A cinematic reconsideration of Malay identity through a slice of Hikayat film culture

Muhammad Zhafri Abdul Rahman

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**NANYANG
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SINGAPORE

**A CINEMATIC RECONSIDERATION OF
MALAY IDENTITY THROUGH A SLICE
OF HIKAYAT FILM CULTURE**

**MUHAMMAD ZHAFRI BIN ABDUL RAHMAN
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2020**

A Cinematic Reconsideration Of Malay Identity Through A Slice Of Hikayat Film Culture

MUHAMMAD ZHAFRI BIN ABDUL RAHMAN

School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

2020

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SUMMARY

Hang Jebat (1961) directed by Hussein Haniff and *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961) directed by P. Ramlee are films which invite a reconsideration of Malay identity through different ways of looking at the Hikayat (feudal Malay epics). *Hang Jebat* is a film adaptation that refocuses the narrative of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* to depict Hang Jebat, who is traditionally understood as the antagonist, in a more sympathetic light. *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is a film that depicts the making of Hikayat films, set in the context of 1961 Singapore. The differences in their plot pattern, characters and eras depicted make it natural to consider them separately. Resisting that temptation, I argue against overlooking the consistencies between them and for constructing an understanding that accommodates them on a common trajectory where what connects them is the drive to challenge and expand discussions about Malay identity.

CHAPTER 1

“Cerita dia macam tu Ramlee? Eh bikinlah cerita lain – cerita emas ke, cerita ayam ke, cerita ikan berlaga ke, cerita kumbang terbang ke...”

(“That is the film Ramlee? They can do other films - about gold, or maybe about chickens, or fighting fish, or flying beetles...”)

- Sudin, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961)

Introduction

Sudin’s lines in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961) cheekily gestures towards a 1961 Singaporean Malay’s weariness of seeing yet another Hikayat film scene. ‘Hikayat’ loosely translates to ‘tales’ or ‘epics’, and these are “Malay prose literature” (Chung 137) usually revolving around feudal Malay monarchs and their subjects. It is not that these melodramatic, action-filled tales of adventure, conquest, magic, love, betrayal and loyalty cannot be exciting, but perhaps a 1961 audience would find himself, like Sudin, unenthused at the sight of the umpteenth centuries-old tale on film screens¹. Indeed the 1950s and 1960s saw a period where many filmmakers in Singapore readily turned to Hikayats as an easy source of ideas for filmmaking. According to a table in a Malay films listings catalogue by FINAS, at least 20 films were recorded to have been produced in 1961 alone (Chung 138), with at least 17 of them being direct adaptations of a Hikayat or at least were inspired by a one². So, can we blame Sudin for wanting something a little different for a change?

While the two films that I chose for this project do not exactly feature fighting fish or flying beetles, what I find interesting about them is that they are ‘different’ in how they

¹ Hikayats were written in feudal Malay societies, the oldest known one being *Sejarah Melayu*, assumed to have been written in the 16th century (Alatas 1).

² Refer to the appendix for a list of known commercial films screened in 1961. *Gado-Gado* (1961) and *Sumpitan Rachun* (1961) are films set in the 1960s while *Sri Tanjung* (1961) is based on a Javanese folktale rather than a Malay one. With the exception of these three, the other films are either inspired or direct adaptations of a Malay Hikayat.

engaged with a Hikayat. They did not simply reproduce the old tales on screen but each film had an unprecedented *kind* of engagement with a Hikayat. *Hang Jebat* (1961) directed by Hussein Haniff is based on the 18th century tale, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (The Tale/Epic of Hang Tuah), but instead of focusing on the main character, Hang Tuah, the film reoriented the entire focus and narrative onto Hang Jebat, who is not just a minor character in the original tale, but also one who is traditionally understood as the antagonist. No other films up till then had shifted the focus of a Hikayat as drastically as Hussein had. *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961) directed by P. Ramlee also offered a fresh change of view amidst the sea of period films flooding the theatres in 1960s Singapore. In a sense, it is a film about making Hikayat films. Its plot follows the 1961 Singaporean life of three working-class Malay men, Ramlee, Sudin and Aziz, who are taken as actors for a film studio that appears to produce no films other than Hikayat films. It is a first in its own right, as no other Malay films up till that point had the Meta-filmic quality of featuring the struggles of Hikayat film actors within and outside the studio premises. Other films which depict the 1960s Singaporean setting do not quite make a direct commentary about Hikayat film culture in the way that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* explicitly does.³

So yes, the idea is that they are different from their contemporaries. What is at stake then, when they differ in this way? And what is my aim in comparing these two films, especially when they feature societies from varying historical periods? I resist overlooking the consistencies between the two films and attempt to construct an understanding that accommodates them on a common trajectory. I argue that what connects them, is the drive to challenge and expand discussions about Malay identity. Specifically, I investigate how each film reconsiders certain aspects that have been presumed to be indispensable to Malay

³ I understand the terms ‘Hikayat film culture’ can be a big discourse involving an examination of production, distribution and/or reception of Hikayat films, but in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* it refers to the general idea of churning out Hikayat films that are not worth watching, that even films about fighting fish or flying beetles can be more appealing ideas.

identity. What I ultimately find is that the films don't dismiss their respectively-identified aspects. Instead, the films redefine them and in the process, alter the dominant positions of these aspects so that there is space for other important aspects to have a bigger influence on the notion of Malay identity.

What exactly are these 'aspects' then? For *Hang Jebat*, it is *daulat* (reverence for the Sultan). *Hang Jebat* sheds light on the problematic conception of *daulat* and consequently redefines it without the Islamic elements that have been misconfigured into it. This divorce between royalty and divinity leaves space for the Islamic faith to come to light and be considered for a more influential position in the notion of Malay identity.

For *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, what it attempts to redefine is the significance of Hikayat films. It highlights Hikayat films as artificial, and this effectively delineates what is outside the Hikayat studio sets – life in 1961 Singapore – as real. This studio/out-of-studio dichotomy alters the Hikayat films' dominant position in influencing Malay consciousness and identity. In the process, it makes way and leaves room for the contemporary setting of 1961 Singapore to come to light as a more significant context to consider when understanding what defines Malay society and identity.

I expand on the main argument by pursuing two distinct but interrelated forces that bind and consolidate the critical nature of both films. The first is more readily apparent, being the problematising of certain essentialist understandings of what a Malay is. The second is an exploration of possible alternative definitions of Malay identity, but the nuance in this move comes in the fact that both films do not appear to insist on the immediate embracing of the alternatives they explore, but instead invite a consideration of such alternatives. In other words, there is some space for anyone watching to think for themselves, instead of having the films didactically provide an answer to the issues they raise. There is distance, in a sense, between what the films raise and what they offer as the answer, and within this distance the

space for one's own thought and response. My understanding of distance here finds a parallel in Christine List's concept of "aesthetic distance" (373) when she explores racial stereotypes in Cheech Marin's Chicano films. She argues that "a central question one must consider when evaluating Cheech Marin's use of stereotypes is whether he establishes the appropriate aesthetic distance in his films, thereby inviting the viewers to look critically at the stereotypes" (374). List interprets the way in which all races exist as comical caricatures in the films, highlighting an artificiality to the world of those films which composes this aesthetic distance. It is in this distance that there is a fundamental space which provides the room for audiences to be able to look critically of the stereotypes (376-380). Essentially, for the Chicano films, distance is a strong precedent to reject certain ideas – this interprets the critical distance as serving a single and resolute purpose. For the two films I look at however, distance is an invitation to reject as much as it is an invitation to think – what gets rejected are older essentialist ideas of Malay identity, and what the films want the audiences to think about for themselves (as opposed to readily accept) is the alternative definitions of Malay identity that get explored. In other words, 'critical distance' for me serves a slightly broader and more general purpose as opposed to the 'aesthetic distance' List writes about.

A close comparison of the two films will reveal however, that there is more critical distance in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* than in *Hang Jebat*. There is more ambiguity in the way *Seniman Bujang Lapok* problematises Hikayat films than in the way *Hang Jebat* problematises *daulat*. This we will see in the second half of this project, where I will elaborate on the benefits of looking at the two films together, followed by an analysis of the similar themes they deal with and how that reveals certain ideas that would otherwise be missed if we were to just look at them individually.

For now, I will focus on the first half of the project, beginning with a brief overview of the various social contexts that undergrid the analysis of both films, followed by how Hikayats, Hikayat films and the concept of *daulat* influenced Malay identity to begin with.

The Influence of Hikayats on Feudal Malay Identity

A Hikayat text can be understood as a “prose-like ‘historical-literature’” (Chung 141)⁴. These are usually written in the pre-colonial feudal era, the oldest known being Sejarah Melayu, thought to be written in as early as the 16th century (Alatas 1). While a Hikayat can generally be understood as a feudal tale or epic, the term ‘feudal’ should be applied with a slight caution. Based on research published in his book about feudal Malay heroes, Shahrudin Maaruf⁵ explains:

The description of feudalism derived from Western history should not be applied too literally to South East Asia. A comparative form of relationship existed. In South East Asia there was the equivalent of the feudal lord – the chief or raja, of a small area. He was the immediate fountain of authority... Vassalage over a certain area was not sanctioned by written grants and ceremonial procedures but implied by the consent of the sovereign. The equivalent to the manor was the self-subsistent village community or a collection of such under one chief. Though there are differences between Western European feudalism and South-East Asian feudalism, the similarities, particularly the psychological structures in the attitude of the period are no less worthy of attention (6-7)

Shahrudin synthesises some characteristics of feudal Malay society in a list:

⁴ Chung qualifies the term ‘historical’ in quotation marks to indicate that despite providing a genealogical account of various royal figures, the fantasy/magical elements weaken it as a form of historical record.

⁵ Just a note, Malay and Muslim names tend to be patronymic rather than having patrilineal family names - meaning the 2nd portion of a Malay or Muslim’s name is their father’s given name and not a family name. Save for those that have family names, the Malay or Muslim characters and authors will be referred to in this project with their given names.

- (a) The presence of a big gulf between the poor (usually peasants) and the rich (usually nobleman and chiefs), in the economic, social, political and judicial field; (b) the political order was dominated by hereditary groups having at their disposal large estates; (c) the relations between the lord and his dependants was one of enfeoffment; the lord had the right to unpaid labour and services of his dependant; (d) the warrior class dominated the feudal order; and (e) the feudal order lacked functional division and favoured decentralization of power and administration. (6)

Shaharuddin further points out that the “feudal method of social organization as revealed in records depended on a feudal psychology which comprised both exploitative and benevolent elements on the part of the master, and submissive inclinations on the part of the subordinate” (7). To narrow down the focus a little, I clarify that this project takes specific interest in the fact that the psychology of feudal Malays notably comprised of a very heavy emphasis on a reverence for the Sultan. In many ways, the Sultan-subject relationship that Shaharuddin takes issue with, surfaces in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. In this regard, I align myself with Simone Chung’s argument about early film adaptations of feudal Malay epics, where “the dynamics of the relationship between rulers and their subjects in the feudal past clearly emerges as the main theme.”(142)

It is important to note though, that the Hikayats were mostly available to the mostly illiterate common feudal folks not as texts but as oral tales (Renard 267). This oral nature “imbues [the Hikayats] with the function of living tales with a moral compass” (Chung 142). In other words, these feudal epics functioned as reference points for Malay identity amongst the ruled, a kind of guidebook (or audiobook) about how to be a good feudal Malay subject.

For the Sultans, written Hikayats can serve as historical accounts which provide a sense of legitimacy to their forefathers and their own reign. Hikayats like the *Sejarah Melayu*

records a list of names and provides a genealogical account of various royal members and their rights to their thrones. The fact that the Sultan-subject relation is also reinforced in many of these Hikayats also doubly reifies the monarchical aspect of feudal Malay identity.

Coming up with negative images of neighbouring nations were also helpful in embellishing Malay identity with a relative sense of glory. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* for one, comes up with a negative image of the neighbouring nation Majapahit in the form of villainous, traitorous Javanese nobles jealous of the power of the Malay Sultan. This aids to “confirm the superiority of Melaka *even if* Majapahit had been at the zenith of its power at the same time as Melaka” (Van der Heide 63).

Putting all these together, we are given to understand that Hikayats helped to mould Malay identity in a way that makes it easy to recognise a Malay as an individual proud to be a loyal subject of his or her Sultan.

Hikayat Films Influencing Malay Identity

Fast-forward to the context of 1961 Singapore, the island is now: (1) without a Sultan reigning over it; (2) no longer a crown colony of the British imperialists so that makes it freshly post-colonial; (3) with a strong Chinese presence; (4) facing the prospects of merging with the federation of Malaya; (5) with a booming film industry. Nevermind how Hikayat films influenced Malay identity – what did being Malay even mean in this complex setting?

I will begin first by clarifying the difference between the terms Malay, Malayan, and Malaysia and Singapore now - a Malayan “was a citizen of the Federation of Malaya, irrespective of racial origin” (Kaur 91). Before celebrating independence from the British in 1957, “Malaya was inaugurated as a political entity in 1948 as the Federation of Malaya and was constituted from the nine Malay states (Perlis, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan) and the Strait Settlements of Penang and Melaka.

This entity is now called West or Peninsular Malaysia.... Malaysia was formed in 1963 and further included Sarawak and Sabah (together called East Malaysia) and Singapore” (Van Der Heide 65). After being a crown colony for several years, Singapore joined as a state of Malaysia for two years before leaving again to become an independent state in 1965.

In the Historical Dictionary of Malaysia, a Malay is identified as “a person of the Malay race. In the Twelfth Schedule of the Federal Constitution, a Malay is defined as a person who: (i) habitually speaks the Malay language, (ii) professes the Muslim religion and (iii) conforms to Malay customs” (Kaur 91). This definition then of course points clearly to the existence of Malays in other countries like modern day Indonesia, Brunei and Thailand as well. But because the films are produced in Singapore, I enlist below several key moments that affect Malaya and Singapore more than other nations because of the way their histories are so intertwined. The two had plans to merge and plans for the merger was already public knowledge as early as an entire year before the films were produced and screened⁶. It is also hard to say the ‘Malay’ perspective that I am concerned with is purely Singaporean considering the nation’s status as “the socio-cultural capital of the Malay Peninsula” (Lockard 1991) and the fact that the early Singaporean film industry drew film crew and actors hailing from all parts of the peninsula in much the same way the island itself drew “young Malay intellectuals and nationalists” with its “cosmopolitan” (Van der Heide 86) status. Hence, save for the moments when I refer to Malays in general from the feudal era, by Malay I mostly mean the Singaporean Malay whose national identity is somewhat fluidised by the prospect of merger with Malaya.

There were many concerns surrounding the merger. For one, Syed Muhammad Khairudin notes how there were “concerns about Chinese numerical dominance on the island [Singapore]” (7). In response to Lee Kuan Yew’s proposal for the nation of Malaysia which

⁶ See Voon 177.

included Singapore, Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed a Malaysia which would consist of Brunei, Malaya, North Sarawak and Singapore so as to keep the ethnic composition of the new nation akin to Malaya's, with the Malay and other indigenous populations of other territories neutralising the Chinese majority in Singapore (Shuid et al 29). The political concerns show the significant presence of the Chinese as well as other ethnic communities that the Malay elites and politicians were trying to come to terms with. But that was not the only concern.

A major event that induced Malays in Singapore into full-blown activism in the post-war years was the Malayan Union Scheme which was announced in October 1945.

This scheme was introduced by the British with the hope of consolidating their hold on the Malay States. Singapore was, however, excluded from the proposed set up.

Malays in the Peninsular who were disturbed by such a proposal saw the implementation of the Malayan Union as an attempt to erode the powers of the Sultans and a dilution of Malay special rights. (Khairudin 7)

Khairudin's observations capture a climate of anxiety about the kind of significance that the Malay monarchy will have in the future of Malay society in general, and the way that will relate to the society's sense of identity and power that derives from such a feudal history within the region. Even though there was technically speaking, no reigning Sultan of Singapore by then, the full-blown activism implied a certain sensitivity amongst the Malays when it comes to what the Sultans meant to their community within Singapore and within the peninsula in general⁷. The Malay monarchy seemed to shoulder a certain responsibility as the remaining stronghold of Malay identity.

⁷ Sultan Hussein Mua'zzam Shah was the ruler of Johor-Riau who signed treaties with the British to later be recognised as the Sultan of Johor and Singapore in 1819. See Brazil 231 for an explanation of his lack of influence over the actual governing of Singapore in the face of growing British authority, and how he left for Melaka in 1834 a dispirited man and passed away a year later. His departure marked the end of any trace of royal presence in the governing of Singapore.

