

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION IN MALAYSIA

By;

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The purpose of this paper is to unveil some of the history and development of documentary programme making in Malaysia, from the establishment of the Malaysian Film Unit (currently known as Filem Negara Malaysia) by the British colonials office in 1946 after the World War II until the period of commercialisation of television stations in Malaysia. The Malayan Film Unit was part of the Department of Information set up by the British government after the Second World War in 1946 that serve as propaganda tools to disseminate the government's information. Therefore it is significant in this study to share the information about the British people involvement in setting up documentary film movement (as part of documentary film movement in Britain) in Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya).

After the independence in 1957 the Malaysian government continue to use the Malayan Film Unit (currently known as Filem Negara Malaya) together with radio Television Malaysia (RTM) to disseminate propaganda messages in the form of thematic government campaign to the people of Malaysia. As a result documentary films produced by Film Negara and RTM are packed with official and thematic government campaigns that appear to be dull and less attractive to the audience. The commercialisation of mass media in Malaysia has significant influence on the state of documentary production in Malaysia. Currently producers and television stations give emphasis on the human interest issues spiced up with sensational elements such as superstition and horror to increase the rating of the programmes. These type of programmes received criticism from the Ministry of Information as they could weaken the mind of the audience especially children and youngster.

It is important to note that in writing this paper, the writer is reliant on the verbal accounts and the personal notes of the respondents of the interviews, as very little information about the history documentary film making has been published and written academically in Malaysia. The main source of information for this chapter is gathered from the respondents of the in-depth interviews, some of whom have kept archive materials on the history of the Malaysian documentary production as well as their through their experience involve in the production of documentary programmes..

In writing up the early history of Malaysian documentary production by the Malayan Film Unit, the researcher owes gratitude to Mr. Hassan Muthalib, an enthusiast who collects archive and historical materials about film and documentary in Malaysia. Mr

Hassan also is a former Filem Negara staff member, and worked in Filem Negara for more than 20 years. His vast experience in Filem Negara makes him one of the most important resources for this study.

This paper also deals with the development of documentary filmmaking in Malaysia and its relationship with television as medium of screening. The researcher also conducted in-depth interview with the producers in several television stations and independent production companies in order to investigate the problems and challenges faced by the producers to produce documentary programmes. Besides that the researcher's personal working experience as a documentary producer with one of Malaysian private television station has exposed him to a great deal of information about the involvement of the station with documentary productions.

History of Documentary Filmmaking in Malaysia - Malayan Film Unit.

The history and tradition of documentary filmmaking in Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya) started during the British occupation after World War II in 1946. It can be inferred that documentary filmmaking was started in Malaya as part of the "documentary film movement" led by John Grierson in Britain. Aitken (1988) pointed out that between 1927 and 1939, the movement became established within two consecutive government film units, namely the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit (1927-1933) and the General Post Office Film Unit (1933-1939). John Grierson and his group believed that documentary could play an important role in social, cultural and educational enlightenment (Grierson 1966, p 144-55). Documentary films educate and inform the audience by expounding issues and problems faced by society, such as crime, war, health etc. In this context, documentary programmes are seen as appropriate agents of change within society as well as catalysts for national development.

During the Second World War (1939-1945) the movement became part of the Ministry of Information as the Crown Film Unit produced propaganda films for the war effort. During the war period, the overwhelming use of films as well as newspapers as propaganda tools was a result of the belief that the media are powerful enough to influence human thought (Wright 1975 p, 79).

In the case of Malaysia, the first Director of Department of Information and the founder of Malayan Film Unit, Mervyn Cecil Frank Sheppard¹ (d. 1994), asserted that the Malayan Film Unit as part of the Department of Information emerged as an "ill wind" that was established as a result of the Pacific war and the occupation years between 1942 and 1945. Sheppard conceived the dream of a government film studio when he was within the grey, cultureless walls of Changi Prison some time in 1943 during the Japanese occupation of Singapore. When the Japanese army surrendered to the British government in 1945, there was no immediate prospect of fulfilment of Mr Sheppard's dream of establishing a film unit for Malaya. When Ralph Elton, the Director of British Crown Film Unit, came to Kuala Lumpur some time in 1946, he told Mr Sheppard about the existence of film equipment left by a British Army Film Unit, which had been producing newsreels and documentary material of the Burma Campaign. The British Army Film Unit was disbanded in Singapore and its equipment was offered for sale. Mr Sheppard quoted Ralph Elton's remark:

“It’s an awful shame. There’s that fine equipment in Singapore. The colonial office won’t buy it, and it will soon be sold in the open market”
Sheppard 1956

Initially, the offer was made first to Lord Killearn, Commissioner General of the British government for South East Asia, but was refused without reference to the newly established Department of Public Relations (the parent of Department of Information) in which Mr Sheppard was the first director. The equipment included a Wall Camera, an animation Camera and a complete Houston Film Developing Machine. Mr Sheppard met Sir Edward Gent, the Assistant Permanent Under-Secretary of the British administration, and permission was granted for his department to acquire the equipments at the cost of AS50,000.00. (MFU 10th. Anniversary Brochure 1956)

The equipment was brought to Kuala Lumpur in July 1946 with the help of the Army Film Unit by parachuting it down. In the same month Mr. Sheppard met several local people who worked with the Crown Film Unit with the intention to recruit them for the newly established Malayan Film Unit. Seven local people were recruited; Osman Shamsudin, Lee Meow Seong, Jumaat Jaalam, Wan Mat Embun, Eusof Khan, Hassan Rashid and Ismail Kulop. All these people had been working with the Crown Film Unit production crew led by Ralph Elton for about nine months. Ralph Elton at that time was making a documentary film called *The 5 Faces of Malaya*. Mr. Sheppard also managed to secure the tenancy of a derelict and abandoned Japanese Paper Mill in Bangsar Kuala Lumpur, which was to be the first office of the Malayan Film Unit (Sheppard M.C 1956). The same site was used for ten years until the government erected a new building in Petaling Jaya in 1965.

In order to train the local staff with the new equipment, Mr Sheppard engaged three former production staff of the Army Film Unit, namely Gillie Potter², Harry Govan and Rex Abbot. Mr Harry Govan was appointed as the first Head of the Malayan Film Unit from 1946 until 1949. Mr Gillie Porter was a combat cameraman with the Army Film Unit and the person who designed the tiger emblem of Malayan Film Unit that remains as the logo for Filem Negara Malaysia until the present.

From its inception, the Malayan Film Unit was involved in the production of documentary films depicting the social, cultural and political conditions of the country under the British administration. The first documentary film produced by the Malayan Film Unit in 1947 was the *Face of Malaya 1* (duration 12 minutes), which depicted the housing problems faced by the people of Malaya’s urban and rural areas. Among the other documentary programmes produced in 1947 were the *Malayan Gazette* No 2, the continuation of the *Malayan Gazette 1* and *The Royal Gift*, the Wedding of Princess Elizabeth as the Head of the British empire. In 1947, the Malayan Film Unit produced eight magazine programmes, two feature films, one commercial and three film trailers.

Gradually, from time to time, the Malayan Film Unit started to produce more and more documentary film for local and overseas screening. Some of the documentaries produced by the Malayan Film Unit were also brought to Britain for screening to the UK audience. All the production work was done with insufficient and poor production

facilities in a studio shaded by “attap”³ leaves. In 1948 the Malayan Film Unit produced the second series of the *Face of Malaya* and 6 episodes of the *Malayan Gazette* (no. 3 to no. 8). In spite of the poor production facilities, the Malayan Film Unit received recognition from various parties, locally and abroad. One of the documentary films produced by the Malayan Film Unit in 1949, entitled *Riwayat Kinta*, won an award in the 1950 Edinburgh Film Festival.

