of *bumiputera*-owned corporations to Chinese businesses as a national economic recovery strategy after the Asian financial crisis. It was noted that this resulted in the strident revival of ‘hate speech’ against non-Malays.

multitude of Malay characters proposes that you can be Malay in a multitude of ways and yet still be considered (supra)Malay. Characters with (supra)Malay ancestry (eg. Ucop, Daruih, and Jefri in *Negara Chekpa Merdeka*, Basiron in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, the spirits in *Salah Sangka*, and effeminate Kassim in *Bina Semangat*) are subtextually presented as being part of the community even if their behaviour may temporarily deviate from communal approval. In contrast, *Senario*'s 'foreign' characters who do not have Malay ancestry (eg. Basiron's Bangladeshi wife in *Raya ... Raya ... Raya*, the ethnic caricatures in *Jejak Karun* and *Tandas Awam*, and Tan Abdullah in *Kantoi*) are subtextually never fully accepted<sup>450</sup> by the Malay characters even if some of the characters are 'constitutionally Malay'.<sup>451</sup> Interestingly, while *Senario*'s female characters share Malay ancestry, those who deviate from *adat* are, to varying degrees, similarly excluded (Wonder Woman and Catwoman in *Dalam Hati Ada Taman*, and Seri in *Bina Semangat*<sup>452</sup>). In this sense, while a multiplicity of masculine Malayness is accepted, performing interpretations of Malay femininity that goes against the dominant political interpretation becomes the object of *Senario*'s narrative vilification.

From the perspective of the dialectical paradox however, this reference to multiplicity – of Other Malays – can be taken positively as a broadening of the Malay category since various Malay identities are 'acknowledged' on national television. Similar to the Chinese references discussed earlier, the inherent fluidity of Malayness here belies its ethnic syncretism. Framed thus, *Senario*'s subtexts can potentially be considered as subversive, though I argue that they were never intended to serve as a broader critique of UMNO's racial politics or the dominant group's conception of statist Malay identity. That they might be read as subversive, is an indirect consequence borne of a deep-rooted ambivalence to what Malayness truly encompasses – given the periodical shifts

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<sup>450</sup> The only exception is of course, *Gong Xi*. I have already identified in Chapter 5 that the political motivations behind *Gong Xi* makes it unique to *Senario*.

<sup>451</sup> Malay as defined by the Federal Constitution. This was discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>452</sup> While Kassim demonstrates the ability to 'reconcile' with his latent masculinity, Seri is unable to 'reconnect' with her femininity.



in state interpretations, since it usually bends according to the political objective of the period – and what it is meant to unflinchingly exclude.

*Senario*'s significations do at least foreground two points with respect to both Malay identity, and Malay gender relationships. In scripting these narratives, the writers/producers draw from a personal or quotidian interpretation of race and gender relations (and the attendant variables). These interpretations invariably coincide with state determinations on quotidian Malay identity. *Senario*'s motifs of Malayness are thus essentially political discourses on Malay insularity, provinciality, class, village life, Islamic expression, sexual and female repression, and the complete adequacy of mutually-affirming cultural-Islamic systems towards life. By this apparent relatability and reflection of lived Malay reality, is *Senario* thus self-reflexive, in the sense that it contains an image of itself – the mirrored reality for viewers – that in turn translates to viewers' social reality which is then referenced again by producers-writers in a cyclic process. Because *Senario*'s producers and writers draw from their experiences within the same political-social system as the viewers, it would therefore be appropriate to wonder if *Senario* is self-referential. If it is, can we interpret these subtexts as indicative of UMNO's success with its divisive strategies for projecting or displacing collective communal anxieties onto ethnic minorities? Regardless of how we account for these questions, they demonstrate that *Senario* can be regarded as a 'socially engaged' sitcom even though it may represent only one side of the divide. In this sense, we are referring to *Senario*'s engagement with Malay society through the very issues and discourses the sitcom chooses to stage.

*Senario*'s 'social engagement' similarly extends to its female characters. While women's rights may have been on the political agenda in the past, women's economic independence that culminated in the gender movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s led to a more overt challenge by some quarters to state patriarchal and religious power. This may explain the frequent construction of female Malays as deviating from dominant conservative understandings of Malayness and Islam. While the nature of *Minah Kanan*'s and *bohsia*'s deviancies

are the focus of *Senario*'s cautionary narratives, the many other economically successful women who are also *santun* are unrepresented. Instead, the feminine ideal appears to be only *santun* women who are subordinated by their relational identity to men and domesticity.

