Being Modern, Malay, and Muslim in the Movies

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Abstract: Serious analyses of media, especially popular media, and how those media are negotiated can provide insight into broader social and political change. Popular media provides us with an arena where global meta-forces—globalization, politics, economics, etc.— intersect with daily life. Analyzing wider social and political-economic issues in Malaysian politics using Malay language cinema of the late 1990s as a media example illustrates this point. In this paper the role of Malay language cinema as both a catalyst for and receiver of Malay lower-middle-class dissatisfactions with authority, especially in terms of the Malaysian government's attempts at religious authority, brings new insights into the intersection between media, politics, religion, and society in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Malay language commercial cinema may not seem the most fruitful medium for analyzing broad social movements—few of the films are commercially successful and most are widely held to be of poor quality. However, this is indeed a productive arena for analyzing some of the recent events in Malaysia. Malay language commercial cinema is a rather unwieldy term, but since cinema audiences in Malaysia still tend to self-separate ethnically, the term helps to distinguish feature films made by and for a Malay audience and to convey the complex socio-political reality of cinema production, exhibition, and consumption in Malaysia. While cinema has a long history in Malaysia—films have been exhibited there since the late 1890s and made in Malaysia (known as Malaya prior to Independence in 1957) since the 1930s—it was the move of the major production companies from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur in the 1960s[1] and the economic incentives for Malay Malaysians and heightened ethnic nationalist discourse of the 1970s that dramatically shaped the films of the 1980s and 90s. There will be a more detailed discussion in the section on cultural producers, but a key point to consider is that often within this medium there are uncomplicated representations of what it means to be modern, Muslim, and Malay.[2] In real life, as opposed to *reel* life, issues of class, gender, and ethnicity undercut those simplistic representations. An example of this discrepancy would be Malay women who negotiate all three identity expectations (modern, Malay, and Muslim) through their dress. However, in commercial Malay language films it is only the Malay and modern elements of identity that are typically represented—see for instance depictions in *Gemilang* (Yusof Haslam 1997), *Hanya Kawan* (Harith Iskander 1997), *Panas* (Nurhali Ismail 1998), or *Puteri Impian* (Aziz Osman 1997).[3] Investigating why something as important as Islamic identity markers would disappear in film leads to analyses of the positionalities of the various constituents involved in cinema—producers, consumers, the government, and the public.

I conducted research on Malaysian cinema in Kuala Lumpur in 1997-8. This was an interesting period because of the economic crisis and the political/social fallout from the arrest, trial, and imprisonment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998.

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Since this time the political situation in Malaysia has changed, in some ways dramatically. I will extrapolate some core issues from this discussion of the elision of Islamic identity markers to analyze some of the wider political and economic changes in the country. Indeed, as the new generation of urban Malays, second generation urban born, comes into adulthood, many of the issues discussed in this paper are even more crucial to understand than they were for the earlier generation.

POLITICAL HISTORY AND "OFFICIAL" ISLAM

Malaysia's colonial history has left a profound mark upon contemporary society, particularly the latter period of British rule, from the 1870s to Independence.[4] Between the 1870s and early 1900s, the Protected Malay States (most of the west coast of Peninsula Malaysia) remained under the nominal control of their respective Sultans, but in fact were run by British Residents (Stevenson 1975, 193). Many of the specific policies of the Residents were aimed at maintaining the status quo: compliant Sultans in charge, British traders trading, Chinese and Indian laborers laboring (both groups having been brought into the country as a colonial workforce), and Malays rice farming (Stevenson 1975, 193; Shamsul 1986, 20-21).[5] The ramifications of this situation continue to have consequences: Malay alienation from other ethnic groups, the schism between Malay nobility and the non-elite, and the increasing emphasis on Islam as principal signifier of Malay identity (especially in rural areas and along the east coast), combined to form critical cleavages in Malaysian society. Building towards Independence, upper-class Malays, who had more interaction with Europeans, formed a distinct nationalist ideology, one geared towards a nation-state (though still communally determined), whereas Malays from the left and the Islamic faction formulated their anticolonial activities and discourses upon different ideologies (Roff 1974; see also Shamsul 1995). Nevertheless, the one arena where the various Malay nationalisms agreed was in terms of the *Malay* aspect of their agendas. This area of agreement would be central to the formulation of the postcolonial nation-state of Malaysia in 1957.