As mentioned in the second chapter, as similar to the situation during the in the United Kingdom cinemas remained off limit for documentary films screenings. In the period of 1940s and 1950s commercial cinemas films achieved its golden age as commercial films directed by and starring P Ramlee gained popularity to the audience. Nevertheless the Malayan Film Unit had remedied the emptiness of the “kampung” (village) life with free street entertainment, with mobile film units being used to entertain the “kampung” folks as well as injecting the government’s propaganda messages. During childhood, the writer experienced the joy of watching the street cinema and open space cinema brought by Filem Negara (Malayan Film Unit). As a child, even though the researcher did not really understand the underlying messages of the film, the pleasant environment of watching films in an open area together with his family and the rest of the “kampung” folks made him feel jolly. Mr Sheppard, commenting on this, wrote:

“By April 1947 when I went on leave, the MFU had produced numerous issues of the Malaysian Gazette and was steadily earning a reputation for skilful photography and its work was appearing all over Malaya both in cinemas and on the mobile units which were beginning to become a new feature of “kampung” (village) life”

(Sheppard: 1956)

In 1948 the Malayan Film Unit received further recognition in the report of the Film Unit Advisory Committee that was laid down at a meeting of the Legislative Council. Article 21 of the report said:

“The members of the committee wish to record their appreciation of the high technical standard reached by the unit and of the impressive progress made in training local Asian technicians...”

(The Malay Mail 12 Sept 1948)

Realising the functions and contributions of the Malayan Film Unit to society and the government, in December 1949 the Chief Secretary of the Federal Secretariat proposed that it be declared as a permanent feature of the government. Initially when the Malayan Film Unit was part of the Information Department it was funded on a year-to-year basis. With this declaration, however, the Malayan Film Unit was awarded a Colonial and Development Grant worth US\$250,000. The grant was used to build a new studio for the Malayan Film Unit. Gillie Potter prepared the design and layout of the new studio. Several places in Johor Bahru, Penang, Taiping and Jalan Gurney, Kuala Lumpur were proposed as potential sites for the new studio.

In 1950 the Malayan Film Unit produced several other documentary programmes that depicted social and political life in Malaya. Among these documentaries were *News of Malaya* No 2 and 3; *Air Supply* - covering the air drop to the army, *Harvest Ahead* - the establishment of the University of Malaya; *Malayan Gazettes* No 10 to 15;

Singapore Rubber Factory Fire; Malayan-Thai Police and Wanted For Murder - tuberculosis (Health promotional documentary). In the same year, the British administration in Malaya also invited Stanley Hawes from the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit to make a study into the purposes, roles and viability of the Malayan Film Unit. As a result of this study, Stanley Hawes proposed that the Malayan Film Unit should be expanded and equipped with better facilities and equipment.

Malayan Film Unit and Communist Insurgency

The year of 1950 also witnessed the start of the insurgency of the Communist Party of Malaya. In order to launch propaganda campaigns against the communists, once again documentary films were used to disseminate the government's information to the public. O'Sullivan et al (2000) defined propaganda as the intentional control, manipulation and communication of information and imagery in order to achieve certain political objectives. In the context of the Malayan Film Unit, Wong Khye Weng (1965) saw the emergency and the reign of terror of communism as a blessing in disguise to the youthful Malayan Film Unit. During the emergency, the Malayan Film Unit was entrusted with the frontline role in the "battle for the hearts and minds" of the people. The production staff of the Malayan Film Unit, such as Goh Meng Kwee (who joined MFU in 1951), were also trained by Gillie Potter to use new cameras that could capture aerial views of the bombing operation, by using the Eyemo single lens cameras that attached to the underside of the bomber aircraft and were activated whenever a bomb was dropped. In recognition of the skill of the Malayan Film Unit staff, Stanley Hawes wrote in his study:

"The technical and creative standard of films produced by the unit are reasonably high, particularly in recent films like the *Harvest Ahead* and *Air Drop*".

(Wong Khye Weng 1965)

In order to launch a propaganda campaign to fight communist insurgency, the Malayan Film Unit doubled and even tripled its production of documentary programmes. There were 24 emergency films and 250 gazettes films produced to disseminate the government's information to the people of Malaya. Among the famous documentary films produced during the period on insurgency were:

- i. More Communists Give Up
- ii. The Surrendered Enemy Personnel
- iii. Journey by Jungle River
- iv. Chik's Great Adventure
- v. Jungle Fort
- vi. Proudly Presenting Yong Peng

Additionally, the Malayan Film Unit also produced 7 films in a package entitled "Driving Communism Out of Malaya", shown in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the British Council Theatre in London. Some of these films won awards, including Best Non Dramatic Film 1957, Diploma of Merit 1957, Best Documentary 1955 and Best Planning in 1956 (Khor Eng Lee 1976) One of the films was produced in the form of documentary-drama entitled *The Adventure of Yacob*, and was then re-titled *Abu Nawas*. This film was directed by Cyril Randal and had a duration of 82 minutes. In this film, Gillie Potter made the first film effect shot used in Malaya by

matting in an airfield with planes moving into the windows of the commanding officer's room. In describing the success of this film, Khor Eng Lee (1976) wrote;

“In 1954 the Tiger made its impact on the international arena with special performances at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the British Council Theatres in London. A package presentation of 7 films entitled *Driving Communism Out of Malaya* surprised and impressed film buffs and connoisseurs.”

In 1951, the British government also appointed General Sir Gerald Templar to lead the Malayan and British armed forces to fight against the communist insurgency. Sir Gerald Templar introduced Tom Hodge (former Chief of Publicity for the British Army in New York) in 1952 to be the new Director General of the Malayan Film Unit, replacing B.H Hipkins. Sir Gerald Templar believed that films could play important roles during the war period. During World War II, it was proven that German and British had successfully used documentary films as propaganda tools to spread government information (Barnouw, E 1987). During this period the mobile film projectors owned by the Department of Information were frequently used in urban and rural villages to spread the government's messages. By projecting documentary films that contained government information and propaganda messages, the Department of Information hoped that the people of the various races in Malaya, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians, would unite against the communist belief and expansion. In this regard, a magazine entitled “Young Malayan” carried an editorial that included these lines:

“It came as a revelation to most people that not only was the technical standard so high, but that films could be so obviously valuable as a means of instruction, of breaking down racial barriers, of interpreting the customs and culture of one community to another and generally being a uniting factor in the growth of Malaya towards nationhood”.

During the communist insurgency, the Malayan Film Unit also faced the tough and challenging task of producing films depicting army personnel on the front line. In 1953, two members of the Malayan Film Unit camera crew were killed in a plane crash in the jungle of Cameron Highland Pahang. The two cameramen were covering the air dropping of supplies to army personnel in a jungle camp. Also on board were three aircraft crew and four Lancashire personnel. Only one person survived the accident. When the footage was recovered from the scene of accident, the films showed some of the scenes of the army in action. The total length of the film recovered was 15 minutes. In 1955 the Malayan Film Unit made 74 new films including half a dozen instructional shorts on Home Guard training that involved military training of local people, including village folks, on how to use weapons to fight against communists. One of these instructional videos was known as “*How To Use a Shot Gun.*”

In 1955 the Malayan Film Unit also started the production of colour film by producing a documentary film entitled *Timeless Temiar*. *Timeless Temiar* was a classic film on the life of the Temiar tribe – the orang asli aborigines that live on the West Coast of the Peninsular Malaya. This film, directed by a Malay director, Mohd Zain Hussain, won the best non-dramatic picture award at the 1957 Asian Festival, was awarded Diplomas of Merit at the Edinburgh and Venice Film Festivals in the same year, and also won high praise at 7th Berlin Film Festival. *Timeless Temiar* has

also been a best seller on the commercial and television circuits in America, Canada and the United Kingdom. Another colour film produced by the Malayan Film Unit, entitled “Hassan Homecoming”, also won two coveted prizes; the *Best Documentary* award and *Youth in Action* best planning at the Singapore Film Festival. (MFU official ceremony brochure).