Religion was also a concern but attempts to consolidate a solid consensus about the direction of the Islamic faith amongst the Malays were complicated not just by debates on the part of the elites but also general Islamic illiteracy amongst the working-class. In *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, William Roff succinctly tracks the debates between the Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda factions from the early 1900s to the 1960s. The Kaum Muda generally consisted of upper-class Malays who upon graduating from universities abroad such as Al-Azhar in Egypt, sought to “re-think Islam in terms of the demands made by the contemporary situation” (Roff 115), opposing the Kaum Tua, the traditional elite, whose traditional understanding of Islam were accused of retarding the “acceleration and direction of social and economic change for the betterment of Malay society” (Roff 117). In turn, the Kaum Tua “condemned the Kaum Muda as irreligious” (Roff 122). As the debates continued, the Kaum Muda generated publications like *Al-Imam* and *Al-Ikhwan*, the latter producing a statement in 1929 attacking the Kaum Tua with regards to their veneration of the Ulama (religious scholars in authority):

[they] behave as though it was obligatory to believe all the law books of the Ulama, and every word in them....while the Kaum Muda hold that the Kuran and Hadith alone have this authority, and that as none of the Ulama are free from error, God has given us reason, or intelligence, with which to examine what the Ulama say (Roff 117)

In 1960 the Sultan of Perak remarked how the Kaum Tua were people who “devote their time to the spiritual side of life” while the Kaum Muda, “the material side of life” (Roff 128). Energetic and sensational as the debates might have been, the reality remains that a large portion of the Malay populace in 1960s Singapore, who were neither as privileged nor as versed in religion as members of the Kaum Tua/Kaum Muda factions, still remained “lax in their observances of essential precepts such as prayers and fasting” (Syed Muhd Khairudin

15) and their version of Islam was still pervaded by animistic beliefs (Syed Husin Ali 42)(Alatas 58). Suffice to say that a Malay Muslim identity of the period was characterised not by a single definition but a splintering of various identities composed by a privileged class with opposing opinions amongst themselves and a working-class defined by religious illiteracy.

Amidst the various loud-hailers over what a Malay identity meant in Islamic terms, there was also a notable attempt to politicise films in favour of particular ideas of national identity. Chung explains how the Hikayat films were very susceptible to this:

Through the manipulation of symbols and practices described in Malay prose literature (hikayat) for use in political campaigns and the reincarnation of these heroic figures on screen, this strategy uncovered an efficient conduit for projecting a specifically indigenous identity to the collective masses in the early stages of the country's nation-building efforts. (137)

At this point, let's now take a step back to begin developing an idea of how Hikayat films influenced Malay identity. The "debates of Malay identity construction can be understood within two contexts: 'authority-defined' and 'everyday-defined' social realities", the first being a combination of the ruling government as well as the coloniser's definition of Malays while the latter refers to "the rural convention of Malayness" (Lily et al. 43). What the block quote above reveals of the 1961 political environment is that Hikayat films can be used to project the idea that Malay identity meant indigenous identity. This falls under what Lily et al terms as 'authority defined'. This rhetoric unites Malays (regardless of which parts of the peninsula their forefathers came from) as native and homogenises the non-Malays (regardless of ethnicity or how many generations their families have lived in the peninsula) as

the Other⁸. In this sense, Hikayat films were capable of uniting and varnishing Malay identity with a political sheen that is meant to foster the future of Malay political dominance.

It is also worth mentioning that Hikayat films were also capable of affecting Malay identity on the individual level, in a way which is much simpler: if colonial history marred Malay identity from ‘sovereign’ down to ‘colonised’, then watching pre-feudal history in the form of the Hikayat films could aid in nursing Malay identity back to ‘independent’. This is what Lily et al terms as ‘everyday-defined’. Seeing on-screen images of Malays instead of white men ruling over Malay society provided a collective point of potential respite from colonial trauma.

Apart from the involvement of the politicians, literary activists too added to the dynamics of the Hikayat film culture⁹. Khairudin notes how “Seniman Bujang Lapok was filmed at a time, which coincided with the reawakening of the Malays, particularly the literary elites” (7). More importantly, their own creative contributions included attempts to look at Hikayats differently. P.Ramlee was himself influenced by the developments of a creative movement called Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50) (meaning the Literary Generation of 1950; the acronym ASAS means “basis”) (Khairudin 8). One of its members of the ASAS 50 association, Kamaludin Muhamad (also known as Keris Mas), describes their engagement with the context in which they operated:

In the field of literature, the proponents of ASAS 50 adopted a new breath of style, employing a mode of language that is fresh, departing from the preceding genre of writers, propounding the themes of societal awareness, politics and culture with the aim of revitalizing the spirit of freedom, the spirit of independence of a people (bangsa) of its own unique sense of honour and identity, upholding justice and

⁸ See M.Ahmad and Lee 415-420 for a more detailed description on how this racial Othering manifests in many 1960s films.

⁹ One of the most explicit involvement of a politician in a film is Tunku Abdul Rahman’s instigation for the production of *Raja Bersiong* (1968) (Chung 147)

combating oppression... We criticise societal backwardness and those whom we regard as the instruments responsible for the birth of such backwardness. We criticised colonialism and its instruments, that is, the elite class, those whose consciousness have been frozen by the influence of feudalism and myths, and superstition that has been enmeshed with religion (Khairudin 8-9).

What the creative environment reveals is a desire to redefine Malay identity through a series of additions and subtractions. What needs adding: a “new breath of style”, a “fresh” “mode of language”, a departure from “preceding genres of writers” and a propounding of “the themes of societal awareness, politics and culture” (Khairudin 8). What needs removing: the influence of feudalism and myths, and superstition enmeshed with religion (Khairudin 8).

This desire to redefine Malay identity can translate into a creative reinterpretation of a Hikayat to get a different idea of Malayness, which is what Hussein and P.Ramlee did in their respective films. Despite passing away at a rather young age – Hussein at 32 and P.Ramlee at 44, they managed to direct numerous films that were adaptations of a Hikayat or films set in the context of 1960s, both auteurs receiving appraisal for their innovative use of lighting, setting and acting amongst other things (Guneratne 162-167). P.Ramlee had a stronger presence though, because he also acted, sang and composed songs for the films he was involved in. The reason I chose to look at these two films of theirs is not because I have made the assumption that they are by some condition, the ‘best’ of the auteurs’ works or most ‘prolific’ of their respective aesthetic styles, but because amongst their contemporaries, the two films happen to be the ones that stood out for inviting a different look at Hikayats.

So what would Hikayats mean to these auteurs then, if their primary business is to promote a different look at these feudal Malay epics? If a Hikayat like *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was, to the colonial Malays, “an elegy to a glorious Golden age that had been cruelly cut short” (Van der Heide 73), then films that *reinterpret* a Hikayat can, to literarily-influenced

Malay film directors, be a cinematic space to experiment with different recipes of Malay identity. The thing is though, this line of argument highlights how even creative Malay films that do more than simply adapt Hikayats on screen, are susceptible to the motives of the filmmakers in the same way the Hikayat films are generally susceptible to being used by politicians. Did the creatives also use films to promote their own nationalistic ideals¹⁰?

Being a decade that saw such tumultuous social and political change, it is natural to read many 1960s films as Tim Harper does, as being invaded by nationalist debate from the outset (285). Chung more cautiously suggests that the films were “more in line with the political climate at the time”, explaining how “Malay filmmakers occupied the commercial sector of popular mainstream culture and were thus cautiously less radical” (141). She concedes though that Malay directors were nevertheless not dissuaded “from inadvertently promoting storylines with socio-political agendas” (141). I gravitate more towards the nuance that Chung recommends because the two films that I analyse, *Hang Jebat* and *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, appear to be collectively governed by a criticality over what Malay identity is, rather than carrying an energy entirely intent on advocating a Malay-centric national identity that many films of that time were allegedly charged with¹¹. In other words, I resist the temptation to read the films simply as ideological apparatuses that served to advocate any sort of nationalist argument that proliferated in the time of their production. Paul Willemsen states that “nationalist cinema” typically performs the right-wing repression of complexity (206-210). Applying Willemsen’s idea here clarifies that for 1961 Singapore, nationalist cinema can be understood as projecting a consolidated and firm idea of what Malay identity means.

¹⁰ By “creatives” here I mean to refer to Hussein and P. Ramlee as auteurs. What I mean to articulate is the idea that while they were known more as directors, they appear to share the same spirit as members of ASAS50 when they attempt to come up with creative ways of using a Hikayat. Locating Hikayat characters in comedic settings instead of their usual serious ones, or reorienting the focus of a Hikayat onto the antagonist instead – I would say these constitute as creative ideas, as opposed to simply reproducing a Hikayat on screen with the same narrative focus, plot and dialogue.

¹¹ As a case in point, see Mahyuddin and Lee 408-419.

However, the two films don't quite do that – their criticality towards essentialist ideas of what Malay identity is, offers exactly the kind of complexity that makes it problematic to define them simply *as* nationalist cinema. Considering that one of the most polarising issues in early 1960s Malaya and Singapore was the insistence for Malay dominance in terms of population numbers as well as political power within the federation of Malaysia, then nationalist cinema could either be concerned with projecting a Malay-centric society as an ideal, or as a bad idea¹². While the two films are arguably guilty of depicting a Malay-centric society, they appear less concerned in discussing whether or not a Malay-centric society is ideal, instead appearing more concerned with trying to develop an idea of *what* Malay identity could be.

Chapter Summaries

This project is split into two halves. The first half is more focused on analysing the films on their own, fleshing out their themes so as to firmly clarify the films' respective concerns first. Chapter 2 is focused on *Hang Jebat* while Chapter 3, on *Seniman Bujang Lapok*. In the second half of this project, the analysis will then move on to a more comparative tone, looking at the similar themes that appear in both films and analysing how they echo and illuminate the nuances in each other's arguments. Chapter 4 will look at the interaction between Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs as they are presented in both films. Chapter 5 will look at the way both films depict the non-Malay characters.

In Chapter 2, I focus solely on *Hang Jebat*. The narrative of *Hang Jebat* centres around the character of Jebat¹³. He is a Melakan warrior who rebels against the Sultan to avenge the unjust death sentence of his beloved brethren, Tuah. In a tragic twist, Tuah turns

¹² The social context will be further explained later in pages 10-14.

¹³ For simplicity, characters within the movie adaptation *Hang Jebat* (1961) will be called simply by their given names, "Tuah" and "Jebat", without their salutary titles "Hang". The terms "Hang Tuah" and "Hang Jebat" will be reserved to refer to them as popular feudal icons in general, or in reference to movie titles of other adaptations.

out to be alive, later ending up killing Jebat after being instructed to do so by the very monarch who had sentenced him to death earlier. Often understood as Tuah's nemesis, the 'traitorous' acts he commits remains the main associative reference for treason despite its minimal entry in *Sejarah Melayu*¹⁴ (Anuar Nor Arai 31). However, scriptwriter Ali Aziz saw Hang Jebat as an 'alternative warrior' to Hang Tuah (Anuar Nor Arai 32). Wahab Hamzah interprets Ali's efforts as attempts to consider the difference between true loyalty and blind subservience by examining Hang Jebat's motivation for revenge and treason (Chung 144). Chung nevertheless sides with Shaharuddin Maaruf that "what was achieved by Hang Jebat was simply a minor shift in political mindset by replacing one form of feudalism for another" (145). With so many existing arguments focused on what is achieved by Jebat through *his* actions, my argument is more focused on what the *film* is able to achieve through Jebat's actions. I argue that Jebat's supposed failure in proposing an alternative polity is not an end unto itself, but is a stepping stone for which the film is able to launch its own criticality. I argue that Jebat's rebellion enables a larger point to be made about the way Islam has been misconstrued and misconfigured within Malay society, especially for certain people to keep hold of their positions of power. My emphasis is that *Hang Jebat* is a *film*, a Hussein Haniff film at that, and through this emphasis I underline the importance of looking beyond the narrative and plot and to consider other cinematic elements which I find, collectively completes Jebat's opposition towards the Sultan and Tuah. What consequently results from this completion is an invitation to reconsider how faith should be configured in a Malay Muslim identity.

Chapter 3 will continue with the trend of considering the films individually first. It will focus solely on *Seniman Bujang Lapok*. Unlike *Hang Jebat*, this film can in a way, be understood as a film about making Hikayat films. It revolves around three main characters,

¹⁴ The *Sejarah Melayu* is a historical-literary text which compiles numerous Hikayat tales.

Ramlee, Sudin and Aziz, working-class Malay bachelors of 1961 Singapore who end up being actors for a film production company that appears to produce only Hikayat films. The narrative is split between their time as actors in the film studio and their time back at home in their cramped rental housing. All of the scenes in the film studio feature dubious scenes that appear as ludicrous caricatures of Hikayat tales. As individuals ignorant of film production, their slapstick antics within the studio compound further adds to the overall comedy. By reinterpreting shallow Hikayat films through comedic lens, what auteur P.Ramlee truly reinterprets is the significance of Hikayat films as a source of Malay identity. The primary argument in this chapter is that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is an exploration of the possibility of moving beyond an identity politics reliant on Hikayat films. In doing so, it is not proposing for the complete abandonment of the Hikayat, but for the consideration of the 1961 Singapore context itself as an equally legitimate and necessary premise where discussions about Malay identity can be held.

What we will learn by the end of chapter 3 is that both films have different approaches to expanding the discussions about Malay identity. *Hang Jebat* looks at a particular piece of Hikayat differently while *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is proposing for the audience to look at social contexts *apart from* the Hikayat. Having looked at the films separately the first half of this project and how they differ, the second half of this project will look at how they are alike. I will compare them more closely, specifically dwelling upon similar themes that appear in both films to consider how despite having different approaches, their messages complement each other in their united aim to expand discussions about Malay identity.

Chapter 4 will build upon the concerns about Islam that were fleshed out in chapter 2 and chapter 3. I will look at how both films depict the interaction between the Islamic identity

of the characters and how that interacts with their pre-Islamic beliefs¹⁵. In this chapter I argue that both films do not place Islamic beliefs and pre-Islamic beliefs in antagonistic terms, even if they clearly cannot coexist. Rather than developing Malay identity through a tension between the two belief systems, both films display a consistent tendency to underplay any tension between Islamic beliefs and pre-Islamic beliefs, shifting the discussion to one concerning an individual's core impulses instead. What results is a rhetoric that proposes the misconstruing of Islamic beliefs and a simultaneous subscription to pre-Islamic beliefs, as both being symptoms of a root impulse like subservience, greed or ego. The development of this rhetoric however, is done at the expense of severely limiting any interaction between Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs. It under-develops the idea that it is, as many scholars have argued, being under-educated about Islam that continues to permit the persistence of un-Islamic animist beliefs.

Chapter 5 will look at how the reconsiderations of Malay identity offered in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are collectively reified through interracial interactions. Here, I will specifically focus on the presence of the other races and examine the significance they have in the discussions concerning Malay identity. My main argument in this chapter is that both films similarly utilise the other races as a means to consolidate an understanding of the identity of the Malay characters. Comparing the two films in this light though interestingly reveals that they accentuate the racial identity of the other non-Malay characters through different means. *Seniman Bujang Lapok* accentuates the racial identity of the non-Malays through their speech and what they wear while *Hang Jebat* accentuates the racial identity of the non-Malays through their religion and other symbolisms. Ultimately though, even though the two films are not nationalistic in the sense of explicitly advocating for a Malay-centric society, the

¹⁵ By 'pre-Islamic' here I do not mean to refer to the entire history of religion before Islam was advocated as a religion by Prophet Muhammad in the 6th century. Here I refer to the history of the Malay's beliefs which was a composite of Hindu and animist elements.

development of the non-Malay characters in their storylines still take a toll because there is a sense in which how easy it is to develop Malay identity, depends on the relative fixity or freezing of other characters, as a relative constant to which Malay identity can be contrasted against.

I will then proceed to the sixth and final chapter to conclude what the preceding chapters collectively offer. Here I re-state the overarching idea, that both films attempt to expand the discussions about Malay identity. I ultimately conclude that they both appear to succeed in this but that success is contingent upon an analysis that goes beyond an examination of narrative, but also on their use of other cinematic elements as a means to rework the way a Hikayat can be used to tell a story or relay a social commentary.

CHAPTER 2

“Mengapa kau baling batu pada kereta aku?”

“Kenapa pakcik bunuh Jebat?”

(“Why are you throwing rocks at my car?”)

(“Why did you kill Jebat?”)

- M.Amin, actor who played Tuah in
Hang Jebat (1961), asking why
young film-goers damaged his car.

Hang Jebat

In this chapter, I look at what a focusing on Jebat has to offer to the film’s own point about Malay identity. An analysis on the level of characterisation alone will go only go as far as to prove that Jebat fails to establish a new polity based upon an independence from the Sultan. A consideration of other cinematic elements however, will reveal that the film’s tactical refocusing of the Hikayat’s narrative onto this rebel warrior is not so much about sympathising, advocating, or furthering his political endeavour. I posit that the film leverages on Jebat’s failure in order to launch its own critical gesture with regards to Malay identity.

My primary argument is that Jebat’s rebellion enables the film to criticise the way Islam has historically been misconstrued and misconfigured within Malay society. One major point is made with regards to Islam and the ruling class, and one major point is made with regards to Islam and the warrior class. For the former, the issue is the problematic conflation of divinity and monarchy. For the latter, it is the interpretation of Islam in a way that favours a subservience to the ruling class. For both cases, Islam is not practiced properly but is instead used as a tool to falsely justify one’s privileges or actions. I further argue that what ultimately results from the collective thrust of the two points is a proposition for Malays to accord a better respect for their Islamic faith and to have a more honest embracing of the

religion instead of conveniently warping it to suit their purposes, or using it as a means to an end.

This chapter has two basic portions. The first portion will begin by clarifying the main keywords and themes. What then follows is a commentary on how Jebat develops these themes, the point being that he flounders at his attempt to oppose certain essentialist understandings about Malay society that he does not agree with. The second portion will introduce an Islamic lens into the whole analysis, and what this brings is a new insight into the way film leverages on Jebat's ineffective and incomplete opposition to bring a separate point about an improper Malay Muslim identity.

