

ACTIVIST FILMS: HOW ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES CONTRIBUTE TO NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

Visual activism can help shape and transform national identity and contribute to nation-building through dialogue on the portrayed socioeconomic and political struggles. This paper examines the part played by activists, with no prior experience in using media, in producing alternative narratives that seek to resist, reformulate, or review state-offered perspectives in Malaysia on various issues faced by the nation through documentary films for public engagement and action. These activists used film to mobilize their campaigns so as to reach a wider audience and to obtain greater impact. This paper shows the specific capacity of film as a powerful social institution in the representation of national struggles and the shaping of public opinion about issues in the country. The analysed films were produced for the Freedom Film Festival, a reputable annual human rights film festival in Malaysia. The activists, who were grant winners of the festival, produced films on various human rights issues, amongst them: death in custody, indigenous rights, and, election and democracy. By studying selected films which were produced for the festival in the past eight years, this paper discusses how the alternative narrative produces a cultural projection in enriching the nation's identity therefore contributes to nation-building. The research method includes interviews with the activists, the organiser of the festival, the panel of judges, and the writer's personal observations from the perspective of being the producer of these films. As these films are screened nationwide, at international film festivals, and are available online, the paper argues the impact of using the activists' notion of alternative narratives to contest but also complement national narratives, despite the country's strict censorship and control of the media.

Keywords: visual activism, alternative narrative, documentary films, nation-building

Introduction

Today, in this age of the easy availability of the internet, social and political awareness has increased among ordinary citizens. The recent democratization of media space has allowed many more voices to contribute, contest, and provide alternative narratives. This paper will present a critical analysis of alternative narratives that seek to resist, reformulate, or review state-offered perspectives in Malaysia and will evaluate their impact. These alternative narratives are through documentary films produced by Freedom Filmfest, a reputable annual human rights film festival. It is the main idea of this paper to highlight that alternative narratives contest but also complement national narratives where these stories connect Malaysians past, present and future. This paper will also indicate how these contending accounts produce a cultural projection in enriching the nation's identity and as the alternative narratives are produced by the people, this creates a collective identity formation of the nation which in itself legitimize public power and therefore contributes to nation-building.

Media in Malaysia

Malaysia once monopolized information in its mainstream media by media ownership and strict censorship laws, but now, in this digital and it age, the internet technological transformation has been able to generate alternative media. Authoritarian control over the visual message evaporated overnight as activists used camera phone visuals to challenge the dominant narrative imposed by governments and rulers (Mahavera, 2015). The use of online social media, such as Facebook, Twitter; new media such as YouTube; and blogs and online news portals is growing rapidly and enables access to information which, in turn, enables civic participation and empowerment. In 2014, about 67% of the Malaysian population – about 20.1 million Malaysians - were online users (InternetWorldStats, 2015). Leading government and political opposition figures are active on Facebook and Twitter as they have correctly understood the internet as an important driving force for civil society's political role (BBC, 2013). Through the internet, the available visuals have levelled the market place of ideas and, according to Freedom House (2015), the internet has become the main platform for free discussion and for exposing political corruption in Malaysia.

Malaysia has some of the toughest censorship laws in the world with regards to suppressing media freedom and the freedom of expression. The authorities exert substantial control over the media and can impose restrictions in the name of national security (bbc, 2013). The government of malaysia has recently embarked on a sedition charging spree since august 2014, targeting the political opposition and academics, activists, and media who have been critical of the government and by early 2015, more than 150 persons were implicated with such charges (ifex, 2015). These people have been investigated or have been charged under the sedition act, mostly for raising critical concerns on national issues and for criticising the government or ruling officials on social media. Striking examples include a malaysian cartoonist zulkiflee anwar alhaque, better known as zunar, who is known for his criticism of the ruling coalition, was charged with nine counts of sedition over a series of tweets he sent out in april 2015 where he condemned the country's judiciary (aljazeera, 2015). Within the same week, a news portal, *the malaysian insider*, was raided by the police and the managing editor, lionel morais, news editor amin shah iskandar, and features and analysis editor zulkifli sulong were arrested under the same law (aljazeera, 2015). In the latest amendments to the sedition act in april 2015, the government is enabled to block electronic media that is deemed to be seditious – a move which extends the government's reach into malaysia's largely uncontrolled online media landscape. The changes to the sedition act drew criticism at home and abroad, including criticism from the united nations (reuters, 2015). According to lawyers for liberty executive director, eric paulsen, if the sedition law is to be applied to its fullest extent, social media or the internet would be silenced beyond recognition (jong, 2015).