Malayan Film Unit and Independence

In 1957, Malaya was preparing itself for independence from the British colonial rule. During this period once again documentary films were produced within the thematic issues of the government campaigns for the people of Malaya. Khor Eng Lee (1976) pointed out that during the first decade of its existence, the film unit was actively involved in the promotion of inter racial understanding, the psychological war against militant communism, and political and constitutional development towards self-government and eventual independence. The spirit of independence in documentary films could be easily seen in several productions such as “*Why register?*” and “*How To Vote*” that encouraged people to exercise their rights in voting to establish a government. The culmination of documentary production for the independence film genre was the recording of the announcement of Independence in August 1957 by the first Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Adul Rahman Putra Al Haj. To commemorate the start of independence, the Malayan Film Unit produced two historical films about “*Merdeka*” (Independence) that were called “*Milestone To Merdeka*” (duration 19 minutes) and “*Merdeka for Malaya*” (duration 38 minutes). The other outstanding films about independence were “*The Birth of Malaysia*” and “*Bapa Malaysia*” the latter being a tribute to the founder of Malaysia Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the first Prime Minister. (Khor Eng Lee 1976).

In June 1957, two months before Malaya achieved independence on 31st August 1957, the management of the Malayan Film Unit changed hands. Ow Kheng Law was the first local person appointed to be the Chief of the Malayan Film Unit. He replaced Tom Hodge, the British national appointed by Sir General Gerald Templer. Ow Kheng Law remained as the Chief of the Malayan Film Unit until he left the unit for the newly established television department as the Director of Television in 1963. Following the appointment of Ow Kheng Law to the new department, Mohd Zain Hussain was appointed to be his successor in the Malayan Film Unit (See Table 1)

Continuing the legacy of the British colonials, documentary films and trailers were used widely by the new government to spread its messages and policies. The government continued to use the Malayan Film Unit as a propaganda weapon to stop the communist threat from influencing the people of Malaysia. In 1960 the Malaysian government abolished the State of Emergency brought about by the communist insurgency. To mark the official ending of the Emergency in 1960 the Malayan Film Unit produced a documentary film entitled *Test of Nationhood*, which depicted the stories of those who had sacrificed themselves in the fight against the evil forces of communism. Subsequently, with the development of Malaysia in 1963, the country faced a new threat in the form of confrontation launched by President Sukarno, the leader of neighbouring Indonesia. In this difficult situation, the Malayan Film Unit was once again called upon to disseminate the government’s messages to the people

inside and outside Malaysia. In describing the roles of the Malayan Film Unit, Khor Eng Lee (1976) wrote:

“The Film Unit became involved in the country’s struggle for survival on two fronts - to maintain solidarity at home and to project the image of our peace loving nation to the outside world. The story of this bitter conflict was most poignantly depicted in a documentary “*Challenge to Peace*” produced on the eve of the fall of Sukarno....”

In the same year as the confrontation with Indonesia, the Malaysian government launched its first national television network. The introduction of the television service in 1963 brought a new era of free visual information and entertainment services to the audience’s homes. The appointment of Ow Kheng Law, the former Chief of the Malayan Film Unit, to be the Director of Television was made on the basis that film and television have a common way of disseminating information, namely through the animated visuals. Ow Kheng Law, describing the similarity and differences of production film and television, said:

“I am really interested in television because of the nature of its instantaneity. I was trained in film but film takes more time to finish. Once a film project is done, the events had already elapsed for two or three weeks. In television, an event could be recorded and transmitted all over the country within hours. This is the power of television”.

(Quoted by Karthigesu 1994b:26)

Table 1 Chiefs or Directors General of Filem Negara from 1946 until the present

PERIOD	NAME
1. 1946-1950	Harry Govan
2. 1950-1952	B. H Hipkin
3. 1952-1954	Tom Hodge
4. 1954-1963	Ow Kheng Law
5. 1964-1970	Mohd Zain Hussain
6. 1970-1973	John Nettleton
7. 1974 (Jan-Mac)	Raja Iskandar Raja Mohd Zaid
8. 1974-1983	Hj Osman Hj Shamsuddin
9. 1983-1984	Datuk Abdul Aziz Wok
10. 1985-1987	Mokhtar Daud
11. 1987- 30 th April 1997	Shaharom Shahaban
12. 1 st . Sept 1997-14 th July 2000	Syed Hamzah Syed Osman
13. 1 st . Sept. 2000- present	Raja Rozaimi Raja Dalnish Shah

Source; Filem Negara (2003) [<http://www.filemnegara.gov.my/organisasi.htm>] accessed 20/10/03.

The establishment of Film Negara

In 1965 the Malayan Film Unit changed its name to Filem Negara in an effort to give a more nationalistic outlook to the film unit after the independence of Malaysia. The Yang Dipertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Putra Ibni Al Marhum Syed Hassan Jamalullail performed the renaming, in conjunction with the launch of the new studios and buildings of Filem Negara in Petaling Jaya Selangor on 24th August 1965. The new

4.1 million dollar studios along Jalan Utara were built with funds provided under the second Five Year Development Plan of the Alliance government. The studios were also equipped with complete production facilities, including 35 mm Cinemascope as well as Standard Format films and full laboratory facilities for printing and processing of 35 mm or 16 mm Black and White films. Colour film processing came later, when Film Negara acquired new colour control equipment in 1966 (Wong Khye Weng 1965). In conjunction with the launch of the new studio in 1965, Filem Negara under the leadership of Mohd Zain Hussain produced a documentary about itself, entitled "*Sejarah Gemilang Kita*". The documentary depicted the roles and functions of Filem Negara to record in film all historical events, including Independence Day and the State of Emergency, when films were used as a tool of psychological warfare to win the hearts and minds of the people.

Filem Negara has one only branch in Kuching Sarawak (Borneo). The Branch was established in 1967 as a Film Unit of the Sarawak Information Department. The Unit moved to the Aloha Building of the Sarawak Broadcasting Department (RTM). Four years later, the office moved to the Rumah Padi at Crookshank Road in Kuching. In 1979, the office moved back to the RTM complex. (Filem Negara 2003)

Since Film Negara moved to its permanent studio and office in Petaling Jaya, its administrative structure has been tightened up and organised under the control of the Ministry of Information. The establishment of Filem Negara was enacted under the Ministerial Function Act 1969 P.U (A) 126 to carry out the functions outlined below:

- Film production (documentaries and trailers)
- Archival coverage
- Storage and preservation of film materials
- Providing film services
- Film sales/ stock shots
- Film distribution/loan
- Participation in local and foreign film festivals

(Filem Negara 2003)

Continuing the legacy of the British administration, which used the Malayan Film Unit as propaganda tool, the objectives of Filem Negara remain encircled within thematic and propaganda functions of the government, as envisaged in its objective of establishment, namely "to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the local people as well as the international community on the government's policies, programmes and achievements" (Filem Negara 2003). The ruling parties who control the government also use Filem Negara to spread their political messages and information to the people of Malaysia in the form of documentary films. The influence of the ruling parties over the production of Film Negara is explicitly shown in several documentary films about the dominant Malay ruling party UMNO, such the documentaries entitled *Perjuangan Bangsa Pembena Negara* (UMNO 20th Anniversary), produced in 1966, and UMNO 25th Anniversary produced in 1972.

In fulfilling its functions to disseminate the government's messages and information, the Animation Unit of Film Negara was also active in producing short public service trailers in animated form, for events such as the annual festival celebration of Hari Raya Puasa and Christmas. The Animation Unit of Filem Negara also produced

several fully animated government campaign trailers such *Anti Sorok*, *Nyamok Aedes* (Aedes Mosquito), *Jimatkan Air* (Save Water) etc.

The growth of commercialism on television has also created a new “unofficial” function for Filem Negara, namely to produce commercial advertisement films for television channels. The early 1970s witnessed the mushrooming of television services in Malaya with the insertion of commercial advertisements in its shows. At the time, Filem Negara was the only studio in Malaysia that had an animation unit with facilities such as animation cameras. Filem Negara grabbed the opportunity to produce commercial advertisement films that later became a source of financial income for the unit. Among the commercial advertisements produced by Film Negara that appeared on the television networks were advertisements for *Malayan Banking*, *Boh Tea*, *Mophiko* and *Breacol*.