Summary and Social Context of The Original Hikayat Hang Tuah

The film *Hang Jebat* is an adaptation from *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. In the original Hikayat, the tale begins with the birth of both main characters, Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat who, with three other friends, receive martial arts training, fend off their homeland from pirates and eventually get employed by the Sultan of Malacca with Hang Tuah as the beloved and favoured *laksmana* (royal admiral). Soon however, Hang Tuah is falsely accused of having an adulterous affair with a palace maid, which is considered high treason and the Sultan hastily sentences his *laksmana* to death without bothering to have investigations done. Hang Tuah is stripped of his prestigious position and his weapon the magical *keris* (short dagger-like weapon) called the Tamingsari, taken away. Both title and magical *keris* are given to Hang Jebat his friend, who despite the prestige, weeps, mourns and soon vows to avenge for his beloved friend. Pateh Karma Wijaya, the cunning foreign dignitary of Melaka's court is from the neighbouring Javanese empire of Majapahit. The Pateh (the Javanese title for minister) is the one responsible for churning the lies and manipulating the foolish Sultan.

In this film however, Tuah's crime is not mentioned¹⁶. In fact, the film begins with the Sultan sentencing Tuah to death. What is clear is that the Sultan neglects to factor in Tuah's loyalty and does not investigate the matter further. This incites the rage of Jebat who upon being made to take the place as *Laksmana*, earns the Sultan's trust only to commit a series of atrocities later including pursuing the ruler's favourite entertainers and concubines, killing some palace guards who safeguard the Sultan's treasures and proceeding to distribute the treasures to the village folk he managed to gather. He treats the main palace as his own, presumably as a form of revenge against the rash Sultan, so that the latter may perhaps know how it feels like to be subject to the whims of another. Not long after Jebat usurps control over the entire main palace. Nobody, not even the Sultan, dares to challenge or openly criticise him. At a point where the situation seems hopeless for the Sultan, the Datuk Bendahara (chief minister of the royal court) reveals to the hiding Sultan that Tuah is still alive. Glad and hopes renewed, the Sultan orders Tuah to kill Jebat. Jebat is pleasantly surprised, elated even, when Tuah appears in front of him, but his sense of relief is cut short when he is told that his beloved brethren has come to kill 'Hang Jebat the rebel'. The duel does not lead to the immediate death of Jebat, but ends with a fatal stab into Jebat's torso. Tuah takes his leave and Jebat, frustrated and disappointed at his brethren's undying loyalty to the Sultan, declares his famous oath, that is to run amok throughout Melaka – and he does. Over the course of several days the wounded Jebat kills hundreds of people, regardless of their level of loyalty to the Sultan, until he eventually dies.

Though scholars have varied opinions on the exact dating to which *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was written, it is generally agreed that the characters depicted within the story lived in a feudal society of fifteenth century Melaka (Barnard 9). The film adaptation, *Hang Jebat*

¹⁶ From this point on, the characters in the film will simply be referred to as Tuah and Jebat, without the honorary title "Hang". This is for ease of differentiation – 'Hang Tuah' and 'Hang Jebat' will be reserved for other adaptations or the general figure of these feudal icons.

(1961), naturally concerns itself with the same feudal society but does it cover the entire original story? Not quite - as is perhaps hinted by the film's title, the film primarily focuses only on the part where Hang Jebat appears most prominently, that is technically, a small portion of the original Hikayat altogether (Van der Heide 193). In the Hikayat version, when Hang Tuah hears news of Hang Jebat's death, he displays some sombreness but quickly resumes his services to the Sultan and that forms the rest of the story¹⁷.

Fundamentally, the Jebat of this film adaptation, much like other Jebats, attempts to explore the possibility of a Malay identity that is unreliant on the Sultan but as many academics have argued, he fails at establishing this new polity¹⁸. I echo and add to this argument by interpreting Jebat's gesture of opposition as incomplete because he is too impassioned to be articulate in such complex gestures – but I also argue that there is a point to Jebat's failure, that it is not the end unto itself.

What Jebat is focused on opposing, is the concept of *daulat* (reverence for the Sultan) and *adat hulubalang* (warrior's code/customs) – but poor Jebat does a hack job of it. Can we blame this entirely impassioned warrior? He struggles, he stumbles, he gets confused with his principles and passions. But the helpful thing is that he does get the ball rolling, there is indeed much to be critical about Tuah's commitment to those two concepts. It is just that Jebat is as we will see, is unable to bring his point across effectively. Where his gestures fall short, the film picks up and completes it by including the Islamic aspect as the missing key to Jebat's opposition. What the film does is that it orchestrates specific visual and auditory elements to bring across one point about *daulat* and one point about *adat hulubalang* each,

¹⁷ In the *Sejarah Melayu*, the story continues with Hang Tuah being despatched as the royal ambassador to different countries amongst other duties, and then parting with his weapon, the keris called Tamingsari, coincidentally at the same moment the Sultan loses his crown in the sea. Without his weapon, the royal warrior is soon fatally injured from fights with the invading Portuguese and the story ends with the eventual fall of Melaka to the hands of the Portuguese. The main difference between the tale of Hang Tuah in Hikayat Hang Tuah and the one in *Sejarah Melayu* is that in the latter, it is Hang Kasturi that rebels instead of Hang Jebat.

¹⁸ See Shahrudin 48, Chung 145 and van der Heide 193-197

but both in relation to Islam. The first point is that *daulat* is a problem because it conflates the notion of divinity and royalty. The second point is that Tuah only interprets *adat hulubalang* in a way that accommodates his subservience to the Sultan.

Before I proceed with the whole stretch of the argument and bringing in the Islamic concepts into the picture, I would also like to briefly explain the terms *daulat* and *adat*. We will then proceed to witness how the film introduces these two concepts.

Introducing The Root of the Problem, *Daulat*

Daulat is a Malay concept that encapsulates a loyalty and reverence for the Sultan. The term itself can function as a noun and as a verb, in that it can refer to a Malay subject's sense of reverence/*Daulat* to the Sultan, and it can also be used in phrases such as "Daulat Tuanku", which is roughly the Malay equivalent of "All hail the king". The most prominent way to express *Daulat* is to, of course, obey the Sultan's orders at all costs. Braginsky explains the origins of this reverence:

According to traditional Malay ideas, the monarch is endowed, by virtue of his supernatural origin and Divine preordination, with sacral energy or power (*daulat*), which makes him a focus and a custodian of the social order. His subjects - both the people and the country, symbolized by Hang Tuah - are linked to him in a kind of sacral marriage (474)

As pointed out by Braginsky, the Sultan is not just a Sultan by virtue of royal lineage but is a figure associated with divine elements. This combination allows the Sultan to be understood as someone who ought to be accorded an amount of respect and reverence so immense, that one simply cannot imagine the consequences of leaving such immeasurable powers at the hands of an unwise ruler. Or perhaps one can, and has made entire stories about the dangers of *daulat* for centuries.

Image 1 – “Don’t refute me!”

The opening scene of the film begins at the royal court, where the Sultan is furious at his formerly-beloved admiral’s alleged crime. This scene effectively foregrounds loyalty to the Sultan as one of the significant themes in the story. The sense of anxiety generated from the drumrolls in the background complements well the frame of the camera as it oscillates between the view of the pacing king and that of his subjects who have removed their *tanjak* - a headgear that can identify one’s social status - and proffering them to the Sultan as an act of submission to his will. The scene then culminates with an exclamation from the Sultan, the opening line of the film – “Hang Tuah must be killed!”

Notably, the Sultan makes no mention of his admiral’s contribution to him and the country as a factor he took into consideration before he made his decision; only a minister makes brief mention of the fact that Tuah has “many deeds”, so that the Sultan may reconsider his decision. Eyes wide, nostrils flared¹⁹, breathing heavy – these theatrics add to

¹⁹ The idea of flared nostrils will return as a recurring gag in relation to another tyrannical figure of authority, in *Seniman Bujang Lapok*.

the effervescence of the introductory scene. The film thus begins at a high point, a point marked by the Sultan having absolutely no wish to discuss nor tolerate anyone questioning his decision.

Having begun in medias res, the film's narrative also commits the similar deed of beginning the story without any flashback to or detailing of Tuah's contributions to the Sultan or the country – neither the Sultan nor the film's plot seem to pay significant attention to Tuah's contribution. The initial tense two minutes long take is an overt declaration of Hussein's authorship over his film adaptation of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Inherent within that directorial gesture is, the film's argument that Tuah's contribution is indeed of peripheral focus, while the Sultan is a primary contributor to the development and conflict in the story. Historically, *adat* (customs) and *bahasa* (language) were the main concepts that formed the pillar of Malay culture painstakingly described in Hikayat texts (Maier 7). Beginning with the Sultan's rash decision however, develops a specific focus on *daulat*. The centrality of *daulat* as a theme in this scene is further reinforced through the symbolic proffering of one's *tanjak* (traditional Malay headgear) to the Sultan. From the onset the introductory scene effectively makes it clear that the maintenance of *daulat* towards the arguably tyrannical Sultan is an urgent concern.

On the contrary, in a very comprehensive historical survey of genres, writings and literary views, Vladimir Braginsky provides a contrasting viewpoint in his book *The Heritage of Traditional Malay Literature*. In his analysis of the Sultan in the tale of Hang Tuah he posits that “despite his rashness and his credulousness, the Sultan is not presented as a tyrant – rather a regular way of portraying Malay rulers in Malay literature”. The depiction, to him, “does not include conventional traits of a tyrant such as promiscuity, massive cruelty and rapaciousness” (475). He explains that “fully in accordance of the hikayat's conception of the embodiment of the country's destiny in the combined destinies of the king and Hang

Tuah, the disintegration of Malacca is presented as being the result of natural ageing caused, in turn, by the termination of a span of time allotted to it by Allah". His supporting evidence is that "the hikayat begins with the supernatural birth of both its heroes; their youth is coincidental with the founding of Malacca, their maturity with its flourishing" and adds that "the hikayat concludes with the simultaneous departure of the sultan and Hang Tuah from Malacca...while Malacca, having reached the end of its period allotted to it by Divine Presentation, is captured by the Portuguese". (Braginsky 474-475). He also pointed out what appeared as important parallels such as the time the Sultan losing his crown coinciding with that when Hang Tuah's loses his *keris*. I can concur that the many 'coincidences' together symbolically establish a link between the Sultan and his warrior but to also suggest that the Hikayat author's conception of Islam as manifesting in the depiction of a fate that sees the monarch's leaving of Malacca and the fall of Malacca as coincidental, and that "the disintegration of Malacca is presented as being the natural result of ageing" (Braginsky 476), overly absolves the Sultan's part in the tragedies that unfold from his decisions. It unfortunately draws attention away from the plot's concern of having such an incompetent and rash character in a position of great ruling power. To be fair however, Braginsky came to that point after meticulously surveying the narrative patterns of not just one Hikayat but many others, thus shaping his perspective of Hang Tuah's Sultan as relatively less tyrannical. Also, Braginsky is not arguing that the Sultan is entirely free from fault; it is that he would not necessarily see the Sultan as the point of contention, to the extent that the film *Hang Jebat* does. To clarify what I mean, recall the fact that while the film begins with the Sultan's sentencing of Tuah to death and ends with Jebat's death, Braginsky looked at events prior and after those moments as detailed in *Sejarah Melayu* as well as *Hikayat Hang Tuah* – from the birth of Tuah and Jebat, all the way to their adulthood and Melaka's fall later on. Momentarily perusing Braginsky's argument though, is extremely useful insofar that it puts

into perspective the film's choice of only looking at a specific portion of this Hikayat – a premise that allows for the argument that maintaining a *daulat* to such a problematic Sultan indeed deserves urgent and primary focus.

Introducing The Supporting Theme, *Adat Hulubalang*

In general, *adat* refers to customs or traditions. “Originally an Arab word, *adat* is used to describe the local customs or customary laws that existed before the advent of Islam.” (Khoo 5). Khoo also adds the points of other scholars who note that “*adat* and Islam are integral to Malay identity and exist in a complementary fashion with each other (Wazir 1992; Sharifah Zaleha 2000)... It acts like the “residue” of all customs that are considered Malay but not Islamic (Nagata 1986, 42)” (5). In other words, *adat* is generally a concept that delineates aspects of Malay tradition that are distinct from but are not at odds with Islamic fundamentals.

While the “application [of *adat*] ranges from the mundane sense of acting properly to the concept of Malay identity and cohesion, and covers the full range of economic, social and cultural practices” (Van der Heide 67), my realistic focus here is not *adat* in its entirety but *adat hulubalang*. *Adat hulubalang* translates to “warrior customs” and these refer to Malay traditions that are specific to those hired as warriors by the Sultan. It is a code, a way of life that prioritises *daulat* more than anything else because a *hulubalang*/warrior's livelihood, unlike other Malay subjects, is the direct and immediate service to the Sultan and his safety. In this code, honour and dignity are thus a matter of how well one obeys and executes the Sultan's commands. Of course, there were court ministers who swore loyalty to the Sultan too but it was not them that the Sultan turned to for physical protection or amusement such as “hunting, fighting and other forms of entertainment” (Shaharuddin 10) - for these the Sultan had his favourite court official, the chief of the *hulubalang*, the Laksmana, “a status above all

warriors” (Shaharuddin 23). In fact, Laksmana Hang Tuah was favoured so much that it did not take long for him to be slandered by the other ministers. A story about him having an affair with a palace maid was all it took, and his death sentence came even swifter. But the man’s commitment to *adat hulubalang* remained firm, so firm that his “loyalty superseded ethical and moral considerations. Right and wrong was defined in terms of the convenience of the master.” (Shaharuddin 23)

Image 2 - Tuah being escorted back to the palace

In the first scene that introduces Tuah, he is seen making a grand proclamation about the warrior’s code or *adat hulubalang* in front of the other *hulubalang*, including Jebat and the Datuk Bendahara: “If [the Sultan of Melaka] no longer wishes me around, then I accept death!”. Though he does not specifically mention the word ‘adat’, we understand from his proclamation that his commitment to *adat hulubalang* knows no boundaries – accepting instead of opposing the death sentence meted out by the Sultan is an expression of loyalty that befits his commitment to the warrior’s code. Though is he, that committed?

Fast-forward a little bit to a scene when we actually hear the word ‘adat’ being uttered, we see Tuah alive! In more modest clothing and housing yes, but with no signs of

having slimmed down or looking dishevelled and anxious, we are made to understand that this is a man who has been well-fed and well looked after. Refusing to die is of course treason, but for a man in hiding and for a *hulubalang* who swore his loyalty to the Sultan, this individual with a treason and dead-man status appears surprisingly at ease.

This is only Tuah's second appearance in the film, and the concept of *adat hulubalang* is spelled out even more explicitly. When the Datuk Bendahara explains of Jebat's rebellion, he remarks, "You have breached the *adat* of the *hulubalang* Jebat. You have disobeyed (the Sultan)". With his face genuinely aghast and disgusted at his friend's disregard for *adat hulubalang*, it is hard to know if Tuah is completely ignorant of or completely ignoring his hypocrisy, considering every second of his being alive is itself a blatant act of disregard for *adat hulubalang*. According to the Sultan's orders, he is supposed to be dead. The point that I am trying to make is that in the way that the film introduces the concept of *adat hulubalang*, audiences are clearly steered to be skeptical about Tuah's commitment to the warrior's code and by extension, his commitment to *daulat* as well.

Now let's take a step back to generalise how *daulat* and *adat hulubalang* work to constitute Malay identity here. *Adat hulubalang* is the pinnacle expression of *daulat*, and even if one is not a warrior, Clive Kessler argues that the "identity of the Malay people is defined through their subjecthood" because a *kerajaan* (structure of a Malay state) "is not only a ruler's domain but his subjects' sociocultural condition, that of having a raja" (136). To put it less gracefully, *daulat* and *adat hulubalang* helps us to understand that being a feudal Malay meant simply being a subject of his or her Sultan. What about how Islam contributes to identity? The Islamic faith is a dimension that by theory, modifies feudal Malay identity by mellowing this sense of subservience to the monarch. This is because the understanding is that any human being is but a humble creation of God (even prophets, so what more Sultans) and thus a Muslim should prioritise God's orders first. Van der Heide

also notes the problem here, identifying the “dominant position of the Sultanate, but also the challenge to it of Islam, which argues for the unimpeded relationship between the Islamic community and God” (70). This means that a Malay Muslim, whether or not he/she is a practitioner of *adat hulubalang*, ought to place God first and Sultan second (if not somewhere below God). But is that the argument that Jebat goes for in his anti-feudalist rebellion? A religious line of argument? No, but his iconic attempts are still very much worth analysing.

Jebat’s Opposition

Jebat is upset, Jebat is hurt, Jebat is angry. The Sultan has sentenced his beloved brother Tuah to death without even bothering to investigate the allegations. How can the evil Sultan do this to his dear brethren? Primarily, because the evil Sultan can. The concept of *daulat* and *adat hulubalang* allows the monarch to do as he pleases. So angry Jebat opposes these two concepts but does not do too good a job at it.

The first thing Jebat tries to do in the film is to convince Tuah that it is problematic to commit to *adat hulubalang*, but he fails. Right after the opening scene with the Sultan sentencing Tuah to death, the second scene of the film immediately features the upset Jebat. Running across fields and forest trails, the passionate warrior desperately shouts “Abang Tuah!” (meaning “brother Tuah”) as he urgently looks for his beloved brethren. Even if audiences unfamiliar with the Malay language were to miss the connotations of “abang” as a term of endearment for that social context, it would be hard to miss the look of concern and distress on Jebat’s face altogether. Once he does find Tuah later, he goes down on his knees crying and pleading Tuah to not follow the palace guards. He also tries to explain to Datuk Bendahara that Tuah has been framed and is innocent. Datuk Bendahara acknowledges knowing the truth but solemnly explains that he does not have the power to renounce the

Sultan's orders. Jebat, out of desperation, offers to kill the palace guards that were escorting Tuah back to the palace.