Since Independence, Malaysia has been governed by the *Barisan Nasional Baru* (the New National Front), a coalition of communally oriented parties. UMNO (the United Malays Nationalist Organization) dominates the other parties in the coalition, and controls the Malaysian government. However, in the 1969 Malaysian general elections, the ruling coalition, and UMNO in particular, lost an unprecedented amount of seats to the (largely Chinese Malaysian) opposition. Race riots resulted, and led to the overthrow of the ruling members of UMNO by younger party members. After order was regained there was a "tremendous expansion of state intervention and the public sector" (Jomo 1995, 4). Alongside developing control over mainstream media outlets (newspaper, radio, and television), the most important of these interventions was the New Economic Policy (NEP). The government intended the NEP to promote national unity by reducing poverty amongst Malay Malaysians and leveling ethnic economic imbalances, especially between the Malay Malaysians, or *bumiputera* (literally princes of the soil, but usually translated as sons of the soil), and Chinese Malaysians.

Alongside economic policies, and at least partially in answer to Malay activist demands, acts such as the National Language Policy (1971) and the National Cultural Policy (1971) were implemented, formally instituting the Malay language (*Bahasa Malaysia*) and culture as the official language and culture of the Malaysian nation-state. The election of Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister in 1981 signaled an expansion of the government agenda, particularly in terms of creating a university-educated urban Malay middle-class. Prior to this urbanization and education push, Malays were largely rural dwelling. As late as 1970

85.2% of *bumiputera* were rural, forming just over 25 percent of the urban population, while at the same time accounting for over 50 percent of the total population (*New Straits Times*). Via the NEP and Mahathir's policies, particularly through higher education and the resultant white-collar employment, these socioeconomic discrepancies were tackled. The government created a large newly urban Malay middle-class. Kahn terms this group, which would include small business owners, midlevel administrators, and/or bureaucrats, NQTs—as in Not Quite There (1996, 14). As Kahn's term suggests, everything did not go completely according to plan, and the creation of this socioeconomic bloc in itself led to crises of cultural, ethnic, and religious identity. As an instance, the rapid urbanization of Malays meant that as late as the 1990s a large number of urban dwellers were either rural migrants or first generation urbanites. This posed a challenge to the village values they had embodied, with the outcome that dissatisfactions arose almost as fast as the urban population, particularly complaints that economic redistribution of wealth has not reached the average Malay, but only Malay elites. Another area where these dissatisfactions have shown up is in the context of Islam.

The Malaysian government has long had a direct hand in defining what is legitimate Islamic doctrine. Historically, the UMNO heartland was the rural village. This heartland came under a dual threat, first from the government's own urbanization policies, and then from *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* or PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, the predominately Malay Islamic opposition party). To counter PAS' encroachment, UMNO undertook—arguably was forced to undertake—a more Islamic program and discourse. The growth of *dakwah* (revivalist Islamic) groups in the 1970s and 1980s compounded this issue (Shamsul A.B. 1994, 1995). By making certain *dakwah* groups illegal and co-opting others, and through the Department of Islamic Development and its National Fatwa Council, UMNO attempted to establish itself as the authoritative force regarding Islam in Malaysia (Ackerman 1991; Peletz 1993), and has claimed a determining role in any arena that falls under the Fatwa Council's areas of responsibility (*cf.* Martinez 2001). Simultaneously, the government continued with its capitalist agenda in an attempt to create a new heartland among those who would be theoretically the most beholden to NEP policies—the newly urban middle-class Malays. This two-pronged approach has resulted in a discourse that has been referred to as nationalist Islam or religious nationalism (Lee 1990; Ong 1990, 270). However, the aforementioned dissatisfaction amongst that same socioeconomic group has also manifested itself in a lack of political support for UMNO (Case 2008; Weiss 2009). This rupture was exacerbated by events in the late 1990s.