After about eight years of the involvement in short animation trailers, in 1978 the Animation Unit of Filem Negara produced a cartoon animation film entitled “*Hikayat Sang Kancil*” (A Mouse Deer Story). “*Hikayat Sang Kancil*” was first screened on television during the Hari Raya Puasa (Eidul Fitri) in 1984 and received acclaim from the Minister of Information, Dato Sri Adib Adam. The Minister requested Filem Negara to produce more animation films with the insertion of educational elements that could benefit children and youngsters. With the encouragement of the Minister, Filem Negara Malaysia produced more children’s animation films, as listed below:

- 1984 - *Sang Kancil & Arnab* (Mouse Deer and Rabbit)
- 1985 - *Gagak Yang Bijak* (The Genius Crow)
- 1986 - *Arnab Yang Sombong* (The Proud Rabbit)
- 1986 - *Singa Yang Haloba* (The Greedy Lion)
- 1987 - *Sang Kancil & Buaya* (Mouse Deer and Crocodile).

As well as being involved in the production of animated films and trailers, Film Negara also turned to the business of commercial cinema films. The involvement of Filem Negara in commercial cinema was done on the basis that Film Negara should fully utilize the film production facilities in the unit that were suitable to produce commercial cinema films. Filem Negara has the best facilities and equipment for film productions in Malaysia. The first commercial film produced by Film Negara to be shown in cinemas was *Dayang Suhana*, produced in 1977. In 1982, Filem Negara produced another commercial cinema film entitled *Gelombang* in 35 mm with a duration of 124 minutes. Later, in 1983, Filem Negara produced a commercial cinema film entitled *Bila Hati Telah Retak*. This film received several awards in the 4th Malaysian Film Festival 1984 in Kuala Lumpur. In 2003, Film Negara was involved in the production of a commercial cinema film entitled *Embun*. Filem Negara, together with Finas (National Film Board), spent more than 3 million ringgit on producing this film. To insert some patriotic elements and historical value, the film depicted the struggle of a woman named *Embun* and the people of Malaya in fighting the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Nonetheless, the film received some criticism from the public because of the excessive portrayal of sexual elements, as there were two rape scenes in the film (Berita Harian 10/9/2002). A reader of a daily newspaper also wrote in to the forum section of the newspaper criticising *Embun* for copying and aping the Western film genres that portray excessive sex scenes, contrary to the norms and culture of the Malay people. The critic further argued that she was disturbed when watching the film with her children

because the rape scenes were not suitable to be viewed by children and youngsters. As a government department that functions to educate the audience, Film Negara should produce films that are suitable for viewers of all ages, including children as well as adults. In this regard it seems that Film Negara stands against the hopes and expectations of its founder, the late M. C. C Sheppard.

“In the age when the influence of commercial films is often detrimental to the ethics and moral of the younger generation, may I venture to hope that in the years that lie ahead, Film Negara will play a greater part in establishing a high standard of morality and conduct among young Malaysians, and in creating a number of new National film heroes, one of whom might be a modern version of Hang Tuah, and another might be a Malaysian to out rival the current song and dance favourites from the West”.

Sheppard 1956

A year after the production of *Embun*, in 2003, Film Negara worked together with Finas (The National Film Board) again, in the production of a commercial cinema film entitled *Palo*. Like *Embun*, *Paloh* was also entrenched with the patriotic elements and historical value, and was about the struggle faced by people in Malaysia during the Japanese occupation and the communist insurgency.

The involvement of Film Negara in commercial cinema films has received criticism from several quarters that have claimed that Film Negara has forgotten its original roles and functions, namely to produce educational programmes in the form of documentaries to educate the public. The excessive promotion and serious involvement of Film Negara in commercial films like *Embun* and *Paloh* were seen as overshadowing the original roles and functions of the department to produce educational and informational films like documentaries. Hassan Muthalib asserted this point in the interview with the researcher;

“I don’t think it is wrong for Film Negara to be involved in the production of commercial Film like *Embun* as long as the films portray good values to the audience. The only thing is that Film Negara should not forget its traditional role: to produce documentary programmes. If Film Negara could spend millions of Ringgit on commercial film like *Embun*, why didn’t they spend this money on documentary films? With that much money, I am sure Film Negara could produce a lot of good documentary programmes to be screened on Malaysian TV. In this case, I think Film Negara should know its priorities ”.

Hassan Mutalib (Producer)

The involvement of Film Negara in the production of commercial films as well as the insertion of sensational values such as rape scenes has emerged as a result of the influence of commercialism in the film and broadcast industry, with an emphasis on the importance of wooing the audience to buy tickets. The ultimate goal of the involvement in commercial film production is one of financial return. Paradoxically, when we look at the original functions of Film Negara as a government department, it has its own important agenda, which is to inform and educate the audience.

Filem Negara and the state owned TV (RTM)

The introduction of the national television services in 1963 under the Ministry of Information had opened up another opportunity for Film Negara to widen its coverage in reaching out to its audience. As planned in the report of G.H Jones (1963) on the proposal to establish a television station, materials from the Malayan Film unit in the form of documentary programmes were suitable to be used as the contents of programmes for the new television services, even though film and television use slightly different production techniques.

As the new television service and the Malayan Film Unit had been administered under the same ministry, namely the Ministry of Information, the task of implementing the proposal did not initially face too many difficulties or bureaucratic constraints. In the early stage of television, the Malayan Film Unit claimed that the advent of the medium had far from diminished but had actually stimulated the productivity of the Film Unit. The television network later became the channel for the distribution of films from Filem Negara (Filem Negara Opening Ceremony Brochure 1965). Voicing his hope that documentary films by Film Negara would always coexist with the new medium, Khor Eng Lee (1976) wrote:

“We hope Filem Negara will concentrate on the production of solid documentaries on national themes of social and economic significance. If properly programmed, produced and presented, these documentary films will project the image of the new Malaysia and help to attract foreign investors and tourists. In a couple of years, when Televisyen Malaysia goes colour, all the good colour films of Film Negara can be telecast for the benefit of the home audience. There should be less imported documentary films and more Made In Malaysia documentaries”

(Khor Eng Lee 1976)

Apparently, these hopes and expectations never materialised. The growth of the television industry and the impact of commercialism on television were to be blamed for the diminishing of documentary programmes produced by Filem Negara in the national television schedules. As quoted by Berita Harian (28th July 1997), in an interview with Hishamudin Rais, a film maker and critic, he pointed out that despite the long history and establishment of documentary by Filem Negara, its production had become stagnant due to the failure of the people to value the role of documentary in preserving the national culture and heritage. Hishamudin also asserted that the local television stations, including the state owned television station RTM, do not value documentary programmes because they do not appeal to the commercial advertisers who provide the stations with financial income.

The researcher’s interview session with the Director General of Film Negara revealed that currently there is no special time slot allocated to Filem Negara’s documentaries by the state controlled television station, RTM. The network shows Filem Negara’s documentary programmes at any time it wishes, and normally during late at night in

the non-commercial time slots. Therefore it is very difficult for the audience and the producers to determine the continuity of Filem Negara's programmes.

“Documentary programmes that we produce totally depend on RTM. When they have a slot, they will put our documentary on TV. Normally when Merdeka Day (Independence Celebration) comes around, instructions will be given by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Information for Filem Negara to produce documentaries and trailers about “Jalur Gemilang” (The National Flag). When our programmes are ready we submit them to RTM and they schedule the shows”.

Raja Rozaimi Raja Dalnish Shah (Director General Film Negara)

As the state owned television station (RTM) expanded its services to the audience, many new programmes were introduced. As described in the previous chapter, in order to win the hearts of the audience to watch the network's programmes, RTM bought imported television programmes, particularly in the form of movies and entertainment shows. Consequently, at one point imported programmes in the form of entertainment such as movies and musical programmes were dominating the schedule, making up more than 48.1% of the total broadcast hours.