Jebat: I will not just stand by and watch! Oh Tuah, I will defend you, I will go amok on these guards! Please! Escape!

Tuah: No Jebat. [Jebat covers his eyes to continue crying] For running away will only prove that I am indeed wrong. I will not be the subject of anyone but the Sultan of Melaka. If he wishes me no longer around, then I accept death!

The swift alternation between crying and raging is already a clear indication that Jebat is easily given to emotions. His quick suggestion to have the other *hulubalang* killed also foreshadows his mounting tendency to be even more haphazard in his plans and actions. It certainly does not bode well for his ability to convince people that there is a problem with *adat hulubalang*, especially when he is dealing with someone who adamantly (apparently) insists on accepting death in the name of his warrior's code. Jebat tries again, this time with a moral rhetoric -

Jebat: Abang, you speak for yourself. What about those you leave behind? Your wife, your child, have you forgotten them? It is as if you are not responsible for them...

Tuah: Jebat! Speak not that way! That, or we shall duel this instance! Would I have wanted advice, I need only ask. Barter not what isn't sought Jebat!

Jebat makes a good point of course, but the difference in their linguistic register is meant to give Tuah the upper-hand. Tuah's language is courtly and he even ends with a Malay idiom while Jebat's language is simple, and added with his threat to go amok, renders him almost like a child in tantrum²⁰. This limits Jebat's ability to bring his point across even when they are valid. Nevertheless, he does well though, to remind Tuah of how a *hulubalang* is still

²⁰ By "courtly" I refer to the tendency for Malay aristocrats and nobility to speak in a slightly different syntax – as in "Speak not that way!" as opposed to the more direct "Don't speak that way!". Being able to use the idiom "barter not what is not sought" is also another social indicator as opposed to sentences that appears simplistic without being adorned by any literary devices.

precious to his family, but let's not forget he also earlier offered to kill the other *hulubalang* who, by his definition, are technically also precious to their own families. So the passionate warrior stumbles and trips over his own ideals, but does he stop? No, he tries again, and gets even more bewildered by his own actions this time.

Jebat also opposes any kind of *daulat* or respect altogether for the Sultan by bringing in the notion of the welfare of his community. In a later scene where he has effectively usurped control of the palace, he makes a grand proclamation of this in front a huge group of village-folk to whom he has hastily distributed the Sultan's treasures. In thanking Jebat, some of the village-folk go as far as to say "Thank you Your Highness", to which Jebat momentarily responds with some fear and panic:

No! Don't- Don't worship me! I am not mad for worship. I am not the Sultan of Melaka whose position and presence you revere. I am Jebat, a commoner! My title (Admiral/Laskmana) is for the benefit of the people. Every move that I make is to commit deeds for the people! And I would die for the people. Because I want justice. Justice! Justice....

While the contents of his grand speech are moving, the beginning and ending moments of his speech betray the content's credibility. It is not that Jebat is trying to lie – he is earnest, he is sincere, he just has not thought his ideals through. His momentary panic at the start of his speech shows that he was not aware of the potential implications of his actions. His repetition of the word "justice" at the end is not so much for the village-folk, but is instead a verbal reminder for himself to understand why he is in the palace, in the position that he is in, essentially trying to understand what it is that he is really trying to do.

Image 3 - Jebat panicking at “Your highness”

Image 4 - Jebat repeating “keadilan”

As for his primary gesture, yes we can hear that he wants justice, but having killed the treasury’s guards in order to gather and distribute the Sultan’s treasures shows how his execution is choppy and not well thought through. He is more than willing to kill for his community, he is also more than willing to kill for his family, as is indicated from his offer to kill the palace guards for Tuah early on. However, after losing in his duel with Tuah later, he would proceed to go amok *on* the community and would kill many Melakans all the same. Hence, although Tuah’s apparent commitment to *daulat* and *adat hulubalang* is clearly not the most ideal, Jebat’s attempt to forcefully decentralise the significance of those two aspects, is not exactly well-executed nor well-sustained either. Quite clearly, the two warriors exist not as idols which viewers can take as immediate examples of as perfect Malays. They do not exist as instructions, but more as questions which make the audience wonder if what is on display is indeed, Malay. One cannot be considered without the other, and together they form that big question. The dichotomy of two extremes on display is what I believe forms the film’s invitational gestures to think about the ideal Malay. Is it simply about striking a balance between Jebat’s ideals and Tuah’s ideals? What is indeed a good ‘balance’ for a Malay? Is there more to consider?

I briefly segue way to include existing scholarly arguments that may have perhaps missed the point of the Tuah-Jebat dichotomy and comprehensively argue how Hang Jebat and Hang Tuah propagate the wrong values and that idolising them as heroes is wrong. Shahrudin for one, in his book exploring the concept of the Malay hero, expresses criticality towards people who identify Hang Jebat and Hang Tuah as figures that are worth idolising, pointing to the royal warriors' negative attributes but in his work, show little consideration for the characters as intended to be more allegorical than they are representational – in that there are lessons to be learnt from them rather than emulating them²¹. The primary design of his rhetoric was to have the negative aspects of the warriors (subservience and self-centredness) as the premise of his arguments before he proceeded to look at the warriors as political devices used by the ruling elite. And the arguments are indeed compelling, but I worry if the premise is slightly overdone, because the writer firstly, projects a disproportionate focus on the warriors' negative attributes and secondly, quite discounts the intellectual capacity of the whole Malay society in general, by glossing past and overlooking this possibility that the Malay society perhaps, just perhaps had and has a capacity to think for themselves, and are capable of looking at the two warriors as characters that are meant to invite critical thinking and generate discussion rather than to be taken, as immediately exemplary figures. Nevertheless, Shahrudin's research and argument still remain indispensable because he sheds light on how these feudal icons remain highly influential to the discourse of Malay identity.

To summarise so far, I have explained that the two big themes in the film are *daulat* and *adat hulubalang*. My argument so far is that Jebat takes issue with these two concepts but he expresses his disagreement rather clumsily.

²¹ See Shahrudin chapters 1 and 2.

Film's Bias Towards Jebat

Despite Jebat's rather erratic behaviour, the film still presents a bias towards him on the level of cinematography. Recall the first scene where Jebat and Tuah appear together – the visual composition of this scene provides a rather interesting study. It alternates between two shots – a view of Tuah from below (presumably the viewpoint of the kneeling Jebat) and a shot which only captures Tuah's mid-riff downwards (effectively capturing Jebat's entire kneeling self as he tugs on Tuah's garb like a child). After this alternation it presents a high-angle shot which presents a view of Jebat framed between the two standing men, both of whom appear fairly motionless, and neither looking at him.

Image 5 - Jebat between the two men

Image 6 - Perspective of kneeling Jebat

The consistent focus on Jebat's theatrics and viewpoint of course, makes it easy to empathise with him more than any other character in that scene. More importantly however, Hussain's visual conceptualisation of Jebat's reality – his hopes for justice, his entire physical self – remain visually and symbolically removed from the two standing men who appear more stoic and distant, and clearly not sharing his passion.

The bias towards Jebat also manifests as a plot bias against Tuah. Apart from dedicating a larger amount of time depicting Jebat, the organisation of the plot, in beginning with a scene depicting Tuah's death sentence rather than Tuah's contributions as the original epic did, further supports this idea. It is of course, worth considering the idea that the choice

to leave out Tuah's scenes of loyalty and contribution to the Sultan altogether, was due to the fact that such moments were already well-known to the audience. Nevertheless, this intentional choice on the part of the filmmakers to refocus on the Sultan's anger is evidently indicative of the film's leaning on the loyalty-to-king or loyalty-to-friendship binary. The fact that the title is "Hang Jebat" instead of the title of the original epic, "Hikayat Hang Tuah", doubly suggests the film's position as favouring Jebat rather than Tuah. From the onset, it is obviously Jebat who the film wants us to side with – that much is clear, but the point about siding with Jebat is that it naturally calibrates the audiences to also, like Jebat, be in opposition to the Sultan.

Getting audiences to empathise with Jebat, is not about getting audiences to completely agree with all his decisions and choices but for audiences to be able to look at the Sultan the way Jebat does - so that we get to view the Sultan through Jebat's eyes. Essentially, I argue that in *Hang Jebat*, the focus is not Jebat – the focus is Jebat's *focus*, the Sultan. Making Jebat the main character and orienting the audience through the 'Jebat gaze' (the way Jebat looks at things), so to speak, is the film-makers' intellectual gambit to nudge audiences to ponder on a different level of criticality about Malay identity - what exactly is the nature and target of this opposition? Is it opposing the *person* in the position of power? Or is it opposing the feudal structure altogether? What about the person or the structure does he oppose? The film leverages on this criticality in order to posit that the Sultan is problematic for the way Islam has been misconfigured into the Malay society's conception of him - this understanding the Sultan as the supernatural or divine being. At the level of characterisation however, Jebat alone does not make this big point – he cannot. As with the case of other Hang Jebats, Hussein's Jebat is also clearly boundlessly passionate - notably too impassioned by his anger towards the Sultan to be able to articulate with such specificity²². Essentially, in

²² Though this Jebat is clear about what he hated in Tuah, detailing what a *laksmana* should be like.

the bigger scheme of things, Jebat's critical gesture is incomplete. The film completes Jebat's gesture by compensating for this lack on the level of characterisation, with cinematography – cinematographic references to Islam in rather pensive ways.

Completing Jebat's Gesture

The film uses Jebat's confusion as a gateway to launch its own critical gesture. Despite his grand proclamation about wanting "keadilan" (justice and equality) and distributing the Sultan's treasures to the people, Jebat's certainty about what he is doing only wavers and continues to confuse himself as the plot progresses. His aim for *keadilan* becomes less and less clear. The weight of his confusion comes from a compound of the opposition he receives and the intoxicating charm of power. After Jebat effectively usurps power over the power, he begins indulging in all the food and dance performances that he forces the palace maids to provide him. His three friends Lekir, Lekiu and Kasturi interrupt the dance performance and express fierce disapproval of his behaviour. They are soon however, forced back when Jebat unsheathes the powerful and revered *keris* named Tamingsari. A proper physical fight breaks out later when Pateh Karma Wijaya, the cunning foreign dignitary of Melaka's court, is granted a group of men by the Sultan after he manages to convince the increasingly anxious monarch that Jebat needs to be killed. The group proceeds to try and ambush Jebat at the palace. Infuriated at the sight of the Pateh whom he has long known as responsible for framing Tuah, Jebat easily kills the Pateh and all of his men. Jebat's unstable mental condition continues to take a turn for the worse when he wreaks havoc in another palace, the palace of the Sultan's second wife, the Javanese princess. From that point on his indulgence in hedonism and mistreatment of the palace maids thickens. In one instance, the man espousing for *keadilan* even grabs one of the palace maid by the hair as he instructs her to relay a message – a violence towards women he never before depicted, at least not until

this point. Satisfied, he gives a maniacal laugh as he lies down on the royal bed. By this point, the onslaught of conflicting experiences is too much for his mind - he has Dang Baru as his soulmate, he has the palace maids serving him, but his friends Lekir, Lekiu and Kasturi disagree and oppose him, the palace guards are constantly trying to kill him. Also, he knows that the Sultan desperately wants him dead, and he in turn would seem happy to have the Sultan dead – but would killing the Sultan be what he really wants? The truth is that he could well hunt for the Sultan and kill the monarch if he wanted to, but Jebat does no such thing. In a frustrated and inarticulate gesture of opposition, Jebat throws a spear towards the throne.

Figure 7 - Angry Jebat

Figure 8 - Spear on throne

Jebat's increasing psychological and emotional anxiety finds itself culminating in the image of the spear on the empty throne. It is a scene which invites audiences to ponder upon the relationship between the monarchy and Jebat's frustration. Jebat is very clear that the Sultan is at the core of his frustration but he somehow cannot come to fathom the totality of what exactly it is that he is fighting for anymore – is it specifically the person in the position of the Sultan? Is it the feudal concept of the Sultan? Is it the whole social structure which supports the monarchy? His gesture of rebellion is erratic, it is incoherent, it is incomplete – he is after all, the boundlessly impassioned warrior. Just what exactly *is* wrong about the Sultan? As the palace maid proceeds down the steps of the palace to relay the message, the camera offers a visual continuity that possibly answers for Jebat.

Image 9 - Dayang/palace

Image 10 - Intermediary/dissolve

Image 11 – Hiding Sultan

The camera develops a visual continuity between the palace steps and the steps of the Datuk Bendahara's house (where the Sultan is hiding) to connect the turmoil between the two places. It is in this location, that the Datuk Bendahara soon reveals to the Sultan that Tuah is not dead. The Sultan immediately expresses delight rather than anger because he sees Tuah as the only means of suppressing Jebat.

Datuk Bendahara: Pardon me Your highness, if God has enacted fate to keep Tuah alive, would Your Highness forgive him his sins? Pardon me Your Highness.

Sultan: Bendahara! Do not make a fool of me.

Datuk Bendahara: Pardon me Your Highness, I bow to you, tainted with treachery.

Hang Tuah is indeed still alive. I had him placed in hiding at the edge of Melaka.

Forgive me for my disobedience, but what order do you have now Your Highness?

Pardon me Your Highness.

Sultan: [smiling and holding Dato' Bendahara's shoulders] What? He is still alive?

The big answer to Jebat's confusion lies in the Dato' Bendahara's evocation of fate. It is one of the most significant scenes in the film not just because of the revelation that Tuah is alive, but because it presents the idea that divine plans (as in fate) are distinct from the Sultan's plans. This fundamentally begins to pry apart the notion of divinity from the Sultan. It deconstructs the understanding of the Sultan as the "representative of God on earth". This idea is further foregrounded when auteur Hussein enacts a very important cinematic move to end the scene. With the soundtrack drained of any sound, the camera then proceeds to lift up and zoom to a calligraphy that spells "Allah" in Arabic (referring to God in Islam), hanging above the doorway – and the scene ends with that image. The camera's panning makes the strikingly quiet change of view a compelling contemplative moment.

Image 12 - Scene ends with "Allah" being literally above everyone

It is clear that on a cinematic level, there is meant to be an implied distinction between the Sultan's plans and God's plans, and the interplay between sound and image once again takes centre stage. I argue that this moment comports with the critical gesture the film makes, the gesture that completes Jebat's gesture of opposition towards the Sultan. Through Jebat's criticality towards the Sultan, the film is able to consolidate a bigger gesture that problematises the traditional understanding that conflates royal authority with religious authority, as this representative of God on earth, this pseudo-*mujtahid*. This synchronises well with the plot itself - had what the Sultan ordained for Tuah been enacted properly, there

would have been no warrior that could match and subdue the rampaging Jebat, again proving that Sultan is neither wise nor has fate under his control. In essence, what Jebat has not been able to properly articulate is his opposition to the idea of *daulat* as worshipping the Sultan as if he is indeed divinity, and the cinematography in the above scene helps bring this point to light.

After detangling the Islam-*daulat* concept in above scene, the film wastes no momentum by immediately making a commentary about how Tuah configures Islam and *adat hulubalang*. The cinematography is equally important in this scene.

Image 13 – Tuah praying in the direction of the camera

In the first scene which re-introduces Tuah after his disappearance and assumed death, he is seen performing his prayers. In the absence of a Sultan to serve and take instructions from, the scene presents Tuah as a man of faith instead. How sincere is this visual Islamic expression of faith as a substitute to the worship of the Sultan? Interestingly, save for the moment of prostration, the warrior is actually praying in the general direction of the camera, and effectively, in the direction of the audience watching. This way, the camera

presents Tuah's act of prayer as more readily available for visual assessment by the audiences. And what *can* audiences judge based on what they see? His facial expression certainly gives the impression that he is solemn and sincere. However, this implied sincerity is later contradicted the moment he reveals his hypocrisy. When the Datuk Bendahara explains to him of Jebat's revolt and effective usurping of power in the main palace, Tuah remarks, "You have breached the *adat* (Malay customs) of the *hulubalang* (military) Jebat. You have disobeyed (the Sultan)". In saying that, Tuah is, as I have mentioned, of course overlooking his own hypocrisy, considering every second of his being alive is effectively an act of disobedience since according to the Sultan's orders, he is supposed to be dead. Having begun the scene with his prayers however, renders his visual expression of faith as awkwardly placed between his grand verbal proclamation about *adat* and his hypocritical loyalty towards the Sultan.

What is also thought-provoking is that his expression of faith remains, very much only a visual. While indeed visible, his prayers remain notably unheard, whispers are all we hear even as he makes his additional supplications. In contrast, his proclamation about *adat* and loyalty to the Sultan however, are both very loud and very visible. The relative silence that is attached to Tuah's presentation of faith is a sensory handicap that is not present in his commitment to *adat hulubalang* and *daulat*, suggesting that of the three constituents, the Islamic faith seems to be accorded a less considered position in his life.