By the time the Asian financial crisis hit in 1997, the relationship between then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had begun to deteriorate. While Mahathir was on vacation, Anwar independently took radical steps to change what he described as the widespread culture of nepotism and cronyism within the Malaysian government. This move alienated Mahathir and others in UMNO. Further, during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Anwar introduced an austerity package that was criticized by Mahathir (Rabia Naguib and Smucker 2009). In 1998, matters between Anwar and Mahathir came to a head. Police were instructed to investigate the truth of claims that Anwar was homosexual, and soon after he was fired as Deputy Prime Minister, arrested, and charged with corruption and sodomy. In April 1999, Anwar was sentenced to imprisonment for six years. Two months later, he was sentenced to nine years on top of the six.

Anwar's trial and conviction were widely discredited both within and outside of the country (Lee and Tham 2007). Shortly after Anwar was fired, he and his supporters initiated the *Reformasi* (Reform) movement, which conducted several mass demonstrations and

rallies against the government. The *Reformasi* movement led to the formation of a new multiethnic-based party named *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (National Justice Party), which later became *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) or People's Justice Party. PKR made huge gains in the 2008 general election (Weiss 2009) and became the largest opposition party in parliament. In 2008, PKR, PAS and DAP (Democratic Action Party, a secular and multiethnic, though largely Chinese Malaysian, opposition party) formed a new alliance named *Pakatan Rakyat* (People's Alliance). Since the late 1990s, both UMNO and PAS have seen their support bases shift. PAS took over elements of UMNO's rural Malay support. Conversely, UMNO gained and then lost support from middle-class urban Chinese and Indians who in the late 1990s and early 2000s were worried about the Islamicist language of many of the opposition groups (Rabia Naguib and Smucker 2009), but who then turned away from UMNO over widespread concerns over crime and corruption (Weiss 2009). In the 2013 general election, *Pakatan Rakyat* managed to increase its share in parliament and for two consecutive general elections denied the government a two-thirds majority.

CULTURAL PRODUCERS, CLASS, AND IDENTITY

Cinema in Malaya/Malaysia, like most of the world, began with exhibition. While not much is known about early film production in Malaya, there is evidence that in the early 1930s two Indians, S.M. Chisty (a businessman) and B.S. Rajhans (who had some movie experience), joined their talents to produce *Laila Majnun*.[6] Fundamentally, the film was an Indian movie set in Malaya and, possibly building on the popularity of Tamil and Hindi films, was commercially successful. This success kick-started Malayan film production, though, as many commentators note, Malays played a relatively small role in the industry (Lent 1990; Hatta Azad Khan 1997; Amir Muhammad 1998; van der Heide 2002). The typical state of operations at that time was that Chinese/Chinese Malaysians were owners and technicians and Indians/Indian Malaysians were directors. Malay Malaysians were limited to acting and translating the scripts and directors' demands into the Malay language (Lent 1990: 189; Hatta Azad Khan 1997: 80).

This segregation of roles largely remained the status quo until the 1970s, however the Golden Age of film production (the 1950s to late 1960s) also needs to be mentioned. While up until the 1950s there were other film production companies, the sheer number of films from two companies—Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris—their production practices, and their control over all three elements of the film industry (production, distribution, and exhibition) ensured their monopolization of the local industry. The 1950s and 1960s were also a period of commercial success for Malaysian films, with broad appeal in Malaysia and Indonesia (largely due to the talent of P. Ramlee).[7] The Malaysian film industry was situated in Singapore at this time, which became a problem as it was becoming increasingly clear that the union between Singapore (predominately Chinese) and the rest of Malaysia (predominately Malay) was not working. Whether or not political uncertainty or economic issues were the cause, the result was that Merdeka (Independence) Film Productions was created in Kuala Lumpur, and production shifted north (Hatta Azad Khan 1997, 102; van der Heide 2002). While Merdeka films were initially successful, the lack of talent and equipment began to interfere with their commercial viability. By the late 1960s the Golden Age of Malay cinema had come to an end, however, another stage of the industry was about to begin.