Meanwhile, in terms of production, ever since television replaced cinema as the main medium of screening for documentary programmes, the method of documentary production has shifted from film format to video format, which uses simpler, smaller and cheaper video equipment such as Betacam cameras and the latest Mini DV cameras. Rabiger (1998) asserted that the development of video technology had made documentary production much cheaper and easier. Documentary programmers no longer rely on bulky, expensive film equipment. For example, in the production of cinema verite documentary, a lightweight video camera is needed to follow and capture spontaneous action such as during interview recording and unrepeatable fast action recording. The problem with Filem Negara, according to an interview respondent in the present study (Mr Wong Mok Yuan), is that the Ministry of Information still insists that the department continue to use high-end film technology in the production of documentary films. Consequently the production of documentaries in this format has become tedious and time consuming, as it requires proper setting up during location filming as well as during the post-production stage. In the case of interview recording, in order to avoid wastage of expensive film rolls, the production staff of Filem Negara have to pre plan with the interviewees exactly what they want to say during the recording. This method, however, reduces the naturalness and spontaneity of the interviewee and constrains his ability to communicate his ideas during filming.

Documentary by the state owned TV (RTM)

In performing the role of public service broadcaster, RTM took responsibility for producing informational and educational programmes to serve as catalysts to national development. In a similar vein, Kilborn & Izod (1997 p.21) asserted that whenever terrestrial public service channels have dominated television, documentary programmes have been included in the schedule because they have been felt to encourage a thoughtful, reflective response and to act as an antidote to the large

swathes of entertainment programming that makes little or no demand on the audience's intelligence. To perform similar roles, two units were established in RTM to produce informational and educational programmes, namely the Development & Agriculture Unit (ADU) and the Public Affairs Unit. The Development and Agriculture Unit was actually part of the Development and Agriculture Service (DAS) that had initially produced radio programmes for rural and development broadcasting since 1948. This service was to form a link between rural populations, including farmers, mine workers and rubber plantation labourers, and the government, in addition to providing them with entertainment and information (Ahmad 1981). During the emergency period, the service was also used to produce specialised programmes intended for the rural population to fight communist propaganda. Since 1971 the Development and Agriculture Unit programming has been geared toward promoting the government's New Economic Policy. To achieve this, a four-fold aim for DAS services was formulated. These aims were:

1. To create awareness and encourage new ideas and aspirations in line with the New Economic Policy and development.
2. To disseminate information and knowledge to the rural community in simple and understandable language.
3. To motivate and provide advice to farmers for healthy competition in order to increase their productivity by using modern farming techniques.
4. To encourage and motivate people to actively participate in socio economic and political activities. (Musa & Hussin 1979)

In 1974 the Development and Agriculture Unit started to produce television programmes in the form of magazine programmes. The first programme produced by DAS was *Halaman Pertanian* (Agriculture Digest) which consisted of four sections; features on successful farmers, new findings in agriculture, agro based business and industries and questions from farmers. The second television programme produced by DAS was *Belia* (Youth). It consisted of reports, interviews and career information for young people in general, with no particular emphasis on agriculture (Hassan 1987). At the present time, these programmes are no longer produced. To replace *Halaman Pertanian* (Agriculture Digest) the Agriculture and Development Unit currently produces *Agrotek*, a magazine programme focusing on agriculture technology, profiles and research. This programme is broadcast every Wednesday from 9.00 pm to 10.00 pm on TV1 (RTM 2003). Kilborn & Izod (1997) observed that new hybridised documentary programmes in the form of magazine programmes, as adopted by TV3, emerged as a result of the growing of commercialism in television services.

In 1977 the Development and Agriculture Unit of RTM also produced a famous magazine documentary programmes entitled *Panorama*. This programme was actually a copy of the *Panorama* programme produced by the BBC in the United Kingdom. At the time, this programme was very popular due to its critical reports and interviews from the public that exposed the weaknesses of the government agencies and departments. This exposure caused some dissatisfaction from the government departments involved. The culmination of this was that after 12 episodes, the programme ceased to be produced. No reason was given by the Minister and RTM for the termination of "*Panorama*" with the exception of a few vague statements saying that "changes in RTM programming are usual and there is nothing unusual about the termination of "*Panorama*" (Darussalam 1988). After a while, this programme was

reproduced, but this revival came with total revamp to its contents and editorial approach. The New Straits Times (23 April 1977) in its editorial report wrote:

“If it is true that the Panorama programme ceased its production due to its criticism of the government, we doubt that this programme will come back as it was. Anyway, we hope that RTM will not be put off making this excellent programme”

Production of the second *Panorama* programme was once again terminated when the 1978 General Election approached. Its two producers were transferred to a new task, to produce film for the use of the Ministry of Information and not for broadcasting purposes (Darussalam 1998). An interview session between the researcher and the Director of TV Production of RTM Madam Normah Rokiah Ramli revealed the reasons for the termination of the programme:

“This was for many reasons. I admit that the programme was very popular at the time. But when too many facts were exposed to the public, we received complaints from the departments involved. Supposed we touch on a story that involved the Ministry of Health regarding a true story about a number of diseases being spread; that means we expose the weaknesses in the department itself. As a government media we try to reduce this kind of story. If there are too many programmes exposing the weaknesses of the government departments, the opposition parties will exploit them”.

Normah Rokiah Ramli (Director of TV Production RTM)

In 2002, the Development and Agriculture Unit of RTM re-launched the “Panorama” programme. This newly re-launched programme was renamed *Panorama 1* and consists of 4 segments. The programme is the only public affairs magazine programme produced by RTM, and is broadcast for one hour every Tuesday, from 9.00 pm to 10.00 pm. Currently there are 4 production teams working on the Panorama programme, and each team consists of four producers and two assistant producers. Panorama also employs part time broadcast journalists or researchers to do coverage or research on behalf of the permanent production teams. On the issue of the editorial freedom and coverage of the programme, two current producers of Panorama (Mr. Rahman Hussin and Mr Manoharan) revealed in interview sessions with the researcher that unwritten rules and guidelines are still overshadowing the editorial freedom and creativity of the producers:

Interviewer: “How about your freedom to cover a story?”

Mr Manoharan: “We are free. We are free in the sense that we follow the “guidelines”. I think producers are quite free to choose what we want to do as long as we don’t touch the “border issues”. Sometimes, for instance, we cover environmental issues. This kind of issue is very valuable and acceptable”.

Interviewer: “So far, have you ever tried to touch any sensitive issues?”

Manoharan: “Never. Because when you cover sensitive issues you have to wait for answers from the Ministries. For example, to set up an appointment takes a long time. If you cover human interest stories like animals or culture, in half or one day you can finish the recording. That’s why many producers want to do human-interest stories rather than issues”.

Documentary and commercial television stations in Malaysia

Six months after the launch of TV3, in 1st January 1985, the News and Current Affairs Department of TV3 produced a magazine programme called "*Berita 3*". The first edition of *Berita 3* was a half-hour programme entitled "*Bangunan UMNO Satu Manifestasi*" (UMNO Building-A Manifestation) which was about the newly erected building owned by the dominant Malay ruling party UMNO. This story reflected the considerable influence of the government ruling party over the programming contents of the newly established commercial television station. It was imperative for the station to show its loyalty to the government who issued its license.

After a while, the name of *Berita 3* was changed to *Majalah 3* and the programme was broadcast for an hour every week. *Majalah 3* was initially planned to carry more in-depth reporting than the news programmes' coverage permitted. The emergence of "*Majalah 3*" could be considered to be very similar to the *Panorama* programme that was first produced by the BBC in 1955. In 1955, Grace Wyndham Goldie, who at that time was Head of "Talk" produced a programme called *Panorama*. Together with the other long running current affairs programmes "*This Week*" and "*World in Action*" it set the standard as a journalist-led programme whose aim was to address the news and political agenda in greater depth than the news bulletins allowed (Holland, 2000 p.148). These programmes aimed to get behind the headlines, to explain what was going on and to provide a window on the world (Goldie 1977).