Despite of the suppressing acts on freedom of the media and on expression, the desire to make changes in political reform and to demand for a deeper democracy than in the past has compelled the public to use social media for advocacy and dialogue. According to yeoh (2011), this can be seen from the trend and role of using social media in a rally, known as *bersih 2.0*. The *bersih 2.0* rally aimed to bring about reform in the electoral process and was held on 9 july 2011 with an estimated 50,000 people who took part in the rally. For welsh (2011), *bersih 2.0* was part of the global rise of the freedom generation, a generation learning to overcome their fear, and one that attaches great value to civil liberties and human rights. This rally ushered in a new form of grassroots politics consisting of four entwined elements: social media embedding, people power, broad civil society participation and multi-ethnicity (welsh 2011).

Alternative media and nation-building

The participation of civil society and the illustration of people power in using social media to create their own narrative demonstrates the significance of the role of alternative media in nation-building. Alternative media serve as a space of counter culture which is intrinsically linked to the deconstruction of corporate media power. In this respect, alternative media practices often challenge mainstream or dominant discourses through the collective elaboration of powerful imageries that make visible alternative points of view about their societies (mattoni et al., 2010). Nation-building stories would then be stories that challenge the so-called freedom spaces or lack of freedom spaces defined by the government today and those stories actually then speak to the nation because it disagrees with the nationhood as prescribed by the authority of the majority (joseph, 2015).

Furthermore, lee (2005) points out that the narrative of nation-building is multi-layered, and, at times, it is difficult to distinguish the narrative driven by the nation-state for less elevated intentions like mobilizing electoral support in comparison to the commitment to nation-building. Therefore, stephenson (2005) argues that nation-building must allow the participation of the civil society. This will allow new arts, literature, and the theatre to offer new expressions and interpretations of national identity and integration which have extended the parameters of social consciousness of ordinary citizens and encouraged new voices that have a bearing on state policies and action - these are alternative sources of nation-building which compete and complement the state's narrative (wang, 2005).

Alternative narratives in freedom filmfest's films

Freedom filmfest, a reputable annual human rights film festival in malaysia, began as a platform to show alternative films which possibly may not be screened in the mainstream media channels because of media censorship and strict control in implementing media laws (har, 2015). The festival was initiated in 2003 by komas, a non-governmental organisation in malaysia which focuses on using creative and participative methodology in its human rights education and advocacy work. The festival was launched with the festival tag line, "dare to document". This tag line represents the spirit of the festival, which is to encourage civil society to document and share their stories without fear or hesitation. The festival builds on the culture of documenting or telling stories about malaysia's social realities, from the platform of human rights. Through screenings and discussions, the goal is for the malaysian public to develop a better understanding and move towards solving issues arising in malaysia. The festival holds screenings in various states in malaysia annually. In addition, members of the civil society, and non-governmental organization partners have held private screenings of these films as well.

Some of the films produced by the festival have been selected to be screened in international film festivals such as the one world film festival and the aljazeera international film festival. The films are also uploaded online and some of the films have over 100,000 views with the highest, so far, of 2,200,000 views for the film *she's my son* by indrani kopal.