By the 1970s, the major studios were either closed or in serious trouble. However, in 1972 two artist-run production companies (Saris Artis and PERFIMA) along with Sabah Films, introduced a new era in Malay language film—the *bumiputera* era—where the role

of Malays shifted from acting, translating, and go-fering to being in charge of production themselves (Hatta Azad Khan 1997, 123-4). The early films by these companies were commercially successful, though not at the same level as in the Shaw/Cathay-Keris days, and this factor, along with economic incentives brought by the NEP, meant a flourishing of Malay-owned film production companies (Lent 1990; Hatta Azad Khan 1997; van der Heide 2002, 149-50). In the longer term, however, most of these production companies were not successful and seldom made more than one film before closing.

Another issue for Malay filmmakers, as noted in the previous section, was the increasing Islamicisation of politics and society during the 1970s and 1980s. This was the situation until into the 1990s. Aside from a couple of successful production companies (such as Grand Brilliance and Skop Productions), commercially successful directors (Yusof Haslam and Aziz M. Osman), and critically and internationally recognized directors (such as Shuhaimi Baba and U-Wei Hj. Shaari), this was largely a period of declining viewership and increasingly desperate attempts to both resurrect an audience and satisfy censorship restrictions. Further, Zaharom Nain's (1994) critiques of the Malaysian cinema industry at the time held true, the industry was Kuala Lumpur-centric and for the most part in the hands of people from a particular social constellation— predominately the long-term urban Malay middle-class.

While writings on Malay economic advancements post-NEP have focused upon the development of a new Malay middle-class (Sloane-White 2008), the fact that there *was* an urban Malay middle-class prior to the 1980s (O'Conner 1995), and that there has never been a monolithic middle-class in Malaysia (Sloane-White 2008), are points less often acknowledged. Indeed, in my conversations with them many Malay informants distinguished between lower-middle, middle-middle, and upper-middle-class (see also Sloane-White 2008, 457). Within Malaysia, any discussion of the *middle-class* involves discourses of modernization processes and communal advancement (Shamsul 1995; Gomez and Jomo 1997; Sloane-White 2008). Sloane-White makes a further important distinction in pointing out that academic analyses of the middle-class typically focus on consumption and success, but Malay discourses on what it means to be middle-class often emphasize production and failure (2008). Importantly, in this same discursive arena, middle-classness is also inherently linked to city dwelling.

As was discussed above, rapid urbanization and the Malaysian government's nationalist Islam policies effectively mean that the newly urban lower-middle to middle-middle-class Malays are situated between three poles: nationalism/ethnic identity via the government and the village; capitalism/modernity via the government, the elite, and the West; and Islam via the various influences of Qur'anic authority, government policies, Islamic groups, and PAS. There are, in other words, extreme pressures on this group to act simultaneously as modern urban dwellers, as good Muslims, and to maintain village mores and practices (Jomo 1996; Kahn 1996). Upper-middle-class and elite Malays do not face these same pressures, and their positionality tends to be closer to a Westernized concept of modern national life. This brings us back to Zaharom Nain's point about the Malay language film industry of the 1990s—that the films are a product of a particular *type* of cultural producer, one who is very much spatially and ideologically situated and invested in a particular constellation of expectations and assumptions of what it means to be a modern urban Malay. Further, as cultural producers, these filmmakers are able to promote their vision to other groups of people. However, the vision itself is questioned and contested.