Considered together, I again contend that these televisual representations foreground the fundamental issue of Malaysian identity today – the rigid insistence on a traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century Malay rubric within an increasingly globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysia. From this perspective, *Senario* reflects two realities about the intricate relationship between Malayness and UMNO. First, it is the culmination of UMNO's Malay social engineering since both the viewers and producers-writers *are* part of the Malay community. Second, if *Senario*'s subtexts are in fact racist, and if they are meaningful to viewers, *Senario*'s significations may be taken as measurable indications of communal (viewers, live audiences, producers, and actors) agreement with statist constructions of Malayness.

Ultimately, *Senario* has the potential for looking 'through' or 'past' statements on ethnicity and religion. However, it instead focuses on encouraging what should be problematized as obstacles to cultural hybridity. Its significations are thus fundamentally at odds with the UMNO government's surface rhetoric of national unity. *Senario*'s frequently racializing subtexts, I am sure, are not unique to Malay programming or more broadly to the genre of sitcom. To varying degrees, I presume that content produced for the Chinese and Indian demographics contain similarly racist signifying elements, often embodying the lowest common denominating elements for immediately relatable characters, narratives, in order to connect with viewers. This observation however, seems to introduce more questions which are better suited for other studies that specifically address them. Some of the potential directions for future studies are outlined in the final section.

### **Extension of Research**

This research represents a first and essential contribution to the study of *Senario*, and Malaysian sitcoms more generally. I have demonstrated the significance of the state within Malaysian broadcasting, and the impact this has had on the performances of Malay identity on *Senario*. I have also shown how these performances of identity reiterate dominant notions of Malayness as understood by the increasingly conservative rural Malay social mindset. As indicated at the end of the last section, there are further opportunities for research that this study opens up. In the next two paragraphs, I will briefly discuss two such extensions of study, both of which relate to themes of nation-building.

One evident lacuna in the scholarship on Malaysian sitcoms is the absence of works on Chinese and Indian language content in general. Within this context, my thesis on *Senario* may be taken as a framework for similar textual studies that focus on these minority language sitcoms and/or television comedy, and Malaysian television content in general. Some questions that may parallel this current work, pertain to what themes these non-Malay Malaysian sitcoms contain, and whether themes similar to those identified in *Senario* are mirrored contextually to minority languages, ethnicity, culture, and/or religion. Moreover, findings from these types of studies can be repurposed for further comparative studies of popular sitcoms (all languages/ethnicity) in Malaysia. Of particular interest are the differences in significations between Malaysian sitcoms in the 1980s and early 1990s (the 'nation-building' era) with sitcoms from the years after 2003 (when Mahathir finally relinquished his premiership).

Of related interest is whether the themes contained within *Senario*, and the discursive position/s the sitcom privileges, are also present within other forms of popular Malaysian media. Since *Senario*'s themes on Malay identity are, as observed, largely determined by political rhetoric and popular communitarian discourse, we are necessarily referring to the presence of these same state-defined understandings of Malay identity within other popular media.

Comparative textual studies between works of different Malaysian media would thus be of great interest.

This study of *Senario* also identifies the gaps or deficiencies that exist in the current political economy of Malaysian broadcasting. From the perspective of policymaking, this thesis has revealed the need to re-evaluate the national broadcast legislation that allows for these essentialist ethnic and religious themes on *Senario*. What recommendations can be made for a revision of current broadcast legislations to circumvent ethnic stereotyping and insularity, and how can these be formulated without being perceived as an erosion of state influence? In short, what implementable revisions to policy can be proposed to the authorities, given the existing political sensitivities? Another related area for potential study is narrowcasting's effects on Malaysian national unity. From this perspective, it would be beneficial to explore how narrowcasting, as practised in Malaysia, can be reframed to encourage cultural assimilation instead of propagating cultural insularity.

These two potential areas for study are examples of scholarship that can be built upon this research. My close reading of *Senario* has demonstrated the various ways by which a dominant form of Malayness is reconstructed on television. I also identified that these reconstructions are deeply rooted in specific dominant historical interpretations of Malay culture and faith. The slippage between political discourse and *Senario*'s televisual representations was foregrounded, and my analysis established the significance of this slippage towards sustaining the position of the nation's dominant political party. While all these are important realities about Malaysian sitcoms, the existing gap in scholarship means that these realities have gone largely unrepresented in academia. With this scenario, this thesis thus stands as the first major study of a Malaysian sitcom, and the first ever analytical reading of *Senario*. It is also the first to engage with the longest running sitcom to ever air in the history of Malaysian television. More broadly as a framework, this work is the first critical textual study of how statist Malay identity is constructed on Malaysian television. With the realities of present day Malaysia, this thesis is a critically needed step

towards understanding Malaysian sitcoms, and the wider ideological processes of Malaysian television in general.

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