The festival has a collection of malaysian narratives told through short documentary films on the themes of freedom, human rights and democracy (joseph, 2015). The documentaries are produced from the perspectives of either the filmmaker who represents a segment of society who is marginalized, or an activist who is involved in an issue which they feel is important to be represented but which is not highlighted in the mainstream media (har, 2015). The filmmakers and activists, who were grant winners of the festival, produced films on various human rights issues, amongst them: death in custody, indigenous rights, national history, and election and democracy. The issues in the films are proposed by the filmmakers, and therefore it also represents the issues that they feel are important to be represented. Producing these kind of films is an act of activism in the sense that the participating civic society is telling the authorities and other malaysians that we should be producing alternative narratives to tell the different sides of a story (har, 2015). These documentaries speak of our nation but it may differ from the narrative of the majority who try to instil their idea of a nationhood, and as these scripts are written, rewritten and reviewed, the documentaries can be viewed as a nationhood script (joseph, 2015).

Freedom filmfest is a creative tool and a platform for filmmakers and activists to reach the general public who do not know these stories (har, 2015). This allows room for critical discussion on issues. The films are used as a reference point to motivate discussion and dialogue which is needed if a nation is to move forward (har, 2015).

Three selected films from the festival will be analysed and discussed to examine how alternative narratives contest and complement national narratives. The films are: *rights denied* (“hak dinafikan”), *the tale of the tinderbox merchant and the oil spill* (“kisah tauke mancis & minyak tumpah”), and *ten years before independence* (“sepuluh tahun sebelum merdeka”). The analysis is based on the views from the filmmakers of these films, the festival director, and a festival judge of the judging panel for selecting the festival film grants recipients. The writer's personal observations from the perspective of being the producer of these films will also be included.

Freedom filmfest film: *rights denied* or “hak dinafikan” (original title), 2010

This documentary was written and directed by abri yok chopil and shafie bin dris, both of whom are from the orang asli, the indigenous minority peoples of peninsular malaysia. Orang asli is a collective term (which means ‘original’ or ‘first people’ in the malay language) for some 18 ethnic subgroups of 180,000 people, representing 0.6% of the national population (iwga, 2014). The orang asli are widely regarded as being peninsular malaysia's original inhabitants, in the sense that they pre-date the arrival of malays (nicholas, 2012). This is the first documentary film made for the malaysian audience which was produced by orang asli and featuring their community and their long-standing issues (chopil, 2015). Previously produced videos by the community were made specifically for their community viewing only. *Rights denied* contains the orang asli voices, many of whom are speaking out for the first time, highlighting indigenous land rights issues and various issues faced by the indigenous community, like educational opportunities, infrastructure development, their livelihood, culture, and on their right to have autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs. According to the filmmaker, chopil (2015), this film speaks about how the existence of the orang asli community is negated, though they are citizens of malaysia. Chopil's film shows that the orang asli have been suppressed by the government, specifically where the state authority, through the department of orang asli affairs (jheoa), dictates the final decision in all matters concerning the administration of the orang asli. The orang asli are subjected to a system akin to the apartheid system of south africa, namely, they have separate development, where there is a separate law and department to control the community. And, even until today, the department has not been headed, managed and administered by the orang asli themselves (sipaun, 2013). This film pushes the agenda for the malaysian audience to recognise the orang asli community as being members of our nation, to value their unique cultural identity and livelihood, and to give them human dignity in this recognition (chopil, 2015).

The mainstream media coverage of the orang asli community has conveyed the information that the orang asli are progressing, with good infrastructure, such as roads, in place, and that the government is assisting in the development but the reality is otherwise - the orang asli community is trailing behind in these areas (chopil, 2015).

Chopil opined that one impact of this film was that many members of the orang asli community now have a strong critical consciousness of their situation, and they are now demanding their rights. There are more orang asli representatives engaged in various networks and who have joined indigenous activist groups, such as the national indigenous peoples network of malaysia (joas), to raise indigenous concerns (chopil, 2015).