Further visual cues in this scene likewise hint to his questionable commitment to his Islamic faith. In a single, slow and smooth sweep, the camera zooms out when Tuah is first seen doing his prayers, framing him as but a small individual amidst all the empty space surrounding him. But when he mentions how Jebat has breached the warrior's code, the camera zooms in. As a man of faith he appears relatively small on screen, but as the defender of *adat*, there is barely enough room to visually capture all of him. The way the film visually

frames him when he depicts or talks about different aspects (supposedly) important in his life parallels just how much these varying aspects actually matter to him. Clearly, the film uses auditory and visual cues to indicate that the object of criticism is the way Tuah positions his Islamic faith as the least significant aspect of his life. But ‘least significant’ does not mean ‘insignificant’ though, does it? The answer to that comes immediately in the first image of the next scene – in almost the same manner he was praying to God, the Tuah that is now reaccepted by the Sultan is already back (perhaps at lightning speed) kneeling and bowing down in front of his monarch. In any case, never again will Tuah be depicting or uttering anything remotely close to Islamic principles from this point on, only a lot of semi-maniacal exclamations about “Jebat” and “treason”. It is not too hard to imagine why there were kids throwing stones at M.Amin’s car after he had finished his role in the movie as Tuah.

Ultimately, I stress again the significance of the interplay of sound and image in this scene. This cinematic showcase pre-empted how silent moments will become increasingly pronounced against the many loud high-intensity scenes later on. I briefly enlist the argument given by Van der Heide in order to show how a lack of focus on those the visual and auditory components can potentially warp our understanding of the film. In an attempt to “argue that Hang Jebat is not as innovative as its supporters would claim” (197) Van der Heide interprets Jebat’s increasing insanity and eventual inability “to overcome, Hamlet-like, the conflicts within himself” as illustrating how the “film’s daring agenda is defused, withdrawn and erased” (194), the agenda being that “Jebat here implies the creation of a new polity, based on a revolution by the people against the absolutist hierarchical system represented by the Sultan (and Tuah)” (193). His observations are concise and astute, but mostly goes as far as to measure the film’s agenda through what is articulated *by* Jebat, which he aptly notes as “implied” through the character, but curiously offers no extended explanation as to why Jebat does not articulate the message well himself, only that it is part of a “failed psychological

complexity” (197). I argue against oversimplifying Jebat’s ill-composed and inarticulate opposition to the Sultan, suggesting instead that it is also interpretable as being purposefully highlighted in order to function as a fundamental stepping stone for the film’s critical gesture, which is not about making a semi-inflated gesture for a new polity with regards to the sultanate, but to rethink how Islam ought to be configured into Malay identity. On that note, Van der Heide also discussed the presence of Islam in the film perhaps too briefly²³. While it is the design of his argument to deflate exaggerated appraisals of the film, his overlooking of the notion of Islam discounts these two aspects: the religion’s role in charging a political message about traditional/feudal Malay monarchy, and how messages about Islam is heavily dependent on the film’s other cinematographic aspects apart from the narrative itself.

Lest it seems that I am straying away from my argument, I stress that my position is not an absolute one that *Hang Jebat* was entirely successful in communicating a certain agenda. I merely posit that considerations for ‘agenda’ cannot be singularly pinned to what the main character/s is/are implying (especially one as inarticulate as Jebat) and has to take into account the totality of the constituents that are depicted (like Islam and its cinematic position in the film narrative) - it is a film after all.

That said, Van der Heide’s analysis is not just useful in how part of the grounds he did not cover has inadvertently brought a fruitful aspect to this discussion. It is also important to note that he is not coming from a position of ignorance about the Hikayat. Elsewhere, he criticises novel adaptations of the book by a Malayan anthropologist, Mubin Sheppard, for a lack of sensitivity to the structure of the hikayat. Chung notes, that “[Shepard’s *The Adventures of Hang Tuah*]’s lack of the narrative repetition commonly associated with Hikayat Hang Tuah formed van der Heide’s (2002:177) conviction of Sheppard’s Eurocentric

²³ See van der Heide 197, where the writer briefly mentions other scholars’ responses on the notion of encroaching Islam in Malay films of that time but only points to favouring of Muslim director Hussein Haniff over non-Muslim director Phani Mamjudar.

approach to interpreting Malay literature through a linear narrative” (143). Van der Heide also criticises an earlier film adaptation of the epic, *Hang Tuah* (1956) positing that the film’s lack of indigenous understanding of Malay political culture was because of its cursory observations of royal court life, superficially attributing it to the expatriate status of the film’s Indian director, Phani Majumdar (197). What I respect in Van der Heide’s rhetoric is an enthusiasm for the maintenance of the dignity of the Hikayat’s aesthetic structures, but I also do distance myself slightly by positing that the epic’s most identifiable feature may not be the most critical feature. I argue that for *Hang Jebat* at least, auteur Hussein is less interested in the replication of a literary structure on screen but is more concerned in tapping on the literary piece’s potential to deliver a message - in this case keeping alive the critical function of the Hikayat as a piece of *sastera* (literature) instead of preserving the more readily-identifiable elements of the Hikayat like its aesthetic of repetition, amongst others. That said it is also not in the design of my argument to identify the features Van der Heide is concerned with as having less critical function, only that I seek to account for Hussein’s priorities in his film adaptation – that should be included as a measure to understand the extent to which the auteur does succeed at communicating an ‘agenda’ through his film. Here my engagement with Van der Heide’s research allows me to segue towards the notion of Hikayat film culture, specifically shedding light on Hussein’s treatment of a Hikayat film like *Hang Jebat* as a medium to transmit a certain questions – who is the true Malay warrior? Certainly not Tuah, but should we then, simply idolise Jebat solely and without question?

If we take a step back from all that has been argued, a bird’s eye view would suggest that the film’s concern appears to be a religious one. Having shown how the film has been critical of Tuah’s prayers and of the way divinity is traditionally encased within the notion of the Sultan, I am now left with the main character himself, Jebat and how Islamic this main character is. As my final section examines Jebat’s expression of faith, I offer the argument

that what ties Tuah, the Sultan and Jebat together is the way their interpretation of faith collectively invites a criticality towards using the idea of God as a means to achieve an end, proposing instead for God to be the end in mind.

On The Question of Faith

The film does not favour Jebat because he appears more Islamic than Tuah but because Jebat, unlike Tuah, did not use religion as a means to preserve his position of privilege. Chung articulates a similar argument when she posits that Hang Tuah interprets his faith in a way which favoured the ruling class that he served (144). The absence of any visual or verbal evocation of God for any of Jebat's rebellion is contrasted against Tuah's evocation of God in the absence of a Sultan to effectively worship. Pleased at his later repatriation into admiralty, and more determined than ever to follow the Sultan's orders, it seems clear that Tuah's prayers as a momentarily-banished Melakan must have included asking God exactly for that repatriation. Jebat's initial absence of Islamic values is contrasted against Tuah's consistent misconfiguration of Islam²⁴. Van der Heide aptly points out that for most of the mid portion of the film, Jebat's animosity was a reason to dissolve any identification with him or sympathise him, especially when he sets out to kill many innocent Melakans after his deadly duel with Tuah (196-197). This I agree with, and stretch the argument further by interpreting this mid-story Jebat as a red flag cautioning those who might consider him perfectly exemplary, and to instead understand him as an important discussant of Malay identity. Interestingly, the moment we are made to re-sympathise with Jebat coincides with the few moments Jebat ever evokes God – first, when he vocalises a soft and pained cry “Allah” when he gets stabbed by Tuah, secondly when he returns to Tuah's house and falls

²⁴ The complete absence of any invocation of God by Jebat is more noticeable only when we actually hear him cry out for God for the first time – when he gets stabbed. Some of Jebat's other un-Islamic moments earlier in the film include him being disrespectful to the women he meets. He amuses himself by tickle-poking a frightened palace maid, and pulls another palace maid by her hair.

down in Tuah's lap, again voicing out "Ya Allah" as he does so. In the final moments of his life, he is embraced by the people he sought out to protect and look out for – Dang Baru, the woman he saved from sexual assault, Tuah's wife, the woman he looked after in Tuah's absence, and Tuah himself, the man he killed many for and the man who tragically ends up killing him. While a sad symphony accompanies his final few words, the music very abruptly stops and only diegetic cries surround the dramatic end of a naïve warrior who, upon being urged by his wife to recite a final proclamation of faith, does so – "Ash-hadu-allah Illah-il-Allah, wa ash hadu-anna Muhammad-ar-Rasullullah", meaning "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and that Prophet Muhammad is the servant of God". Dang Baru spearheads this return to sympathising with Jebat, where this particular film adaptation grants her the unprecedented opportunity to give the closing speech. She tearfully remarks, "This world is cruel. The afterlife is your place. There you will rest. Your death is not for waste. Your fight will be an ever-lasting memory. Jebat..."

The re-sympathising of Jebat coincides with Jebat's return to God. Jebat's turn to Islam, though belated, appears sincere. This contrasts against Tuah's turn to Islam, which appears convoluted with the wrong principles from start to end. To this effect, it is interesting to identify the small supporting detail where Tuah briefly verbalises "Innalillah" at the moment Jebat dies. This is part of an Islamic proclamation or prayer that is customarily verbalised when someone passes away - but Tuah only verbalises half of this, where what he says translates to "We belong to God", when the complete proclamation is "We belong to God *and to God we return*". While the film ends there, knowledge of the complete epic explains that Tuah will continue to serve the Sultan and meet the monarch's ridiculous demands, thus really making audiences wonder about Tuah's take on what he forwent in his prayer – "to God we return". Will Tuah's return to faith or God only ever happen in the absence of a Sultan to serve? It historically seems to be the case. For Tuah, God seems to be a

means to an end – where prayers are dedicated to reinstating him back into admiralty and Islam is interpreted in a way which favoured the ruling class he served. For Jebat, God was never the means to an end but seemed to be the end in mind. While Jebat indeed got lost in his own passions at first, ‘return to God’ he did in the end.

It is worth noting that ultimately, the film treads the grounds of depicting religion rather carefully because it does not explicitly promote Islam as the solver of all issues but is instead against the idea of using religion as a means to achieve an end²⁵. It is more for religion or God as the end in mind²⁶ - though that is as far as the film goes in didactically delivering a religious message to the audience, for I believe that many of its cinematic gestures in this regard are more like invitations to contemplate and rethink rather than a direct means to feed audiences with answers or solutions.

While its message about religion does appear rather nuanced, it is hard to say the same with the anti-feudal dimension of the film. Amir Muhammad compares *Hang Jebat* with an earlier adaptation of the same Hikayat, a film titled *Hang Tuah* (1956):

There’s a lot more ambiguity when it comes to its main character; there are spaces for the audience to come in, and it even ended with a question from a self-doubting hero: “Siapakah yang benar? Jebatkah benar atau akukah benar? (Who was right? Was Jebat or was I right?)” *Hang Jebat*, instead, ends with a *statement*...from Jebat’s widow...”Matimu tidak sia-sia, Jebat. Perjuanganmu tetap menjadi kenang-kenangan untuk selamanya. (Your death is not in vain, Jebat. Your struggle will be remembered forever.)” (203)

²⁵ A place to ask for a return to a particular social privilege for Tuah

²⁶ As illustrated with Jebat’s sincere ‘return’ after regretting his murderous rampage, amongst other sins.

I do agree that between the two adaptations, there is more ambiguity in *Hang Tuah* than there is in *Hang Jebat*, and thus, more space for the audience to think for themselves in the first adaptation – but this is insofar as the “anti-feudalist” (Amir 203) message is concerned. My point is that that is not the only dimension in the film, and configuring an understanding of the film’s more nuanced take on Islam and religion still renders enough of a space for anyone watching to have a thought about what makes a good Malay Muslim. *Hang Jebat* still dedicates far less screen time to the relatively ideal Muslim characters like the warriors’ wives than it did the warriors, which implies that auteur Hussein is more reluctant to develop screen images of the ideal Malay Muslims than he is in developing images of bad Malay Muslims²⁷ – not to encourage audiences to follow these ‘bad’ Muslims, but as a strategy to encourage audiences to ask and answer for themselves what indeed does make a good Malay Muslim. So despite the film’s clear proposal to have God as the end in mind instead of as a means to an end, I believe that the religious dimension of the film is the one place there is enough nuance, as opposed to its unmistakably resolute anti-feudalist dimension as a “politically charged” (Amir 203) film.

To conclude, I have resisted from interpreting *Hang Jebat* purely through the level of Jebat’s characterisation, which can myopically read Jebat simply as a tragic hero succumbing to naivete and failure. I argued for the consideration of narrative as well as other cinematic elements which collectively completed Jebat’s opposition towards the Sultan, consequently resulting in a proposal to avoid using God or faith simply as a means to an end and to configure it as the end in mind instead.

²⁷ Both the warriors’ wives can be understood as ideal Muslims because they are not only loyal to their husbands but at several moments, attempted to steer their respective spouses back to the ‘right’ path. Tuah’s wife attempted to reason him out of the duel with Jebat while Jebat’s wife prompted his return to faith in the end. It is a waste that there is yet to be any adaptations of this *Hikayat* which develops a focus on the female characters.

CHAPTER 3

Seniman Bujang Lapok – The Feudal Epic Setting vs The 1960s Malayan Setting

Moving away from high-intensity feudal court scenes, P.Ramlee's *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961) situates the characters of Sultans and their warriors – Tuah and Jebat included – in rather comedic scenes, meta-narratively located in film studio settings. A reading of *Hang Jebat* as completing Jebat's gesture aids in illuminating *Seniman Bujang Lapok* as a text that similarly plays up the limitedness of sticking to traditional interpretations of the Hikayat. The most striking difference though is that *Seniman Bujang Lapok*'s reinterpretation also entails the proposal to look *beyond* the Hikayat.

My primary argument here is that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* attempts to explore the possibility of moving beyond an identity politics reliant on *Hikayat* films. In doing so, it is not proposing for the complete abandonment of the *Hikayat*, but for the acknowledgment of contemporary context of 1961 Singapore itself as an equally legitimate and necessary premise where discussions about Malay identity can be held. This exploration stretches over two primary moves. The first move revolves around highlighting the artificiality of Hikayat films. The second move concerns designating different kinds of comedy in the artificial setting at the studio and “real-life” setting back in the characters’ “derelict, semi-rural housing” (Amir 124-125). For this second move, I employ Susan Sontag's conception of Camp in order to illuminate the fundamental differences between the comedy situated at the artificial setting and the comedy situated at the “real-life” setting.

Seniman denotatively translates to “artist” or “art practitioners” but in this context, it also functions as the shorthand for “actor”²⁸. *Bujang* refers to their state as “bachelors” while *lapok* is something academics occasionally explain as only pointing out the bachelors’

²⁸ It is hard to find conclusive evidence that “seniman” is the shorthand every Malay, including those outside Singapore, took to at that time when referring to actors. However, even if it is not ubiquitous amongst all Malay communities, it appears as a shorthand that P.Ramlee is fond of, seeing that there is an immediate connection implied between art and acting.

unsuitability in marriage, which I feel fails to fully capture the full play on the word²⁹.

“Lapok” generally translates to being in a weathered or unappealing state, here referring to the fact that the three bachelors are on the one hand, over time, becoming increasingly less appealing candidates for marriage, and on the other, being very unpolished actors (due to their general ignorance stemming from a disadvantaged socioeconomic condition) taking cliché/*lapok* roles – hence unpolished/*lapok* as a *bujang* and as a *seniman*. The socioeconomic subtext is not to be overlooked, as we will see.

The bulk of the scenes in the *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is split between Ramlee, Sudin and Aziz’s job at the film studio, and scenes depicting the reality of their lives back at their *kampung*³⁰. They three share a small room in a cramped rental housing where all occupants share a single toilet. As the trio continue to flounder in every single scene at the studio, Ramlee also develops a romance with the female lead - a neighbour named Salmah (played by singer-actor Salomah) who is a single nurse living with her mother. Sudin buys a stone from a peddler claiming it has magical properties, but it fails to bring him the luck he needs when he attempts to borrow money from their employer, money Ramlee desperately needs to marry Salmah. Drama ensues in their neighbourhood life however when a middle-class scoundrel, Shariff Dol (also the real name of the actor) sets fire to the trio’s rented housing upon having his marriage proposal to Salmah turned down. When confronted by Ramlee, Shariff Dol initially denies having anything to do with the fire but quickly goes into a fist-fight with Ramlee when evidence of his involvement was presented. Of course, Ramlee wins and the ruffian is sent to the police. Homeless, the trio contemplate their future by the foot of

²⁹ See Sim 364 as a case in point.

³⁰ “Kampung” [1:14:55] is the term Ramlee uses to refer to where he lives, and will be the term I use from this point on. “Kampung” can translate to “village”, but we should note that here it is better understood as “neighbourhood” because Ramlee’s “kampung” does not depict the connotations of extreme rurality commonly associated to the idea of a village at that time. One example is that they do not draw water from a well. Instead, they get their water supply from a common pipe in a communal shower and toilet - also perhaps the reason why Amir uses the term “semi-rural” even though the housing appeared “derelict” (Amir 214-215).

Shariff Dol's house – until Salmah appears by a coconut tree, coyly calling for Ramlee. He eagerly runs to her and both exit the scene after talk of marriage. Other female stars soon make a guest appearance – Zaiton calls for Sudin and finally, Dayang calls for Aziz (also the ladies' real names). All couples verbalise their eager delight at the idea of marriage and one by one, the three bachelors exit the ending scene and presumably, also exit their roles as *lapok*/mouldy bachelors/*bujang*. But what of their roles as *lapok*/mouldy actors/*seniman*? With the plot and the characters' backgrounds briefly established, I return to the focus on feudal Malay kings and their warriors – exactly the kinds of *lapok*/mouldy characters that the trio is made to take up in their acting career.