Currently, every week on Saturday 9.00 pm to 10.00 pm without fail, *Majalah 3* will meet its audience. Even though this programme has run for so long, it still maintains a considerable audience every week. According to a rating survey conducted by A C Nielsen, "*Majalah 3*" draws about 4.1 million viewers, to top the chart of all television programmes in Malaysia. "*Majalah 3*" has overtaken all other television programmes, including movies, entertainment programmes and news (New Straits Times March 27, 2000).

As the first magazine programme for TV3, and because it is so well accepted by the audience, *Majalah 3* has become the station's flagship programme. The successful magazine format of *Majalah 3* has resulted in the establishment of the Magazine Department as an extension of the News and Current Affairs Department in 1994. *Majalah 3* has also become the root for the advent of the other magazine programmes produced by the Magazine Department, for example *Nona* (a women's programme) and *RSB* (a youth programme). These programmes have become the training ground for newly appointed broadcast journalists before they are entrusted to work on more challenging programmes like *Majalah 3*. It is worth noting that the writer was also the assistant Producer for *Majalah 3* for more than 4 years during his tenure with the network. Being a former employee of TV3's magazine department has afforded him the opportunity to have an insightful overview into the development of the station as well as the programmes the station produces. These insightful overviews have provided useful information for this study.

Majalah 3 in English means Magazine 3. It was dubbed a magazine because of its concept of portraying coverage in a segmented format, with a duration of five to 25

minutes for each segment. During almost 19 years of transmission, *Majalah 3* has undergone numerous revamps to its format and the names of its segments. The purpose of these revamps was to give the programme a fresh look to and to avoid monotony in its style of presentation. The revamps also involved the modification of its montage and changes to the production team.

Currently, *Majalah 3* is telecast partly 'live'; the moderator is telecast straight from the studio while the segmented stories are replayed from recorded materials. This mode of presentation allows the audience or people involved in the stories to give their opinions or to communicate directly with the moderator via emails or phone calls. Currently, *Majalah 3* is divided into 4 segments: "*Perspective*" feature the main story of the week, "*Kisahny*a" features strange events, "*Fenomena*" features new findings, treatments or inventions, while "*Perjalanan*" bring the viewers to exotic places around the world (TV3 2003). Previously, *Majalah 3* also invited the audience to participate by submitting their home video footage in a segment called "*Kelab Video*" (*Video Club*). Previously, *Majalah 3* has also featured international issues in a segment called "*Salam Benua*".

As a commercial television station, TV3 emphasises the commercial income derived from every programme the station produces. Due to the nature of "*Salam Benua*", which featured hard-core international issues, it was seen not as very attractive to the audience. The production team of *Majalah 3* noticed from the minute-by-minute audience rating of the AC Nielsen People Meter survey that during the "*Salam Benua*" stories, the programme was losing its audience to rival channels. As a result, TV3 has removed the "*Salam Benua*" segment from *Majalah 3*.

As with "*Salam Benua*", the production team of *Majalah 3* also noticed that the hard-core critical stories featured in the main segment of *Majalah 3* had no appeal to its audience. Even though some of these stories had won several awards and recognition, such as the environmental journalism awards from the Malaysian Press Institute, the stories failed to retain a sufficient level of audienceship to compete with the programmes that were broadcast on rival channels. It has become a tradition within the award bodies that stories about hard-core issues that contain informational elements to educate the public, such as environmental issues, have more chance of winning awards. This situation caused a dilemma for the production team of *Majalah 3* in selecting which should be given priority; rating or educational values? In this paradoxical situation, it seems that *Majalah 3* has had to bow to the pressure of the station to retain higher ratings in order to ensure the programme would survive and bring commercial benefits to the network. As a result, *Majalah 3* is giving currently priority to human-interest stories. These kinds of stories are spiced up with sensational elements that have boosted the ratings of *Majalah 3* to more than three million viewers. For example, the stories of "Santau" and "Busong" depicted superstitious and mystical acts (like voodoo rituals) practised by the indigenous people to cause harmful effects such as sickness and death to their enemies.

In the focus group interview session with the production team of *Majalah 3*, one of the respondents revealed to the researcher why *Majalah 3* features these human-interest stories:

Interviewer: “Previously, *Majalah 3* focused more on current affairs stories, but now it is more inclined towards human interest. Is that because of the rating factor?”

Mohd Nasir: “One of the main reasons is ratings - because we are a commercial television station, ratings have become a determinant factor for the survival of a programme. We have to look at how the advertisers want to sponsor a programme. They will definitely look at the ratings. Indirectly, this will influence what we want to tell to the audience”.

Another respondent in the focus group (Noraini Tahir) interrupted the discussion and revealed that *Majalah 3* is no longer an educational reference for university students, as it has moved away from stories about current issues:

“Previously, we did things just like the news. Like we went to the squatter areas. The approach was just like the news; that’s why the ratings dropped. Now, if we want to do a story about the squatters we take a different approach. We emphasise the human-interest factors first, then add subtle information about the underlying issues. I think this will work for commercial purposes. The problem is that when we changed to this human-interest approach, we lost the educational elements in the stories. University students no longer take *Majalah 3* as their reference. At one time, students were calling us every week, wanting more information about the issues we disclosed as reference for their studies”.

Noraini Tahir (Producer TV3)

Echoing the producer of *Panorama 1* of RTM, Mohd Nasir, a journalist on *Majalah 3*, also said that another reason why the journalists of *Majalah 3* liked to cover human-interest stories was because of the difficulty they faced in balancing up the reports while under pressure to meet deadlines.

“When we do current issue stories, we must be fast. We must be fair and square to the persons involved in the stories. We must get a balanced report. We must get them to say something. As we are a weekly programme, we don’t have enough time to wait. I am sure that you know it is so hard to chase people to fix appointments, especially when we want to talk about the problems they are involved in. So that’s why most of us prefer not to cover issues. We like to do human-interest stories because they are easy to get and easy to do”.

Mohd Nasir (Broadcast Journalist TV3)

As TV3 is still subject to government control, the difficulty of covering issue stories in *Majalah 3* is sometimes related to institutional and political constraints on the contents of editorials of the programme. Noraini Tahir described this:

“At one time, *Majalah 3* also did coverage of the current issues or hard core issues. Remember last time “you” did a story with me about illegal immigrants in the detention centre. We had to go through a lot of hassle to get approval to put the story on air, as we had to send the tape to LPF (Film Censorship Board) for approval and it took some time to clear. Since *Majalah 3* is a weekly programme, we could not wait longer to put this story on air, as it was a current issue story. If we are late to put a story on air, it will be outdated”

The pronoun “you” mentioned by Noraini in the focus group discussion was referring to the researcher, who did a story about illegal immigrants in Semenyih Detention Camp in 1997. At the time, Noraini was the producer of *Majalah 3* and the researcher was the broadcast journalist of the programme. The issue of the Semenyih Detention Camp surfaced when one of the NGOS (Tenagita) revealed and lodged a complaint about torture and inhumane treatment received by the illegal immigrants in the camps. The complaint sparked criticisms of the government of Malaysia from various parties, both local and abroad. The Ministry of Home Affairs, which was responsible for the camp, denied the allegation. As a curious journalist, the researcher tried to uncover the issue from inside the camp. In order to gain access, permission had to be obtained from the Ministry of Home Affairs. A meeting was scheduled with the Director General of the Ministry of Home Affairs with a number of the top brass from the Police Department to discuss the requirements of the coverage. It was agreed in the meeting that a copy of the tape must be submitted to the Ministry prior to the screening of the coverage. Worrying about a possible ban on the content of the coverage, the researcher practised self-censorship by avoiding any sensitive areas in visuals gathering and script writing.

In parallel with British documentary production, Kilborn & Izod (1997 p, 166 & 167) asserted that throughout its history, documentary has always been influenced by various bodies that assume the functions which it has been called to fulfil. Kilborn & Izod (1997) raised the example of the institutional and political censorship of a documentary programme in the banning of the BBC documentary by Peter Watkins. “*The War Games*” (1965) was a drama documentary depicting the likely effects of a nuclear attack on a British city. The BBC issued a press release explaining the reason why this programme had been banned; officially, it was on the grounds that “the effect of the film was judged to be too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting”. Even though there was a good reason for the ban, in the interest of protecting the public from being exposed to horrifying images, Aubrey (1982 p48-54 in Kilborn and Izod 1997) asserted that there was a degree of government involvement in the decision not to show the documentary.