The film validates the marginalised community represented in the film and, as a result, the community is empowered and confident to then continue to recount the film’s narrative to others (har, 2015). For example, the orang asli are becoming more aware of their rights over their land and they have become increasingly insistent on government attention and knowledgeable in asserting their claims and concerns.. The orang asli community have asserted their rights by writing letters, making police reports, writing memorandums, and taking the dispute of land ownership to court (chopil, 2015). In recent years, the judiciary has recognised the orang asli’s rights to their ancestral land. One such example is the malaysian high courts in 2014 affirming the rights of 82 orang asli from the semaq beri tribe to their ancestral land which spans 7,000 acres between maran and kuantan (anbalagan, 2014). In addition, civil societies like the human rights commission of malaysia and the malaysian bar council have also highlighted issues and brought attention to orang asli problems and governmental neglect (chopil, 2015)

The process of nation-building includes the narration of stories of the hidden people, like the orang asli, who are basically from a small section of society and who are not given adequate and accurate coverage in the media (joseph, 2015). *Rights denied* is the voice of the “original people” of this land who are entitled to the rights and benefits of being citizens of malaysia. The orang asli community’s narrative needs to be heard especially when their legitimate rights to their land, livelihood, culture and, above all, human dignity has been denied. *Rights denied* is pivotal in providing this alternative narrative to counter and perhaps, at times, complement the state’s narrative to build a collective national identity which then contributes to nation-building.

Rights denied co-director shafie continues to document stories of his community and his son edits these films. They then publish the films on the internet. There are other members from the orang asli community who uses videos to express their concerns, ideas and aspirations. This use of alternative media provides continuous narratives of the orang asli and bridges the indigenous and non-indigenous population. These narratives of the indigenous society and the people serves as historical documents and can be retrieved anytime. The development of the orang asli on-going narratives produced by their community can be seen to be more inclusive and participatory and this represents a very important component in the nation-building process.

Therefore, *rights denied* and the on-going narrative produced by the orang asli opens for interaction and discussion, which is important for nation-building.

Freedom filmfest film: *the tale of the tinderbox merchant and the oil spill* or “kisah tauke mancis & minyak tumpah” (original title), 2010

The tale of the tinderbox merchant and the oil spill was written and directed by journalists, sheridan mahavera and siti nurbaiyah nadzmi. This documentary delves into the two protest incidents that transpired when a 150-year-old hindu temple was relocated from a muslim-majority neighbourhood to another neighbourhood. Malaysia is a plural society, multi-religious, and has a population of 30 million which includes malays, chinese, indians, and more than 200 indigenous ethnic groups. With regards to religion in malaysia, muslims constitute 61% of the population - a large majority of the malaysian population, and hindus constitute 6% of the population, as shown in figure 1 (department of statistics, 2014).