One of the areas affected by the government's move to establish itself as the authoritative force in terms of Islam concerns censorship. One of the key components of the Censorship

Board is the participation of the Department of Islamic Development. Their guaranteed participation is almost the only aspect of the censorship process that is consistent. Indeed, there remains uncertainty as to just what is or is not allowed, resulting in debate amongst Board members as to what should and should not be censored. Guidelines on certain issues, such as the depiction of the female body, are quite clear (Kaur 1993, 89), but not always enforced or standardized across different media. An example comes from the film *Panas* (*Panas* translates as "Hot" and can have the same sexual connotation as it has in English). A scene that has been cut from the film has the heroine (Aleeza Kasim) romping in the ocean in a bikini. Despite not actually appearing in the film, however, a still from the scene was featured in an advertisement for an entertainment magazine article about the actress.

Other issues are not even this straightforward. A former Censorship Board member told me that as members only serve temporarily, much of the censorship consists of nothing more than personal *bête noir*. For Malaysian filmmakers the penalty for misjudging an unclear and malleable situation can be serious, ranging from cuts to their film to a financially ruinous ban, or even to prison sentences. The result is that the filmmakers typically play safe and self-censor. This is particularly true in the case of depictions or discussion of Islam—one possible reason that Islamic markers may be left out of film depictions of Malay women.

MALAY WOMEN

Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, is often depicted as an area where women have a higher status relative to surrounding areas, such as China or India (Errington 1990, 1-8; Ong 1990; Carsten 1997, 24). While Malay women do play a large and visible role in daily life, both at home and in public, this point does not negate that we are still talking about *relative* levels of autonomy. Village-based studies in Malaysia have provided rich ethnographic detail about rural/traditional gender expectations (Peletz 1993; Roziah Omar 1994; Carsten 1997).[8] Gender socialization begins at a relatively early age, and is typically quite explicit, even didactic. Daughters are trained to display Malay/Islamic female values and duties (Roziah Omar 1994, 22-29; Carsten 1997, 65-66). Malay girls are expected to be obedient, quiet, and feminine (Ong 1990, 261). Further, by the time they are 7-8 years old, daughters are expected to help with housework, and within a few years will be looking after their younger siblings. The Islamic ideals of honor and shame are taught at home and in religious classes, and Malay society places high value upon women personifying those principles (Ong 1990, 261-2; Roziah Omar 1994). Between these various expectations, Malay girls are somewhat constrained in both their spatial movement and social interaction. Over time these roles and rules have shifted, as new opportunities such as employment and university have arisen, and class plays a large factor in how rigidly Malay gender ideology is patrolled (Ackerman 1991, 199-200).

During the 1980s in particular, the Malaysian government opened the country to outside investment (Jomo 1996; Gomez and Jomo 1997). One result of this was the burgeoning of factories owned by multinational companies. Young women specifically were recruited away from their families and villages to work in factories, as they would theoretically provide both cheap and docile labor (Ong 1987; Ackerman 1991). At the same time the government was undertaking its Islamicisation programs (Martinez 2001), and this shift in the Islamic discourse has interacted with other socio-political and economic processes to create sites of tension and possibility (Ong 1990; Ackerman 1991; Ong and Peletz 1995). Kahn, in his discussion of the NQTs, lists many of the characteristics of lower-middle-class Malays; a principal characteristic is that of being a devout Muslim (1996; see also Martinez 2001).

The practical effect of all of the above upon Malay women has been to create two contradictory official roles: as workers, consumers, producers of the next generation, and prudent household managers on one hand; and the Islamic role of moral guardians and exemplars on the other (Ong 1990).

As an example of an instance where nationalism, Islam, and the West (or perhaps better termed "internationalism") may or may not manifest, female dress provides an intriguing microcosm of wider negotiation strategies and possibilities. Modes and articles of dress are linked to certain narratives of Malay female identity. The *mini telekung* (shoulder length headscarf) or other types of headscarf (*tudung*), and the way they are worn, are symbols of Islamic consciousness/practice (Martinez 2001). Certain dress styles: *baju kedah*, *baju kurung*, and *baju kebaya*, are marked as being "traditional" Malay garments.[9] Other clothes, which are marked as international or modern (such as jeans, T-shirts, and trainers), form yet another mode. Further, for many if not most women it is not a matter of wholly one or another of these modes, but of combining them—for instance wearing a *tudung* with a T-shirt and jeans. Dress modes simultaneously manifest social pressures and ideologies, allow for individual negotiations of those pressures and ideologies, and are expressions of individual personality.