Highlighting the Artificiality of Hikayat Films

Part of the proposal to move beyond Hikayat films involves, first and foremost, moves that diffuse the social or political significance of Hikayat films. For one, rather than championing Hikayat icons, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* foregrounds the artificiality of Hikayat icons instead. The larger point is that emphasising artifice disenchants Malay viewers from looking at feudal warriors romantically or with such reverence that it prevents them from acknowledging that identity is derivable from the contemporary setting as well.

Early in the plot, the trio's plans to audition as actors brings the story to the compounds of Jalan Ampas Studio. Almost immediately after, the trio find themselves greeted by a sudden commotion – the camera pans over to present an angry director (also using his real name, "Ahmad Nisfu") chastising his assistant director as well as an actor who has come to audition for his film. The director's source of anger is made apparent as he laments aloud at the incredulity of having a very skinny, goofy-looking, aged man auditioning for the role as Hang Tuah.

Ahmad Nisfu: [To the Assistant Director] Idiot! I told you to find someone strong!

Not someone scrawny like this!

Assistant director: Director Sir, this is indeed a strong person!

Ahmad Nisfu: Strong? What rubbish! How did you even become an assistant director?!

[Director turns to take his leave but the Assistant Director stops him]

Assistant Director: Director sir, he is indeed a strong person sir! In a single sitting, he can finish five plates of rice!

Ahmad Nisfu: That is not strong, that is greedy you idiot! This, the likes of this wants to be Hang Tuah – what?! [Director points to man, and camera pans from his goofy smiling face and down to his shoes] Hang Tuah wearing shoes?! Enough! Get him to leave! Humph!

Middle-aged Man: Director sir, never mind if I can't be Hang Tuah. Do let me be Hang Jebat.

Ahmad Nisfu: You want to be Hang Jebat?? [Director smacks his own forehead in despair] You'll be the death of me. With just a single flick, all the bones of your ribcage will scatter. Enough! Go away!

[Director Ahmad Nisfu exits]

Image 14 - “strong”

If bringing audiences to the set of a studio compound is a soft call to awaken audiences to the idea of Hikayat films as constructions, then the sight of a Hang Tuah auditionee in front of a modern studio building is a blaring image that confronts audiences with a whole other level of artificiality. People are more used to seeing Hang Tuah the warrior in action, not a film actor struggling to get a job as Hang Tuah the character. This scene reduces the spectacality of Hang Tuah the feudal icon by presenting him explicitly as a film role instead. By emphasising artifice, this scene explicitly delineates the feudal world as a world disengaged from the “real world” outside the feudal sets. This disengagement is also subtly reinforced by the visuals of the auditionee himself - no questions were asked about why the man looks rather malnourished, or why he is so desperate to get a role. Only that producing a Hang Tuah film is not about showcasing any sad story of his.

Disengaged, spectacality, artificiality - the truth is, looking at this scene with the earlier analysis of Hussein’s *Hang Jebat* in mind can animate many other kinds of thoughts and discussions about auteur P.Ramlee’s take on Hikayats of feudal epics. But to give a firmer focus to the discussion, we proceed by looking at the film’s position first, which thus governs its ‘take’ – and by ‘position’ I mean to refer to the film’s point of approach to Hikayats. Because *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is a film about making feudal films, it deliberately draws attention to the fact that Hikayats are constructions, and its characters, as performances. On that token, I enlist the views of Nanney and Chung who see reproductions of the Hang Tuah epic and its characters as reflections of social attitude of the Malays³¹. Along similar lines, both writers pick up on the appeal that Hang Jebat’s valiant attempt at independence, has for a freshly post-colonial Malaya³². If we accept film adaptations featuring Tuah and Jebat as readily readable for social attitudes, how do we go about reading

³¹ Chung looks at film productions while Nanney, drama productions. Both make for the case that productions about the tale of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat easily reflect the political attitudes of the time in which they are produced.

³² See Chung 144-145 and Nanney 166-169.

‘social attitude’ here, when the roles of Hang Tuah in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* are never played but only repeatedly auditioned for? At the very least, it shows auteur P Ramlee’s awareness of the Tuah-Jebat roles as social indexes, and also perhaps him obfuscating and teasing anyone attempting to ‘read’ Malay society through these icons. Indeed, if Tuah-Jebat icons are by any measure, objects to be read, then failed Tuah auditions resist and challenge stable definition. This is what I mean as constituting as an attempt to diffuse the social significance of Hikayat films.

The above commotion is the first but not the only instance where we will see the film repeatedly mocking Director Ahmad Nisfu’s attempt at directing iconic Hikayat scenes by repeatedly giving him an unsuitable person to play the role of Hang Tuah. We learn later that Sudin’s sheer faintheartedness overpowers his screen-test as Hang Tuah when he accidentally replaces iconic lines full of bravado with a rambling about having an upset stomach, quivering all the way through and finally ending in seizures. We thus never end up seeing Hang Tuah being ‘properly’ performed in the film at all. In the long stretch, this limits and exasperates any attempt to essentialise Malay identity through the use of Hikayat characters or the Hikayat in general, as the film attempts to shift the discussion elsewhere. But where exactly then does *Seniman Bujang Lapok* propose for discussions about Malay identity to be held? Apparently, right outside the studio gates.

What follows right after the commotion with the director and the scrawny aged Hang Tuah auditionee is an exchange between the trio and a security guard about what it means to be Malay – a rather short but pertinent discussion about manners in speech.

Sudin: Oi! Is this where they make films? [Security guard ignores him] Oh you are possessed too?

[Sudin moves over to Ramlee and Aziz]

Sudin: I’ve had it. Let’s go home. The people here are all ill-tempered.

Security guard: They call themselves Malays, but have no manners. They call people with “Oi Oi” What am I? Rock? A piece of wood?

Sudin: He is snubbing us.

Ramli: Well he’s right. You’ve no manners calling him with “Oi”. Language reflects the condition of a community!

By virtue of film sequencing, placing this definition of Malays right after Director Ahmad Nisfu’s rude outbursts clearly defines him as un-Malay³³. And if he is un-Malay in that regard, how ‘Malay’ then can his films be, beyond making sure Hang Tuah does not appear with modern shoes? Is that what being Malay means, to be limited to the rehearsal of familiar visual iconographies? To be limited to speak the language but not carry the values? This short exchange with the guard, who is for the record, not Malay, may seem like it essentialises Malay identity down to a particular ideal but in truth the disconnect between the Malay characters’ behaviours and the presented definition of who Malays are, serves as a schism that more effectively raises the question of what it means to be Malay than in actually affirming what a Malay is.

Though of course, there is a certain direction that the questions are pushing audiences towards, it is not that they simply disorientate. What the scene of the Hang Tuah auditionee and the trio’s talk about Malay identity collectively demonstrate is the film’s attempt to persuade viewers to start acknowledging the legitimacy of premises metaphorically (and literally) outside of Hikayat films, as places equally if not more capable, of holding pertinent discussions on Malay identity.

³³ Director Ahmad Nisfu’s lack of manners in speech does not cease, becoming even more evident later when he berates Ramlee as “stupid”, “idiotic” and asking him why he “didn’t just die as a child” instead of “growing up to trouble people”.

Seniman Bujang Lapok and Camp

In the attempt to move discussions about identity to the setting of 1961 Singapore, I identify comedy as the primary element which enables this transition to go smoothly. Indeed, comedy is present in both the film set as well as “real world” setting back in the trio’s home. I resist the temptation however, to assume that it is the same kind of comedy that appears in both sites. This is because real 1960s social issues plaguing Malay society are depicted more readily and consistently in the “real” neighbourhood setting, signalling that there are different stakes involved. To better clarify this, I explicate the difference between the comedies in the two settings through the difference between naïve camp and self-aware camp as conceptualised by Susan Sontag.

In its simplest sense, camp can refer to a preponderance of style. And one of *Seniman Bujang Lapok*’s identifying features is exactly exaggerated, hyperbolic, larger-than-life actions and reactions on the part of its characters. In other words, I am using Sontag’s conception of camp to consider what makes these actions and reactions funny. What I am trying to prove is that these actions do not necessarily all stem from the same kind of comedy, nor do they necessarily serve the same purpose. Sontag identifies two kinds of camp in her text *Notes On Camp*: naïve or pure camp is unintentional, entirely serious but has a seriousness that fails (393-395); conscious camp, on the contrary, is intentionally funny (393), a self-performance she describes as “Being-as-Playing-a-Role . . . the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre” (390)³⁴.

My argument is that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* employs naïve camp within Director Ahmad Nisfu’s feudal scenes and self-aware camp in the trio’s “real-world” life. This allows audiences to distinguish between moments of comedy in the feudal scenes, and moments of

³⁴ Lest I signal a heavy involvement of the entire history of camp at this point, I clarify that my utilisation of the concept here is limited to its nature as a means of viewing the reality depicted in the films, a general conception rather than one that entails the association of the camp’s “historically specific origins in gay subculture” (K.Horn 16).

it-is-not-just-comedy in the *kampung* setting. With the two kinds of comedy working side-by-side, they constitute a proposal for a film culture that moves beyond shallow reproductions of the Hikayat, and a proposal to engage with contemporary 1960s setting as a meaningful source of identity.

The Studio Set, A Seriousness That Fails

“The ultimate Camp statement: it’s good because it’s awful”

Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 407

The feudal Malay epics that director Ahmad Nisfu tries to create constitute as naïve camp. It matches Sontag’s description of being entirely serious but having a “seriousness that fails” (395). Director Ahmad Nisfu most certainly takes his films as serious art, such that he is unable to see the ridiculousness he portrays to his contemporary audience. Consider the very first shooting set that Ramlee, Sudin and Aziz come to witness once they enter the studio.

Image 15 – “Belacan!”

The Sultan is an angry tyrant armed with a sword, while the woman is a heap of sobs. It is hard to take the intensity of the scene seriously considering the stereotype of the

tyrannical Sultan and the helpless female subject is played out to an extent that seems caricatural; not only is the Sultan so angry that he will not forgive the woman's sins "from the present to the afterlife" but he is also making do without an executioner and participates actively in the death sentence by wanting to behead the woman himself, not over infidelity or envy or any political reason – all because of the fact that there was no *belacan* (shrimp paste) in his dish. That is the character that is created for this feudal scene. As for the actor himself – his eyes are wide, his stance menacing, he screams for *belacan* and he means it passionately. Both the actor and the role he is playing captures exactly what Sontag means when she explains that "camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is "too much"" (395). As naïve camp however, this scene Director Ahmad Nisfu is directing is as Sontag would put it, "dead serious" and "does not mean to be funny" (393).

The extent to which the feudal scene is ridiculous is made very clear, but the ignorance in the trio's response to this scene is also over the top. Apparently the existence of cameras, recording equipment and film crew, did not signal to the trio that it was a film set – somehow they believed a feudal man was actually berating his spouse about *belacan* in the middle of a film studio. Not knowing that it is a scene in the process of shooting, Ramlee is the first to express his disapproval, loudly asking the rhetorical question "Wow he seems angry doesn't he?" As the 'Sultan' prepares to strike the woman Sudin then butts in, reprimanding the Sultan and demanding he apologise to the woman. As both the 'Sultan' and his 'consort' expressed confusion at the continuous interruption, the man acting as the Sultan asked if Sudin was "mad", to which he received a punch from Sudin, squarely on the chest. Furious, Director Ahmad Nisfu stands up and lands a blow on Sudin's back for ruining the scene. Finally, Aziz aims a punch on the director's face in an attempt to defend Sudin but the

director falls down even before Aziz does anything. The cherry on top of it all is Aziz's running gag, remarking that he is not scared of the Director's "large nostrils".

The entire hullabaloo is of course a generous serving of comedy but we need to be careful not to overlook the point the trio bring. The trio's response is fundamental because it functions to diagnose the angry *belacan*-Sultan scene as a "seriousness that fails". By displaying the extreme example of how we should *not* respond to the feudal scene, the trio's response in this sense prescribes how audiences *should* perceive Director Ahmad Nisfu's scenes, that it would be plain silly not to identify or perceive the feudal scenes "in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (Sontag 385). In other words, not only are such feudal Malay scenes ridiculous, but it would also be ridiculous to take them seriously, for they are in fact, 'too much' to be taken seriously.³⁵ After pulling Sudin and Aziz aside, Ramlee explains to them that it is just a film scene:

Ramlee: You guys are making a mess of everything! Can't you see they are just acting?

Sudin: Well acting is fine. But what's all this about beheading people over belacan?

Ramlee: Well that is the film, what can we do!

Sudin: "That is the film" Ramlee? They can do other films! About gold, or maybe about chickens, or fighting fish, or flying beetles. Can't they?

To raise an issue about one's sense of control over what films ought to be produced, films perhaps unreliant on *belacan* - by this point the social metaphor of the *belacan* is impossibly tempting. *Belacan* is after all a fundamental ingredient in many Malay dishes and arguably the soul of Malay cooking, and to have that located within a feudal Malay court in a production studio that apparently does nothing but Hikayat films, makes Hikayat film culture

³⁵ The trio's response is not camp though. Camp is art that proposes itself to be serious and Director Ahmad Nisfu seems more ready to identify his scenes as a work of art rather than the trio proposing that their response as a work of art. While they are not in this sense camp, the trio's response is fundamental in diagnosing the Campness within Director Ahmad Nisfu's scenes.

somewhat interpretable through the *belacan* as metaphor. In other words, the absence of Hikayat icons like the tyrannical Sultan in films, might just be a dish without *belacan* – would such a dish still be called, a Malay dish though? But then again how tyrannical are we, if we refuse to accept meals that do not have *belacan*? The crux of the issue that the above scene gestures towards is a form of cultural essentialism that limits expression and creativity. While Sudin’s suggestions do not quite convincingly provide an alternative ‘ingredient’ that might make a good film, he deserves credit for at least trying to make room for discussion about what can indeed possibly makes a good film. I personally think that P.Ramlee is smart for using the *belacan* as metaphor because it offers a frugal criticism that is concise and does not implicate unnecessary hate for the *belacan* /iconic Hikayat characters because essentially, what is being attacked is not so much the *belacan* itself, but the over-dependence on it that just makes meals/films bad. Sontag would perhaps say “it is so bad it is good” as the “ultimate camp statement”, which can be apt because *belacan*, like durian, can taste so good and smell so bad. The point is not about abandoning these foul-smelling ingredients, but to rhetorically ask Malays if they won’t consider exploring meals without them – it might offer a breath of fresh air.

Self-Reflexive Camp Outside the Feudal Set

The film attempts to shift discussions about Malay identity away from Hikayat films in order to address social issues directly affecting the community back at the *kampung*. Interestingly though, the film also depicts the reality of the trio’s *kampung* life with a certain degree of camp-ness as well.

The trio’s daily life is beset with woes and grievances of living in such close proximity with their neighbours. Not only are they separated from other rooms merely by a thin wall (which helps very little in concealing the domestic quarrels of other renters), but the

rented house is also located very close to other houses in a densely-populated neighbourhood, making squabbling between neighbours a common scene. In one instance, a neighbour attempts to fix his new motorcycle by revving the engine loudly, unbothered by the amount of smoke and noise generated in the middle of the night. This disrupts the trio's efforts in memorising their lines. Once outside, Ramlee sarcastically remarks that the motorbike looks new and fancy, but that he is not interested in buying it. The owner of the motorbike responds coldly, remarking that he is free to do what he wishes with his bike. Sudin proceeds to try and fix the bike after diagnosing the bike with having a malfunctioning exhaust pipe. With a few random adjustments of several bolts and nuts, some erratic tapping of the bike's metal parts with a spanner, Sudin asks the bike-owner to start the engine again. This time, a small explosion occurs and the bike disappears, with the trio pointing up to a tree where the bike sits, before they leave the baffled bike-owner. The bike-owner's wife soon appears, and is dumbfounded at the whole situation, and the bike-owner himself, implies that he is even more dumbfounded and struggling to fathom that the cartoon-like outcome is somehow logical and acceptable.

Clearly, the film's source of comedy owes much to exaggerated outcomes and antics. The preponderance of dramatic style exists in both Director Ahmad Nisfu's Hikayat scenes in the studio as well as the scenes in the *kampung* but while they are stylistically coherent in similar ways, they are not stylistically resonant in the same way. This is because it is self-aware camp that we see being depicted here, unlike the naïve camp we see in Director Ahmad Nisfu's Hikayat scenes. Self-aware camp refers to a preponderance of style that relates to *intentionally* overly-performing, while on the other hand, Director Ahmad Nisfu's characters *do not know* they are over-performing - they (himself included) are entirely certain they are proposing their work as serious art, hence the term "naïve" camp. The self-aware camp on the other hand, matches well with the various real and contemporary issues that are

depicted in the *kampung*. In essence, what confers the 1961 life depiction a strong resonance that is absent in the Hikayat scenes back in the studio is the *kind* of camp quality it has – while the existence of camp antics on the studio set helps identify Director Ahmad Nisfu's feudal epics with a seriousness that fails, it allows the depiction of 1961 life outside the studio to flourish in a richly self-reflexive way.

Let us look at another scene back in the *kampung* to further understand how self-aware camp is applied here. A domestic squabble between a Malay-Muslim couple also disrupts the trio's efforts at trying to memorise their scripts. A wife discovers that her husband has secretly married another woman. The husband, Kuswadinata, asks his wife, Tina, to calm down and to remember God. The wife replies:

Tina: Oh, you told me you had late night meetings, late night meetings. So this is where you go! Keeping a mistress here!