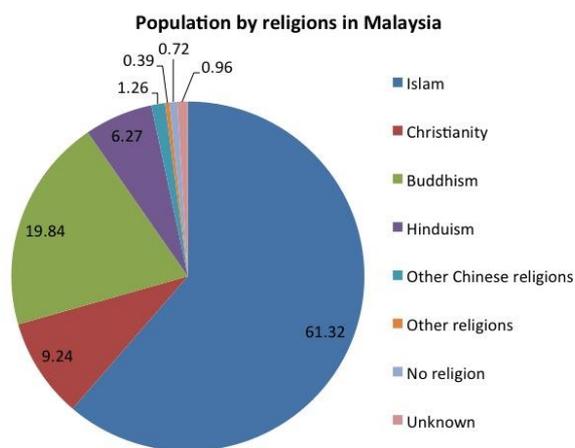


Figure 1: population by religions in malaysia

In this incident of the relocation of the temple in 2009, there were, firstly, a group of people claiming to be from the neighbourhood (section 23, shah alam), where the temple was to be relocated, who dragged a severed head of a cow from the state mosque to the state government building to protest the relocation of the temple. For the hindus, the cow is a sacred animal and though the cow head protest was isolated to just one section of shah alam, this incident had actually stirred raw nerves throughout the country where both muslims and hindus were affected by this brazen protest and required explanation as to why it occurred (mahavera, 2015). The second incident happened a week later, in a town hall meeting between the state government and section 23, shah alam residents to discuss the temple's relocation. The meeting erupted into a screaming, chaotic fracas (loyarburok, 2010). The filmmaker, sheridan mahavera, first wrote about the cow head protest when he was a journalist for a local newspaper daily in 2009. He felt that media coverage of the protest did not really delve into the issues which sparked the incident, such as the management of places of religious worship in a plural society, and communal tolerance towards different religions. Mahavera said, "with the documentary, i set out to try and answer why such an obscene act was carried out by supposedly ordinary malaysians and whether this outburst was a sign of something worrying that was lurking behind the facade of inter-communal harmony. At the same time i wanted to also propose solutions to how we can better manage inter-communal ties, given how seriously malaysians take their respective religions" (mahavera, 2015).

Filmmakers mahavera and nurbaiyah felt the need to expand this narrative in depth so that the film was a "lesson that needs to be learnt so that similar things do not get repeated" (mahavera, 2015). As malaysia is quite sensitive on rights and religion, many filmmakers have traversed that fear of offending as in the case of *the tale of the tinderbox merchant and the oil spill*, which was produced in a very objective manner (joseph, 2015). This documentary helped the audience to be more reflective on the incident to realise the need for discussion to manage the needs of different religions and to continue to engage in this public discourse (mahavera, 2015). Filmmaker mahavera noted that, "the film also highlights the need to educate ordinary malaysians to accept and respect the rights of others to worship how they choose, and most importantly, to provide adequate space and funds to allow them to practice worship".

The tale of the tinderbox merchant and the oil spill seeks to promote inter-communal understanding and this is part of the nation-building process for malaysia, being a multi-religious country. Furthermore, the film can be viewed each time the issue of managing differences and communal expectations are raised. In 2014, a severed cow head was found at the front gate of a state assemblyman's house, who is a hindu (looi, 2015). In april 2015, some 50 muslims who were reportedly residents of taman medan, urged a church in taman medan to take down the cross it had affixed to its façade, claiming that the cross was a challenge to muslims living in the area (lim, 2015). These events, among other such incidents, needs to be unpacked behind the sensational headlines to understand why this has happened. *The tale of the tinderbox merchant and the oil spill* reminds us how extremism can easily be fuelled when we fail to understand the context of the dispute, and to manage such situations beyond the emotions (mahavera, 2015). This film can be used as a tool to drive the public to have a discourse on managing and respecting the needs of different religions. Though malaysia has a long way to go to achieve inter-communal harmony, the work has begun, where existing narrative in the mainstream media needs to be unearthed. *The tale of the tinderbox merchant and the oil spill* offers the nation a space for the discourse of ideas, sharing of knowledge, and for strategies to develop a more critical analysis of our diversity and a way to move forward together.

Freedom filmfest film: *ten years before independence* or "sepuluh tahun sebelum merdeka" (original title), 2007

Ten years before independence tells a crucial story about the people's struggle for independence in 1947. This is missing from malaysia's history textbooks and official independence celebrations. The film was written and directed by fahmi reza, a visual activist. He said, "i wanted to narrate the history of the peoples' struggle for independence, after world war ii and the japanese occupation, and before the emergency in 1948" (reza, 2007). Reza also made this film to remember and acknowledge the contributions of the political left in the country's struggle for independence as very little is actually said about the role they played. He wanted to show that it was the people in the political left who started fanning the people's nationalistic spirit for independence. Eventually, a democratic movement was born that united the people of all races to oppose the british in both malaya and singapore. The documentary focuses on the aspirations of that period, which peaked with the publication of a people's constitution, drafted by a multi-ethnic coalition, putera (centre for people's power) - amjca (malayan council of joint action) and a general strike was called on 20 october, 1947. By 1948, many of the leaders and members of putera-amjca that spearheaded these remarkable events, had been arrested under british emergency laws and their story was swept under the carpet of a revised version of malaya's history (yap, 2008). Ten years later, in 1957, malaya gained independence from the british.