The successful formula of human-interest stories to boost the rating of documentary programmes led TV3 to launch a new programme, entitled *Misteri Nusantara*, in 2003. This 52-episode programme depicted mystical stories such as places believed to be haunted like world war army forts or empty houses or buildings. The programme managed to secure a place among the top 10 programmes in the weekly chart of the AC Nielsen audience rating survey. (See Table 5.2: Top 10 Television Programme AC Nielsen Media Research).

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Information does not encourage broadcasters to show stories about superstitions, as it claims that they will weaken the minds of the audience, especially children and youngsters. Consequently, programmes that contain superstitious and mystical elements, such as *Misteri Nusantara* produced by TV3, have received criticism from the Deputy Information Minister Datuk Zainuddin Maidin. In a similar action, he also ordered the RTM channel to stop the broadcasting of *Pelik Tapi Benar* (Strange But True), a programme produced by KRU Motion Pictures that contained mystical and superstitious elements (Berita Harian June 6,

2003). The criticism from the Ministry sparked various feedback from the public. One member of the public who opposed the move by the Ministry wrote in to the forum section of Utusan Malaysia (September 10, 2003) accusing the Ministry of Information of practising double standards by asking commercial television stations to withdraw local television programmes that contained mystical elements whereas similar action was not taken against imported mystical programmes such as the *X-Files*, which portrays mystical subjects in a scientific way and *Angel*, which portrays the vampires that live in a city.

Misteri Nusantara was produced by the Documentary Department of TV3. Originally the Documentary Department of TV3 was part of the Magazine Department, which functions to produce educational and informational programmes in the form of documentary programmes for local usage as well as for export purposes. The Documentary Department of TV3 also produces a seasonal Islamic documentary programme entitled *Jejak Rasul* (The Prophet Foot Path) that is broadcast daily in the month of Ramadhan every year. *Jejak Rasul* depicts the journey of the Jejak Rasul production team to historic Islamic places all over the world. *Jejak Rasul* as a seasonal programme has been well received by the audience, especially Muslims, who observe fasting in the month of Ramadhan. In the month of Ramadhan, Muslims are encouraged to refrain from watching wicked television programmes such as those with sex elements, so Islamic documentary programmes like *Jejak Rasul* are considered the most appropriate types of programme to be screened in terms of giving due respect to the Muslims and the month of Ramadhan. Because of this, when *Jejak Rasul* is shown, every Muslim household is gathered in front of the television watching the informational and educational documentary programme, which subsequently makes the programme one of the most in-demand advertisement spots for advertisers.

Another of TV3's magazine format documentary programmes is "999". "999" depicts the work of security and emergency personnel such as the Police, fire-fighters, ambulance drivers and the army in dealing with crime and emergency cases. The programme also extends and follows up stories from news coverage. Because of the nature of the programme, which exposes sensational behind-the-scenes footage such as crime scenes and accidents, it has managed to place itself among the top ten television programmes in Malaysia. (See Table 5.2 AC Nielsen People Meter Rating).

Table 5.2; Top 10 Television Programmes in Malaysia by AC Nielsen Media Research.

WEEK 0345 (02 NOVEMBER 2003 - 11 NOVEMBER 2003)						ALL CHANNELS
NO.	PROGRAMME	CHANNEL	DAY	DATE	TIME	VIEWERSHIP ('000)
1.	SENARIO (Sitcom)	TV3	Wed	05/11/2003	2059-2134	3,562
2.	999 (LIVE) (Documentary)	TV3	Mon	03/11/2003	2100-2129	3,287
3.	SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S THE LOST WORLD (Movies)	TV3	Fri	07/11/2003	2100-2203	3,144
4.	KISAH BENAR (Drama)	TV3	Wed	05/11/2003	2134-2202	3,111

5.	MAJALAH 3 (L) (Documentary)	TV3	Sat	08/11/2003	2059-2200	2,981
6.	SEMBILU (Movies)	TV2	Tue	04/11/2003	2104-2155	2,967
7.	CEREKARAMA- PENGANTIN LARI (Drama)	TV3	Sat	08/11/2003	2200-2358	2,951
8.	MISTERI NUSANTARA (Documentary)	TV3	Mon	03/11/2003	2130-2205	2,861
9.	BULETIN UTAMA (News)	TV3	Fri	07/11/2003	2000-2100	2,826
10.	TBL - MASAM MASAM MANIS (Movie)	TV2	Sun	02/11/2003	2100-2326	2,724

Source : Nielsen Media Research

The satellite television station, ASTRO, does not produce its own documentary programmes for its channels. When the researcher asked in the interview why ASTRO was not interested in producing documentary programmes, the Senior Manager of Production Service of ASTRO (Sheikh Mohd Sofiyan Abd. Rahman) said that ASTRO already has three documentary channels, namely National Geographic, Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. However, the station also commissions out a limited number of local documentary programmes to independent production companies for its in-house channel, ASTRO Ria, as it does not employ enough production staff to produce such programmes. Tunstall (1993) asserted that satellite television stations like ASTRO practise the publisher and packager approaches, in that they acquire television programmes from other production companies and their broadcasts are typically themed to specific genres such as news, movies and documentary. Because of this, Tunstall (1993) argued this type of approach television station only employs a very small number of producers to produce television programmes for its channels. In the case of ASTRO, it has a small production unit that comprises about 30 people to produce mainly entertainment programmes.

Documentary Filmmaking by Independent Production Companies

In the early period of the emergence of documentary filmmaking in Malaysia, most of their production was done by the government media departments such as the Malayan Film Unit (Film Negara) and RTM. There was no indication of active involvement of independent production companies in documentary filmmaking, as this period coincided with the mushrooming of commercial cinema films by the independent filmmakers. Due to the fact that the contents of documentaries were mainly encircled within the government propaganda campaign, it was considered more appropriate to place the responsibility for producing documentary films on the shoulders of government departments such as the Malayan Film Unit (Film Negara) and RTM.

When the government of Malaysia launched the privatisation policy for the broadcasting services in the mid 1980s, the Ministry of Information privatised local television productions and programming as well as airtime in the government owned Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). The privatisation of local programme production was aimed, among other things, at helping to revive the dying Malaysian film

industry. The new policy triggered the mushrooming of over 200 independent production houses vying for limited opportunities to air their productions (Rahmah Hashim in Jomo K.S 1997). Even though the privatisation policy has never limited the types of television programme produced by independent production companies, most of the independent producers were more interested in the production of drama programmes. To make way for independent productions as well as to make a sacrifice in the interest of reviving the dying film industry, RTM reduced its production of drama programmes and subsequently closed down its Drama Department. Previously, the RTM Drama Department was known for its credibility and had produced a series of popular drama programmes such as *Anjang Aki*, *Tok Perak* and *Opah*. In terms of documentary production, the production staff in the two relevant RTM departments, the Public Affairs Unit and Development and the Agriculture Unit, have taken the responsibility to produce informational programmes in the form of news, documentary and magazine programmes. Gradually, this situation has moulded a tradition in the Malaysian television industries that independent productions are expert in drama and movie production while television stations are more capable in the production of news, current affairs and documentary programmes. According to the respondents to the in-depth interviews, this situation is due to economic factors. In describing this situation, the Senior General Manager of Programming TV3, Khalil Md Zain, said:

“I don’t see any reasons for independent producers to specialise in documentary programmes. First, the local stations are not buying them, because we can produce our own. So for the independent producers, they need money so they must sell in order to get returns. So I don’t think they will spend. Secondly, we come to the question of how they get experience. We have people who have 17 years of involvement in current affairs programmes and we have the technical staff, who are capable of making them. If there are independent producers who have experience of making documentary programmes, they mostly come from the former staff of TV3 or the other television stations. But we still come the question of where to channel their programmes, I think their budget is much more acute”.