Kuswadinata: Allah, I swear Tina, this is not my mistress. This is my second wife. She is not an outsider. She is your *madu* (term amongst wives with the same husband). Tina...Tina...

Tina: Oh, so she's your second wife? Previously, you said you'd commit suicide if I don't marry you. And now? You secretly get another wife. You useless man. Do you want to die? You ought to be shot with one of those shotguns for elephants!

Kuswadinata: Allah, calm down Tina, we are Muslims. According to Islamic law, I can have four wives my dear. I'm only at two right now. It seems another is on the way. Maybe in the next scene, maybe coming soon...Tina....Tina....

Fortunately, there isn't a follow-up scene where Kuswadinata appears with a third wife. But the meta-filmic momentum does not stop there. It continues to pick up when the trio shows up to resolve the conflict. Ramlee ends up punching Kuswadinata out of defense, and afterwards the camera centres on Ramlee and continues to dedicate a strangely generous

amount of screen-time for him, lingering on him as he proceeds to stretch his hands outwards and raising his shoulders in a gesture of resignation for not knowing what to really do, and finally proceeding to sigh and sit down. As the wisest of the three, this appears rather inconsistent of Ramlee's character too because he says nothing much beyond "we mean to help" and remains relatively quiet. It seems more the case that he was actually embracing another meta-filmic moment. As someone whose multiple marriages were public knowledge at the time (Khairuddin 14), P.Ramlee playing Ramlee displayed the clearly awkward position he was in, brandishing an awareness of himself as not being the right character-person to be delivering any self-righteous commentary on polygamy or marriage advice to Kuswadinata and Tina. Instead of his own role, the auteur ultimately picked Aziz to admonish Kuswadinata to be honest and fair to his wives. But are the meta-filmic elements within Kuswadinata's dialogue and Ramlee's gesticulations identical to Director Ahmad Nisfu's Hikayat scenes, which to be fair, are also meta-filmic because they feature a scene within a scene? The thing is, the Hikayat actors (including Director Ahmad Nisfu himself) do not show an awareness of the audience watching them, but Ramlee and Kuswadinata do. Ramlee and Kuswadinata make subtle metaphorical winks to the audience in the above scene through their lines and actions while Director Ahmad Nisfu and his *belacan*-Sultan actor are both entirely absorbed with the production of the feudal scene to be aware at all.

Image 16 - Ramlee as also P.Ramlee

That said, it is not just the two meta-filmic moments by Kuswadinata and Ramlee that give this scene a stylistic resonance. It is the self-aware camp antics of Tina that pulls everything together. Recall the *belacan*-Sultan scene itself, a preponderance of anger so markedly camp. Although Tina and the *belacan*-Sultan are angry for different reasons, Tina's threat to execute her spouse with a shotgun for elephants bears a striking similarity with the king who threatened to execute his spouse with a long sword – both statements carry hyperbolic elements interpretable as verbal camp. What I stress though, is that Tina's camp anger is distinctly self-aware camp while the *belacan*-Sultan's is naïve camp. While she appeared to have a more legitimate reason to be as angry as she sounded, she 'hits' her husband with so little energy (almost therapeutically) it appears immediately comical, making it rather evident that she is only playing at being 'seriously' angry, or as Sontag would put it "play[ing] at being campy" (Sontag 395). The tickle here then, is in suspending audiences between believing Tina as angry, and believing Tina as only performing the level of anger she believes herself entitled to. While the *belacan*-Sultan was already in the midst of swinging his sword towards his wife, we wonder if Tina would really shoot her husband when her many physical strikes (all three of them) are done so tenderly. But angry she apparently is – so angry that she pulls down the doorway curtains so that the world can witness her performance of unleashing her terrifying wrath upon her husband. Appropriately, several neighbours soon do begin crowding at the door to witness with concerned faces as if they had not heard the commotion to begin with.

The trope of extreme anger is recycled here but it is noticeably relocated from the character of the tyrannical Sultan to Tina, a 1961 Singapore Malay woman. Tina was more suitably the patron of that anger because her performance animated the anger of an arguably large section of the Malay community. The 1960s was a decade which saw a "high prevalence of unreported polygamous marriages" (Khairuddin 14). In *The Muslim*

Matrimonial Court, Judith Djamour compiled her fieldwork carried out in 1963 Singapore, noting not only instances where Malay men would quietly keep another wife in another part of the colony as contributing to the high prevalence of unreported polygamous marriages but also the fact that divorce rates amongst Malays peaked over 50 per cent in 1957 (26-32). It seems Malay women indeed had lots of reasons to be angry, and given that most cinema-goers were also women at the time (Hamzah 84) what better character to make the patron of a larger-than-life anger to accommodate the real-life anger of an entire community of Malay women? Certainly not feudal Malay damsels, especially not the likes of a helpless sobbing consort submissive enough to let her petty husband get away with beheading her. It had to be sleeve-rolling, arms-akimbo Tina.

So in a larger sense, what is the function of self-aware camp here? Self-aware camp amplifies the self-reflexive elements in this scene to differentiate this scene as being staked in contemporary reality. So even when the camp antics make this scene appear funny, audiences can still understand that Tina's anger is not over an unrealistic or trivial matter like the *belacan*-Sultan's. In essence, self-aware camp in this case aids in comicalising *without* trivialising the issue it raises. To designate self-aware camp here in that way allows the 60s *kampung* setting to be favourably portrayed as having the potential to raise, depict and address newer/contemporary issues in a way that shallow feudal scenes do not. Unreported polygamous marriages was an issue that needed addressing but to approach it with elements of comedy also enabled auteur P.Ramlee to get past the taboo of openly broaching marital issues.

To re-emphasise my main argument, it is with the contrast between the Hikayat scenes at the studio and scenes at the *kampung* that we are given to understand how while Director Ahmad Nisfu's feudal scenes are marked by a seriousness that fails, auteur P.Ramlee's contemporary scenes at the *kampung* are marked by a playfulness that succeeds.

The above argument then demands a follow-up for clarity; what exactly is a measure of ‘success’ in this context? Sontag explains:

Ordinarily we value a work of art because of the seriousness and dignity of what it achieves. We value it because it succeeds – in being what it is and, presumably, in fulfilling the intention that lies behind it. (399)

In fairness, we cannot promise to know *all* of the intentions behind the film’s creation, but by contrasting the Hikayat scenes against contemporary daily life in such a manner, it is reasonable to gather that at least one intention of the film is to show how it is possible to move past Hikayats and engage with contemporary setting as a potential source of identity. Does it succeed at this? At the expense of overly-limiting the critical capacity of Hikayat films to caricatural characters, yes it does. But to be fair I doubt that auteur P.Ramlee intended to dismiss the significance of Hikayats altogether. It seems more the film culture that over-focuses on the commercial value of familiar feudal icons and cliché high-intensity scenes - or as Amir would put it, “melodramatic” scenes (216) - that form the object of the film’s criticism, not so much the Hikayats themselves. If anything, the continuity of the camp anger of the tyrannical Sultan to the scorned Malay woman potentially indicates the auteur’s unwillingness to abandon Hikayats in the business of engaging with social issues. The continuity allegorises the manner in which feudal Malay epics can at the very least, serve as an historical vantage point from which we can trace back the origins of certain familiar tropes. In this case, the familiar trope is a camp kind of anger, whose patron character evolves with time.

Is *Hang Jebat* Camp?

An obvious question could then surface – if *Seniman Bujang Lapok*’s depiction of contemporary life is self-aware Camp and its depiction of feudal films is naïve camp, is

Hussein's *Hang Jebat*, itself a feudal epic film, automatically rendered as naïve camp then? And how would this supplementary line of inquiry be helpful to this project?

The answer to the first question is, no, *Hang Jebat* is not a naïve camp film. While its characters like Tuah and Jebat are indeed designed to make grand, larger-than-life gestures about their respective loyalties, they succeed in enacting discussions about what a Malay Muslim identity is and therefore, in a film that does not have a seriousness that fails. Sontag explains:

25. The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers...

35. Ordinarily we value a work of art because of the seriousness and dignity of what it achieves. We value it because it succeeds—in being what it is and, presumably, in fulfilling the intention that lies behind it. We assume a proper, that is to say, straightforward relation between intention and performance. (395-399)

If anything, Tuah's loyalty to the Sultan is the loyalty of three million men combined, while Jebat would kill three million men who are loyal to the Sultan. Audiences would find it hard to exemplify the passion of either man, and that *is* the point, their gestures are huge, stylised in a way to steer people away from idolising them, but that does not render them ineffective initiators of a discussion. The point is to be aware of them as extreme ends. "A work can come close to camp, but not make it, because it succeeds" (Sontag 396). Even if the two warriors are arguably camp characters, in their campness they animate complex discussions about what it means to be a Malay Muslim, thus making it hard to assume the film has a seriousness that fails. Consequently, this then answers the second question, concerning how the concept of camp has been generally useful. The concept has been useful to understand the preponderance of certain elements in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (over-the-top displays of fear or anger to name a few) and in distinguishing between the different kinds of

preponderances of style and antics that occur within and outside of the studio feudal set.

While camp is not an ideal label for *Hang Jebat*, it helps in hinting that the film is a work of art that does succeed.

But for all the camp scenes within *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, how exactly do the arguments so far relate to the bigger idea of Malay identity in general? The truth is, compared to *Hang Jebat*, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is less definitive about what Malay identity ought to be. It is instead more definitive about what components should go into the identity brew. In other words, it is less an argument about ‘Malay identity ought to be this’ but more ‘Malay identity should include this’ – and by ‘this’ it means the contemporary context. What it laments is an identity recipe derived only from age-old ingredients like tyrannical Sultans, helpless damsels and *belacan*. Scorned housewives have to come into the brew. Working-class men struggling to support themselves have to come into the brew. Domestic squabbles have to be part of the brew. To this end, I include a 1961 local magazine review, about what the film’s aims were:

Dan di-samping kejadian2 lucu dan mentertawakan yang digambarkan-nya itu-lah, Ramlee ingin menarek perhatian penunton-nya supaya menyedari masharakat-nya yang sa-benar. Umpama-nya, kalau-lah masharakat itu di-bandingkan sabagai sa-orang insan, usah-lah mengadili kemuliaan dan keperwiraan serta ke-su-chian-nya, mengikut apa yang terhias di-tubohnya, tetapi adili-lah dengan jalan mengetahui lebih dulu apa yang tersembunyi di-sebalik pakaian dan perhiasan-nya.

(Apart from the comedic episodes depicted, Ramlee wants to draw the audiences’ attention to realise/recognise their true society. The idea is that if a society is likened to a person, we should not judge his decency, virtue and innocence based on what

adorns his body, but we should judge by finding out what is hidden beneath his clothes and adornments.)

Filem Kita, 1961, March/April

What the review articulates parallels Azhar Ibrahim's argument about how we should not read Malay society only through a romantic view of the Hikayats, because "a narrow nationalistic reading of history, although very much anti-colonial in its stance, remains silent on the abuses of past feudal rule" (22). If a Malay man is thin, hollow-cheeked and scrawny enough for Director Ahmad Nisfu to be able to see his ribcage, then as Azhar and the film review suggests, we should be able to acknowledge that inconveniently less-appealing part of him instead of only focusing on the feudal garb thrown over him. What the film wants is to draw our attention away from the feudal garb and onto the men *behind* the feudal garb.

Stylistically speaking though, the issues that do affect the men behind the feudal garb appear in a smattering fashion throughout the film's timeline - cramped housing, inconsiderate neighbours, cheating men, poverty, ostentatious dowries, Islamic illiteracy. They are never really dwelled upon as each of them appear in their own short scenes and never quite continue to be developed in follow-up scenes. I don't think the point is to zoom in on any one issue, but to acknowledge that there are various issues. But this breadth-instead-of-depth method also makes *Seniman Bujang Lapok* a rather underwhelming film when it comes to the measure of its message about what Malay identity *should* be, because while it highlights many issues, it does not let any of them take the limelight to develop and continue to run centre-stage for the entire length of the story. But by measure of its aim to draw our attention away from romantic Hikayat films though, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* does really well at meeting the strong message of *Hang Jebat* mid-way. What I mean is that it is effective in adding a nuance to *Hang Jebat* by nipping at the strong anti-feudal message that Jebat the warrior has had the unfortunate responsibility of being forced to shoulder (much of the

discourse on Malay identity interprets him that way). Looking at the films together allows us to understand that we don't have to look at *Hang Jebat* as a matter of agreeing with all his actions (which can be an uncomfortable notion even for Jebat supporters when they witness the scene of his amok on the Melakans). When we put the films together, the wisdom that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* offers is for us to put the character of Jebat in perspective and understand the society he came from – he was not a man out with the grand aim of remoulding this huge notion of Malay identity, he is first and foremost a simple and emotionally-driven individual, who unfortunately got thrown under the disorienting limelight of feudal court drama for wanting to avenge his friend, ensnared with the complexity, problems and temptations of feudal court life he didn't quite know how to fully navigate. In other words, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* offers the perspective that Jebat of *Hang Jebat* is a person, not an icon, so let's not put him on that pedestal and let's try looking beyond his iconic actions and begin recognising the vulnerable man behind the feudal garb.

From a different angle, *Hang Jebat* also adds value to the viewing of *Seniman Bujang Lapok* because its depiction of animist and Islamic beliefs, to a certain extent, informs and provides a historical context to the actions that the characters from *Seniman Bujang Lapok* take. The latter also provides a continuation to this notable tendency to portray the two beliefs as exclusive peacefully coexisting.

As might be apparent at this point, I am beginning to direct my analysis to a more comparative tone. The second half of this project will compare the two films more closely, beginning first with a look at Islam and Magic, before I proceed to the following chapter to look the interracial relations in both films.

CHAPTER 4

Islam and Magic

This chapter will build upon the concerns relating to Islam that were fleshed out in the earlier two chapters. The focus will be on how pre-Islamic beliefs, specifically in the idea of magic, premonitions or signs, are configured with the notion of Islam³⁶. Despite depicting different social contexts – one the feudal setting and the other the 1960s - I argue that a strong similarity exists: both films do not place Islamic beliefs and pre-Islamic beliefs in antagonistic terms, even if they clearly cannot coexist. In fact, what occurs consistently in both films is the limiting of any interaction between the two belief systems. This enables each film to expand the discussion about Malay identity in different ways.

For *Hang Jebat*, the underplaying of any tension between Islamic beliefs and pre-Islamic beliefs allows for the discussion to shift to one concerning human impulses instead. For *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, preventing any interaction between the two belief systems allow the working-class to be understood other than through the vocabulary of Islamic piety, which would otherwise label working-class Malays as superstitious, underdeveloped, and simply impious individuals. The point is to be able to look at the social conditions from which such animist sensibilities come from, rather than simply defining the working-class Malays in terms of their religious lax.

Pre-Islamic Beliefs

Before diving into the analysis proper, I will briefly explain what I mean by ‘pre-Islamic’ beliefs. Prior to the arrival of Islam, Malay communities in general had a belief system that meshed elements of animism and Hinduism together, manifesting in a veneration

³⁶ The term ‘pre-Islamic beliefs’ is not to be understood in a global historical sense, but for practical purposes, is meant to apply to the beliefs of the Malays before the first Muslim missionaries came. This will be used interchangeably with ‘animist beliefs’ – the latter term being more specific for belief in magic that takes root in the belief of *semangat* (life force) rather than Hindu beliefs.

of ancestral spirits and *semangat* (referring to life force, which is believed to exist even in inanimate objects) amongst other things. Alatas notes that Hinduism certainly had an influence on the Malays, but their practice of the religion appears “more aesthetic than philosophical by nature; they either did not grasp the subtleties of Hindu metaphysics or they ignored it in favour of that which was less complicated and more readily acceptable to their own world view” (2). It is thus hard to say Hinduism was syncretised but at least it is safe to say that there were elements from the religion which were used, like the Hindu concept of divine kingship which was later, modified to the ruler being “God’s shadow on earth” when Islam slowly began to exert its influence (Mohd.Taib 226).

Ackermean and Lee note that “the animistic religion of the Malays concentrated on their relationship with the natural world, with ritual functioning as the means by which malevolent and beneficent spirits were invoked by identified practitioners of magic, called ‘bomoh’”. (12-13). To give a clearer picture of how these practitioners of magic functioned in pre-Islamic society, the *bomoh* (witch-doctors) were the ones Malays sought the service of for love charms or health potions while the *pawang* (shaman) was sought if they need the weather controlled for good crop harvests or for special ceremonies like weddings. Royalty would tend to hire an *Ahli Nujum*, a kind of royal fortune-teller cum geomancer who would dispense advice for the best course of action. We will see a little more of the *Ahli Nujum* role in the film *Seniman Bujang Lapok* later.