People in power write the history of our nation and they will present a historical narrative that sheds a positive light on them in order to legitimise their current position (reza, 2007).

Narratives that do not support this dominant narrative are left out, as it would challenge or counter their narrative. *Ten years before independence* was to recognise that there were others who fought for, and contributed to independence. This film showcased unsung heroes who fought the british and were calling for independence a decade before the actual independence itself. From accounts of the national struggle and collective memory, portraits of national heroes can emerge (wang, 2005).

As such, the process of nation-building has been reflected in the rewriting of the country's history (wang, 2005). This film fills in an important gap in the general knowledge of malayan history where it tells the poignant yet inspiring tale of those who battled but lost, and because history is written by the victors, their contributions and their sacrifices have been ignored for too long (sharom, 2007). *Ten years before independence* provides an alternative narrative where the history of the quest for independence began much earlier than narrated in the history textbooks. It tells how progressive the thinking was then, with the proposed constitution of a secular and multi-racial nation. As the dominant narrative is influenced by the agenda of those in power, it is crucial to balance this power with the participation of the civil society by providing alternative narratives to help citizens to be aware about the nation's actual history. History is a powerful tool in nation building, where it writes the biography of the nation and the internet can be a repository for alternative views and alternative retellings of the nation's history, including reza's *ten years before independence*. Reza's unpacking of history of the politics is a direct contribution to honest nation building for malaysia (joseph, 2015). This film is an alternative retelling of our nation's history and by being on the internet, it is part of the global knowledge bank and accessible to all, no matter what the ministry of education chooses to do with history textbooks (lee, 2008).

Conclusion

Nation building is an ever changing scenario. National narratives emerge and in response, alternative insights arise, resulting in resistance, and the process repeats itself. Nations will certainly differ in their experience of this process; some will experience a more rapid narrative generation and renewal, while some will approach such narrative contestations far more peacefully than others. Regardless, it is perhaps unnecessary to discuss the authenticity of the imagines and far more fruitful to understand why, who and what is being said about who and how one belongs (vasu et al., 2013). Freedom filmfest's films explore the narratives of the nation and, by documenting the views of the people, records the resistance and problems that arise from particular narratives this is an important work as it contributes to the nation's history in the future (har, 2015). The different threads found from the festival films' narratives of national history, community struggles, democracy and racism contribute to, contest, and provide alternatives to the dominant narratives, and when weaved together, strengthens the country's nation-building. And forms as nation narratives where the festival's films contribute to discussion and dialogue with its audience to articulate their aspirations of what their country as an extension of themselves, stands for. When individuals and communities within the nation constantly define and redefine national narratives through the festival's films and the discussion and dialogue, they articulate their aspirations of what their country as an extension of themselves, stands for. This further projects that the national identity is continuously mediated and formed from a collective view.

In the new generation of malaysians born after independence there are those who are more concerned about the integration of marginal communities, of religious and cultural pluralism within a more democratic system, of preserving the country's environmental and cultural heritage, and of more equitable sharing of the gains from development (wang, 2005). One mode of resistance to dominant narratives that fail to capture all of the nation can be seen in the internet. The internet is a place for people to organise civil-society initiatives for unity as there is a sense of great freedom on the internet (lee, 2008). While uniting the nation, these narratives reveal the state's shortcomings, undermining its power and challenging its legitimacy. With recent amendments to the sedition act, the authorities can now exert control over the online media landscape. Where can the alternative stories now be shared? Perhaps we can look back to the spirit of the festival and its original tag line, "dare to document". This tag line can be used today to encourage civil society to continue to document and share their stories without fear or hesitation. This quest will keep the cycle of narration and re-narration ongoing leading to an inclusive and participatory nation involved in the continuous unfolding of the concept of nationhood. It is important to do so, where the reaction to what we are not will be from the voice of the people reclaiming malaysia as our nation (joseph, 2015).

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