As with the earlier discussion of tensions on the middle-class, it is worth stressing that gender expectations do not affect all Malay women equally. Upper-middle-class women are less likely to work in paid employment. Further, elite and upper-middle-class Malay urbanites are not *marked* as being devout, which is not to say that individuals are not religious, but that religion is not as important an identity maker for these socioeconomic groups. As we have already noted, it is the elite/upper-middle-class Malay viewpoint that is typically represented in Malay language films, which is another factor in the elision of a crucial identity marker in those films.

DRAWING THE THREADS TOGETHER

In a situation where the government has control over media via strict censorship policies—especially regarding the legally permitted portrayal of Islam through the Department of Islamic Development and its National Fatwa Council—media depictions of Islam are either avoided or represented in officially sanctioned modes. The pragmatic hesitation by the cultural producers in their depictions of Islam is compounded by a disjuncture between the film producers and the consumers of those films as to what it means to be a modern Muslim Malay Malaysian. While there is a general public agreement regarding gender and religious roles and responsibilities, there remain arenas of the three components under discussion—modern, Muslim, and Malay—where there is an active negotiation on both a personal as well as a societal level as to how these roles and responsibilities are to be enacted in the context of a modern, multicultural state (Furlow 2009; Weiss 2009).

As the issue of political and religious authority discussed earlier demonstrated, middle-class dissatisfaction stems from the failure of the government to allow space for the *unintended* consequences of modernity, for the changes of needs and desires of subjects who are no longer satisfied with past modes of authority, lifestyle, gender, etc., who acknowledge the new spaces created by modernization and desire the ephemeral results of that modernization (Weiss 2009). In this case, the new middle-class is amongst the most vocal and articulate in expressing their discontent. These dissatisfactions are expressed in various terms of identity—namely what constitutes being Malay, and what Malay means in the context of the Malaysian nation-state (Furlow 2009), in the discourses surrounding the failure of economic promises, and continuation of outdated modes of authority. These elements play out

in the very public arena of Malaysian cinema.

In mainstream Malay language cinema the Western/modern elements of dress and identity, and to a lesser extent Malay elements, are represented most often (as for instance in the films listed in the Introduction). The disappearance of a key element of Malay women's identity is problematic for what should be a significant component of a young, urban, middle-class Malay cinema audience. Not only do Malay women from that social group almost literally not see themselves and their complex and nuanced identity negotiation in these films, they often regard the upper-middle-class Malay version that they do see as inauthentic and even insulting. An example of this occurred while I was watching *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (*The Last Malay Woman*, dir. Erma Fatimah, 1999) with three Malay female university student friends.[10] The film itself is about a male Malay theatre director who goes in search of the "real" Malay character. He meets several different people who represent aspects of what it means to be Malay: a Westernized older man; the man's daughter, who represents the ideal Malay; and her Islamic fundamentalist fiancé. However, when we first see the actress (Vanida Imran) who plays the last Malay woman, she is walking on the beach with her *tudung* simply draped over her head. This is not the proper way to wear a *tudung* in public—it should be tight around the face so that no hair is seen. To make matters worse, the director is also a well-known actress and it is common knowledge that she herself does not wear a headscarf. When the actress came on screen all three of my friends expressed anger and annoyance at how she was wearing her headscarf. One said, "She [referring to the director] is telling us how to be a Malay and she doesn't even know how to wear a headscarf properly!"

The preceding anecdote expresses much of the dissatisfaction that the new urban middle-class feels towards authority. While in this case that dissatisfaction was over the representation of Malay femaleness in a Malay language film, the implications of the frustrations and particularly how they were formulated demonstrate a more fundamental dissatisfaction. During my fieldwork, Malay informants frequently pointed out the bad behavior of elites, particularly in terms that illustrated the elite's lack of Muslim morality. As Sloane-White (2008) suggests, this may be a rhetorical device that both frames and contrasts the economic failure but moral superiority of the lower-middle-class with the Malay elite and the government, who have failed to live up to their religious and political authority.