Khalil Md Zain (Senior General Manager Programming TV3)

In a separate in-depth interview, one of the independent producers also agreed with Khalil Md Zain’s opinion:

“I think this situation is more or less caused by the economic factors. The production of drama or movies is definite in its cost. This means that the independent producer can determine the cost of production and we can plan it properly according to a specific time frame. For the production of news, current affairs and documentary programmes we need to be current and up to date with information and events that happen around us. Therefore we can’t afford to put someone one to standby to tap for the current information and events. Only TV stations can do this because they have more resources and bigger budgets”

Mohd Noh Shatibi (Independent Producer)

In recent years, to break the tradition of the monopoly of the television station over the production of documentary, several new production houses have tried to embark

on the production of documentary programmes. One of the production companies, KRU Motion Pictures, managed to place its documentary entitled *Pelik Tapi Benar* (Strange But True) among the most popular television programmes in Malaysia. This programme copied the human-interest formula that contains superstitious and mystical elements, in order to woo a higher audience rating. As mentioned earlier, this programme was banned by the Ministry of Information because of its excessive portrayal of superstitious elements. The Chief Executive of the KRU Motion Picture company, Norman Abdul Halim, tried to arrange an appointment with the Deputy Information Minister of the Ministry of Information Dato Zainuddin Maidin to negotiate the possible lifting of the ban. The Parliamentary Secretary said the ban on the programme was only temporary, to allow the Ministry to study the effects of superstitious elements in the programme. He also said that he would be willing to meet Norman and discuss how the company could improve the quality of its programme (Berita Harian 6th. June, 2003).

Another independent production company that concentrates in the production of documentary is Novista Sdn Bhd. So far, Novista Sdn. Bhd has managed to get several commissions for documentary programmes from the ASTRO television channels. Harun Abdul Rahman, the sole proprietor of the company, told the researcher that his company produces documentaries mainly for clients from commercial non-broadcasting companies and government departments in the form of promotional and instructional videos. Novista Sdn Bhd. also deals, on behalf of its clients, with the commercial television stations, arranging for them to broadcast documentary videos without charging the stations any fees. For example, Novista Sdn arranged a deal with NTV7 to broadcast an hour-long documentary programme entitled *Cheng Hoon Teng Temple* at no cost to the station. This documentary was considered a promotional item for its client, the management of Cheng Hoon Teng temple. With regard to the potential market for documentary programmes, Harun Abd Rahman perceived that the market for in Malaysia was very small. Therefore, the company is trying to find potential clients from the overseas market. Harun Abd Rahman said:

“If you want to make money from documentary you have no choice but to sell overseas. Otherwise you can’t make money. If you sell a documentary for one off rights to commercial television stations, you won’t get a profit out of it because TV stations pay very little. For me, if you want to produce good quality documentary, it would take a year to be spent on shooting. And then if you sell to TV3 and they pay you RM25,000, it is not worth it. So you have no choice to but find an overseas market like Discovery Channel or National Geographic”. But to penetrate this market your production quality must be very, very good”.

Harun Abd Rahman (Independent Producer)

A number of independent producers in Malaysia shared similar views with the owner of Novista Sdn Bhd concerning the potential for a global market for Malaysian documentary programmes. In 2001, several Malaysian production companies attended the MIPTV International Television Market in Cannes, France, and brought a number of titles of Malaysian television products. More than 11,000 television executives and programmes buyers from all over the world attended this event. Among the Malaysian companies that took part in the MIPTV 2001 were Grand Brilliance Sdn Bhd (the

Marketing arm of TV3), Eurofine Sdn Bhd, Bright Network Sdn Bhd and several others. Film Negara and the National Film Board (Finas) also sent their representatives to the event. During the event, only Grand Brilliance Sdn Bhd (the marketing arm of TV3) managed to sell a few Islamic documentary programmes to several television stations from Islamic countries (Utusan Malaysia 4th.April, 2001). The ability of TV3 to sell its documentary programmes might be due to its long involvement in the field with programmes such as *Majalah 3* and *Jejak Rasul*. Furthermore, TV3, as a major broadcasting company, is always supported with strong financial backup. The small independent production companies came to MIPTV just to assess and examine the potential market for Malaysian television products in the form of drama and documentary programmes in the international platform. Eventually, after the event, one of the participants from Malaysia concluded that documentary programmes are easier to sell due to the universality of their contents. Unlike movies and drama, documentary programmes that contain informational and educational elements, such as the cultures of peoples in different geographical locations, are universally acceptable to the international audience.

Conclusion

From the discussion in this paper, it can be concluded that during the initial history of documentary production in Malaysia, these films had a reputable image as agents of change within society as well as catalysts for national development. The contents of documentary programmes during the early period were mainly encircled within the government campaigns and propaganda, but they were still capable of relieving the emptiness of “kampung” life by bringing street cinema entertainment to the rural audience. As this was a free medium of entertainment, and was brought close to their homes, it was extremely popular among the public. Indirectly, the government had successfully conveyed its messages and campaign to the public.

With the advent of television in Malaysia, the expectation was that the medium would be able to redouble the showing of documentaries and facilitate their roles as means of social and cultural enlightenment. Ironically, the reality has not reflected these hopes. Documentary in Malaysia is subject to political and economic pressures in order to survive in the television line up. Due to the political pressures, documentary has lost its touch in performing its role as a social critic. Some documentary programmes have been terminated due to their critical views of the government departments. Because of economic pressures, television stations are no longer interested in showing serious and critical documentary programmes. Nowadays, television stations are more inclined to produce and show new hybridised forms of documentary that contain light stories in the form of human interest and sensational elements. These types of documentary programmes are perceived as more appealing to audience as well as to advertisers.

To find alternative markets for local documentary, some producers in Malaysia have tried to explore the global market. Due to the high expectations of the international audience, Malaysian producers have yet to establish stable and comfortable grounds to woo the international audience. As a new participant in this field, there is still a lot for them to learn, especially about developing high quality Malaysian documentary programmes.

¹ Mervyn Cecil Frank Sheppard (Muslim name Mubin Sheppard) is a British born historian. He was born in Kent, Ireland in June 1905 and died on September 12th, 1994. He came to Malaya in 1928 and joined the Malayan Civil Services under the British administration. He became a Malaysian citizen in 1957. A year after that, he embraced Islam and used his Muslim name Mubin Sheppard. Mr. Sheppard was the first Director of Public Relations of the Information Department of the British administration, which formed the Malayan Film Unit in Malaya. Mr. Sheppard had the option to return to England and become Lord of the Cabra, the 404 hectare ancestral estate, which he inherited from the Civil Services in 1964. He chose to sell the estate and remain in Malaysia. In 1969 Mr Sheppard was awarded the Panglima Setia Mahkota award that carried the title Tan Sri. (Personality Profile www.emedia.com.my) See picture in attachment

² From Art College during the war, Gillie Potter's early film experience was initially gained as a film trailer artist with the National Screen Service before joining a film company in Soho concerned with the production of Animated Training Films for the Armed Services. His Army Service took him to Fort George in Inverness, followed by a period with the Gordon Highlanders in Aberdeen from where he was transferred to Pinewood Studios for training as a combat photographer with the Army Film Unit. After his training period, he was sent to Sri Lanka and Singapore to serve with the South East Asia Command Head quarters. Potter was also involved in the filming of the Japanese Surrender Ceremony in Singapore when he was attached to Lord Louis Mountbatten Headquarters in Singapore. When the unit was disbanded, Potter was seconded to the Malayan Film Unit. In 1997 Potter was awarded a Fellowship of the B.K.S.T.S – The Moving Image Society for his contribution to the film industry in the UK. In his letter to Mr Hassan Muthalib, Mr Potter indicated that he lived in 22, Linkswood Road Burnharm, Bucks SL18AT. See picture in attachment

³ Attap roofing is made from Nipah leaves which are not long lasting and very vulnerable to fire.

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