CONCLUSION

The young women mentioned in the preceding story are now working adults and their frustrations have taken new forms of expression. The second generation of urban middle-class Malay women, the younger sisters and daughters of the women discussed by Ong, Kahn, and others, are no less invested in the tripartite negotiation that Malay women have been undergoing, and indeed their negotiations are arguably even more precarious than those of the previous generation. It is this generation that came to maturity during the *Reformasi* movement, the creation of new political parties, new media sources not under the direct control of the government, and new opposition movements. They not only are dissatisfied with authority, they are also the generation least invested in the discourses and praxis of the authorities (whether that be UMNO or the Malay elite) and, as Shamsul A.B. argues (*Malaysian Insider*), behind the huge swing to the opposition in the most recent general elections. Just as a Malay filmmaker could raise the ire of her audience by misrepresenting something as fundamental as how to wear a *tudung* appropriately while simultaneously describing the woman mis-wearing the headscarf as an ideal example of modern female Malay-ness, the government faces a similar crisis of authority. Their claims to religious

authority in particular have led to negative reactions from core elements of their support base, while simultaneously the government is also being pushed into either promoting or tacitly condoning actions that alienate non-Muslims. The attempts by various Islamic groups to ban the use of the word Allah by non-Muslims are an example.

While the situations of the filmmaker and the government are not the same, the underlying issue of failing to live up to the responsibilities that come with claiming authority for oneself are similar. Serious analyses of media, especially popular media, and how those media are being negotiated can provide insight into broader social and political change. Malay language commercial cinema acts as a synecdoche for the aforementioned failure of authority, whether that is the failure of authority amongst the Malay elite, the government's attempt at authority via censorship, or the more general social and political failure to live up to a religious authority.

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NOTES

1. Contemporary Malaysia consists of peninsular Malaysia or West Malaysia and the states of Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo. During the colonial period and briefly after Independence, Singapore was also part of Malaysia.

2. Within the independent Malaysian cinema that began to proliferate in the late 1990s and early 2000s (such as in films by Yasmin Ahmad, Osman Ali, or Amir Muhammad) these representations are more nuanced and complicated (Amir Muhammad 2010; Baumgärtel 2012).

3. One difficulty with researching commercial Malaysian cinema is that the films seldom make it to a market outside of their Malay language base, and thus are seldom subtitled or available to purchase legally outside of Malaysia. While there are links to many of these films on social media such as YouTube, they tend to be pirated copies uploaded illegally.

4. Andaya and Andaya (1982) is a good general source for information on Malaysia's colonial history.

5. While there has been a Chinese presence in Malaysia since the 1400s, the majority of Chinese immigration occurred during the British colonial period.

6. There is debate as to whether *Laila Majnun* is indeed the first film made in Malaya (Hatta Azad Khan 1997, 73 n. 1), but more relevant to this analysis is that the film helped to establish what would become the status quo discussed in the text (Amir Muhammad 1998, 25; Lent 1990, 189).

7. P. Ramlee is an entire article himself. One of the biggest stars in Southeast Asia, P. Ramlee was successful as a singer, actor, and director, and had both cross-generational and cross-cultural appeal in Malaysia and outside of the country (Hatta Azad Khan 1997; van der Heide 2002).

8. For more information on village/traditional gender Carsten (1997) provides a good overview, while Ong (1990) and Peletz (1993) add more information on how these roles were evolving due to the political-economic changes Malaysia underwent in the 1980s.

9. *Baju kedah* is a short loose blouse over a sarong, *baju kurung* is a long loose blouse over a sarong, and *baju kebaya* is a fitted jacket over a sarong. They are listed here in what would be regarded as an ascending order of elegance.

10. *Terakhir* in the title is usually translated as last, but can also be translated as ultimate.