I add in the arguments of J.N McHugh, who compares his research with that of other British scholar-administrators who have published studies on Malay beliefs:

It seems to have been assumed by Skeat, from the evidence of charm books and romances, that the greater gods of the Malay pantheon, “although modified in some respects by Malay ideas, were really borrowed Hindu divinities, and that only the lesser gods and spirits are native to the malay religious system.” With this viewpoint I

do not agree. It seems more likely that the Hindu influence overlaid the basic and fundamental Malay belief in the hantu of the country, and that the references to the Hindu deities in the charms and mantras learned from Hindus were applied as potent and impressive acquisitions.” (20)

In essence, McHugh argues that Hindu beliefs became available as an added vocabulary through which Malay society could express their pre-existent beliefs, not that there were no beliefs to begin with or that Hinduism was simply the first major belief system that engineered the Malay society’s outlook of the world. Moving on to the arrival of Islam, he adds:

With its advent came the addition of Allah and of the Prophet, and of the names of a number of eminent Islamic personages to the existing incantations, charms and spells. With it, too, came the djinns, or evil spirits, references to Sheitan (the devil), to angels and to Sheikhs. But the effect of all this is cumulative. The charms merely grow in length, and no doubt in potency, but the acquisition of these newcomers. (22)

While his argument to consider the beliefs as cumulative can appear more sensitive to the history of Malay progress as compared to the other colonial scholar-administrators, it is not necessarily fully agreeable because it oversimplifies the Malays’ response to Islam as being the same with their historical responses to other religions that came. Alatas argues that Islam had a marked difference from the onset, as manifest in the forms of Islamic missionaries which did not necessarily have Hindu equivalents within the Malay Archipelago of pre-Islamic times (19-20). Secondly, the belief in one God makes it fundamentally wrong to accommodate a simultaneous belief in other Gods or deities, something that was necessarily made clear before one embraces Islam. Tariq Ramadan explains that Prophet Muhammad was tolerant of multiple different terms of accepting Islam but to the oneness of god, there

was no negotiation – he never compelled anyone to accept Islam but he was clear that no cultural practice in Muslim communities should present any form of major syncretism (190).

The point that I am trying to make is that in the act of invoking former animist beliefs, one is inherently invoking a reliance on older deities and this directly evokes tensions with Islam which is staunchly monotheistic. For the most part, by the first phase of Islamisation the Malay Muslims had abandoned the worship of older deities because the clearest message of Islam is in the oneness of God (Alatas 29). However, this is not to say that the other aspects of pre-Islamic beliefs were completely abandoned, as manifest in the residual veneration of magic, *semangat* (life force which exists even in non-living things), shamans and premonitions³⁷.

The reason why I bring up McHugh's account as well as Alatas' account is to put in perspective the way the relationship between Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs in Malay society has historically been depicted. Somewhat akin to McHugh's account, both films do not develop any tension between the two belief systems but where McHugh argues that they can coexist and be cumulative, the films never allow the two beliefs to be brought up simultaneously – references to either belief are always in separate scenes. To clarify this, I will first begin by looking at the way Tuah negotiates his Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs through his relationship with his weapons, the *keris*.

Magical *Kerises*

The *keris* is a traditional Malay blade which commonly measures the general length of a dagger and sometimes, the length of a sword. Its most identifiable feature is its asymmetrical waves on each side of the blade. Animist beliefs confer the *keris* its own *semangat* (life force), which as custom dictates, ought to be honoured and taken care of by

³⁷ According to Islam, these acts are still *Shirk*, a kind of heresy for associating another being with God.

smoking it with incense and cleaning it with lime amongst other things. Such acts are accompanied by mantras that would have the general aim of enhancing the potency of the blade and to synchronise the *keris*' *semangat* with the wielder's own. This sits uncomfortably of course, with Islam's stand on disbelieving in charms or magical objects but the belief in magical daggers, or a subscription to such a belief was a widespread practice in the first phase of Islamisation Alatas writes about. Amongst the most famous of all such weapons is the Tamingsari, synonymous with the figure of Hang Tuah. It was particularly famous as a *keris* that was believed to grant its wielder invincibility – nothing can stab, wound or physically injure said wielder. The original Hikayat details that Hang Tuah knew of this feature of the Tamingsari and disarmed the original owner (named Taming Sari) in a duel in Java before being able to kill the Javanese warrior with his own weapon. In a similar fashion, Tuah was able to defeat Jebat only when he managed to get hold of the *keris* Tamingsari again, and this is something the film features. Before we look at the duel proper though, let's understand the relationship between Tuah and his weapon first.

Image 17 – Tuah smoking his *keris*

The film's treatment of Tuah's relationship with his weapon heavily downplays the presence of animist notions. It does this by diverting attention away from animist elements, focusing it instead onto Tuah's brewing emotions. In the scene where Tuah is preparing for his duel with Jebat, he smokes his new *keris* with incense³⁸. The soundscape remains bare and the absence of any mantras makes this particular *keris*-smoking appear more like a purely cultural custom rather than pre-Islamic ritual steeped in animist beliefs. In place of magical mantras, we hear Tuah's breathing. This relocates the attention towards the simmering anger that fuel Tuah's actions and away from the mystical elements suggested in the smoking ritual. The absence of any background music in such tense moments also seems to engender a hyper-focusing on any physical movement available – of which there are few. Tuah does not shift his view to his wife even as she speaks, only his moving hands busy smoking his *keris* and the wife's worried staring of his hands animate the intensity of the scene. The *keris* does not personify magic, it personifies rage. She soon speaks:

Tuah's Wife: This night feels extremely different...Thunder and lightning strike continuously, as if nature will not accept your actions..

Tuah: What do your words mean?

Tuah's Wife: Do you still intend to use that *keris* to kill Jebat? Do you not remember Jebat, your friend, your beloved brother?

Tuah: [Looking up] I will not acknowledge a traitor as my brother!

Interestingly, her reference to the natural imagery is a subtle appeal to her husband's animist senses but unfortunately, whether or not *semangat alam* agrees with Tuah is entirely besides the point³⁹. The conversation quickly turns to how vexed Tuah is by Jebat's treason to allow anything else to come in the centre of the picture. Tuah's determination to kill the Melakan

³⁸ It is the *keris* Parungsari, the Sultan's own, given to him to aid his battle with Jebat.

³⁹ "Semangat alam" translates to "nature's spirit", and interpreting good and bad weather as expressions of nature's approval or disapproval is a historically common practice in Malay society, even amongst people who are not shamans.

rebel decentralises the significance of the animist reverence for *semangat alam* and it becomes a scene about his impulses instead.

The suppression of animist elements occurs in tandem with a conspicuous absence of Islamic references. For a five-minutes long scene based on a conversation on morals, it is rather curious that Tuah's exchange with his wife sees no religious talk occurring, as in what the course of action they could take as Muslims. Guidance from Quranic verses, or references to common *hadiths* (accounts of the Prophet's words), or even the slightest mention of a simple Islamic supplication or basic prayers – none of these surface. Just in case we slip into thinking that these are characters that have too little knowledge of Islam to be able to bring it up in a conversation, we need to remember that that is the same man who was performing his prayers in an earlier scene, proceeding to answer the Bendahara's Islamic peace greeting after he was done, which shows that he did not just have a fundamental belief in God but also an overt awareness of *akhlak* (Islamic manners/conduct)⁴⁰. Additionally, Alatas' study about Malays in this particular period further supports the fact these are not individuals completely devoid of Islamic knowledge nor incapable of looking at Islam as a form of guidance on what to do in that situation⁴¹. With all of these in consideration, it is very hard not to suspect that the absence of any religious talk in this scene is an intentional and conscious decision on the part of the auteur. Most importantly, the original Hikayat also details Tuah as being very well-versed in the Quran (Shaharudin 21), but here, the film Tuah, just like his Hikayat text counterpart, only justifies his actions on the level of customs:

Jebat has breached the code of the Malay hulubalang which we have received from our ancestors. My decision is in line with adat (customs) and does not break the

⁴⁰ The Sholat is a fundamental prayer done five times a day, and is composed of actions that include but are not limited to, bowing and complete prostration, an act symbolising absolute humility and submission to the creator.

⁴¹ Refer to Alatas 39, where the writer explains about the second phase of Islamization.

law. My loyalty is only for the king of Melaka, my king. The treasonous Jebat must be punished!

But his dramatic tirade does not end there, he exclaims, “Jebat has committed treason!” “Jebat has become the king’s enemy!” “Jebat has committed treason!” – and each time he makes one of those exclamations, the camera helpfully zooms in closer and closer to his near-maniacal wide-eyed expression. The true object of critique here is not his justification. What the triple zoom here draws attention to is his vehemence. *Adat* here is just an excuse for him to “[interpret] Islam in favour of the ruling class he serves” (Chung 144). Essentially, the takeaway here is that his Islamic belief is in tow, and what leads instead is his impulse.

Image 18 - “Jebat has committed treason!”

To fully illuminate the dynamics of the subtext in this scene, I take a step back to consider the two-fold manoeuvre that occurs; firstly, the presence of pre-Islamic beliefs is suppressed and secondly, the opportunity to bring up Islamic values is not taken up. What emerges as a pattern is the way the film works its way around from placing Islam and animism to be in conversation with each other. This effectively averts any potential tension

between the two belief systems because neither is allowed to surface fully. This does not accurately reflect McHugh's depiction of Islam, but in a way, does synchronise well with his idea of Islam as existing with pre-Islamic beliefs peacefully.

What the scene also does, is to effectively shift the discussion into an alternative politics, that is the human impulses that drive us to make the decisions we make. Instead of placing the two belief systems in antagonistic positions, they are both placed in passive positions beside each other – both exist equally as resources for Tuah's opportunistic tendencies.

Let us take a moment to consider Tuah's opportunistic tendencies. While his disregard for his wife's reference to *semangat alam* earlier can indicate a rejection of the reverence for animist beliefs, we later see Tuah contradicting his rejection of animist elements when he jumps at the opportunity to get the magical, invincibility-granting Tamingsari, altogether re-embracing his un-Islamic dependence on the magical qualities of this weapon. To briefly summarise that scene: having disarmed Tuah in their duel later, Jebat throws aside the Tamingsari he was wielding, crying and asking for them to reconcile. Tuah momentarily shows gratitude to Jebat, but quickly grabs the Tamingsari, throwing the ordinary, non-magical Parungsari to Jebat instead.

Image 19 – Tuah with the Tamingsari back in his hands

When we put all these actions of Tuah together, we are given to understand that when animist elements appear not to be in favour of his decisions, he has no wish to hear it. But given the opportunity to see it working in his favour, he jumps at it. Correspondingly, when he is abandoned by the Sultan, he returns to his Islamic faith by praying to God. And once the Sultan re-accepts him, he prioritises his dedication to the Sultan again⁴². What the film is truly critical about is the way Tuah goes back and forth between animist and Islamic beliefs, as and when either may conveniently support his servitude to the ruling class.

Hence, from the way elements relating to Islam and animism percolate the film's narrative in a rather subdued state, we can derive Tuah's immorality in the film as neither relating to his Islamic nor his pre-Islamic beliefs – Tuah is depicted to be as opportunistic as he is immoral for seeing Jebat's defeat as a means to prove his loyalty to the Sultan and the superiority of his warrior's code. Ultimately, his core impulse is a subservience to the

⁴² I evoke again Chung's argument about Tuah interpreting Islam in a way which favoured his service to the Sultan.

Sultan⁴³. Jebat is not Tuah's enemy just because the Sultan says so, but he is Tuah's enemy because his act of rebellion implicitly challenges Tuah's principles of subservience. So killing Jebat is a double indulgence in this impulse because it not only eliminates the challenger of his principles, but is also another opportunity to express subservience by obediently carrying out his beloved Sultan's orders.

Significantly stripping away the presence of Islam and animism thus leaves Malay identity rather bare here, allowing audiences to identify the basal impulses that drive a person – this is another way the film tries to expand discussions about Malay identity, to look at a person's core, if I were to put it in a slightly cliché way. With Tuah's core being revealed to be the impulse for subservience, faith (Islamic or pre-Islamic) and *adat* appear simply as tools and excuses for him to justify his actions.

Had the two belief systems been placed in antagonistic terms though, the tension that could otherwise result from the two belief systems' contradictory and opposing fundamentals could have manifested in the film as strong undercurrents or ripples that would have made it harder to focus on the way feelings and impulses drive our decisions.

Magic In *Seniman Bujang Lapok*

Tuah's belief in charmed objects finds its continuity in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* through the trio's belief in a magical stone. Interestingly, the animist elements Hussein suppressed in *Hang Jebat*, is blatantly brought up in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* by P.Ramlee. Similarly though, references to Islamic beliefs and references to animist beliefs are brought

⁴³ One might assume that Tuah's core impulse cannot be subservience to the Sultan when he technically disobeyed the Sultan's orders by staying alive after his death sentence. While this argument sounds reasonable, it is more plausible to believe that Tuah believed he is of more use to the Sultan alive rather than dead, which is why he agreed to be hidden by the Datuk Bendahara. And he is right, because the Sultan is glad to receive his help once Jebat has taken over the palaces. Tuah's decision to stay alive thus might appear to be done in the name of disobedience but in reality it is actually done in the name of serving the Sultan.

up in separate scenes, and this divorces any connection between the two and compels audiences to consider them on their own terms instead.

On one of their off days, Sudin purchases a stone from a street peddler claiming that it has magical properties. Believing that it would help him somehow in his attempt to borrow three hundred and fifty dollars from their manager, he pays ten dollars for the stone – but ends up being able to borrow only five dollars from their fierce manager.

Image 20 – Trio looking at the magical stone

The message would be simple if the stone's time in the film ends there, the message being that Sudin is obviously naïve for still subscribing to pre-Islamic beliefs despite being a Malay Muslim of the 1960s, which befits Khairuddin's commentary about the state of Islamic lax and lack⁴⁴. However, the moral of the story from the magical stone becomes a little unclear when Sudin then tosses the stone in a drain concluding that it brought bad luck instead of good luck. There was no fundamental change in his mindset or any marked departure from the belief in animism to believing more in Islam. He essentially did not disbelieve in the stone's magical quality, he just believed it had the wrong kind of magical quality. Khairudin surmises:

⁴⁴ See Khairudin 13-15 to see the way a belief in magic is treated as a symptom of being lax in the Islamic faith.

Such were the satires directed by P. Ramlee towards the Malay society at that time. Hussein Alatas concurred with this viewpoint by arguing that the Malays during the 1960s were steeped in their beliefs of magic and mysticism in order to solve their daily trials and tribulations. In an influential academic treatise, Syed Husin Ali further highlighted that the version of Islam amongst the Malays during this period was pervaded by animistic beliefs. Malays were more concerned with wasteful and pompous ceremonies which were far from the teachings of Islam. Moreover, Islam amongst Malays was essentially devoid of the rational and philosophical underpinnings. Malays were also found to be particularly lax in their observances of essential precepts such as prayers and fasting. (14-15)

Khairudin's collation of arguments and observance attempts to capture a connection between the lax and lack in Islamic essentials, with the existence of pre-Islamic beliefs, implying that such a state was a direct result of the Malay community's informed and intentional choice to be that way. However, consider this - how is Sudin to know that he is being un-Islamic?

Much as it is natural to see the magical stone scene as a commentary coming from a religious perspective, I argue against overlooking the possibility that it is also perhaps coming from a social perspective, one lamenting the trio's social conditions. Sudin's ability to spend time to educate himself and grow more literate about Islam (and any awareness of how much he does not know about it) is disrupted by a combination of his focus on dealing with unemployment and living in a community equally ignorant about Islam⁴⁵. Curiously, this difficult reality, despite being so much a part of the working class community (who constitute most of those charged as knowing and practicing Islam to a terribly limited extent) is something virtually

⁴⁵ Besides the polygamous and unfair Kuswadinata, the trio are also neighbours with old man thinking flea from a pig will nullify his ablution (it does not, the concern is the pig, not the flea).

no research article explore as having to do with their religious illiteracy or religious ‘lack’ as is⁴⁶. Additionally, there is no point of reference for what counts as a successful and pious Malay Muslim in the film – the absence of such a character in the film perhaps reflects the reality of the world of the working-class community that has limited access to religious knowledge or realistic references of exemplary piety achievable by their class. If being well-employed and being rich are any measure for what the working-class community of the film understand as success, then the only ‘successful’ people outside of the studio are composed of snobbish arrogant individuals who are arguably equally un-Islamic – the rude doctor that belittles the trio and the *kampung* menace Shariff Dol, are examples. My first point with regards to this scene is thus a contemplative one, perhaps sentimental even, in that the scene possibly sympathises and laments the unfortunate circumstance of the working-class Malay whose expression of faith in animist beliefs is not something he can necessarily recognise as associated with Islamic illiteracy.

My second point about the scenes depicting the trio’s pre-Islamic beliefs is more founded in the composition of the film’s narrative. Akin to *Hang Jebat*, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* situates the depiction of anything explicitly Islamic (prayers, or any mention of religion) and anything explicitly pre-Islamic (like the notion of magic of premonitions) in separate scenes rather than in the same scene. In this sense, the film avoids depicting a connection between the two. While it can be easy to propose that a subscription to pre-Islamic beliefs is a symptom of being lax in observing Islamic teachings, the film problematises the two distinct issues on their own terms. Let us first consider what the film’s point is when it makes reference to these respective belief systems.

In *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, the subscription to animist beliefs is problematised. In one scene that overtly brings up animist beliefs, we see the trio on a feudal film set as actors.

⁴⁶ See Syed Husin Ali and Khairudin 13-15

Ramlee is playing the Sultan, Aziz is his Datuk Bendahara. Sudin plays the *Ahli Nujum* (royal fortune-teller/geomancer) a figure responsible for relaying signs and premonitions to the Sultan. After dismissing his Datuk Bendahara, Ramlee the Sultan proceeds to ask what his dreams meant.

Ramlee: Datuk Ahli Nujum, I had a dream that cow dung dropped from the sky and fell on my face with a smack.

Sudin: According to my premonitions, danger will befall your highness.

Ramlee: Da-danger? Oh no no but it did not actually hit my face – just a slight bit - it almost did, it almost did. It fell on my shoulder instead. What does that mean Datuk Nujum?

Sudin: Oh the shoulder yes? Ah that means..you'll have tapioca malaria fever.

[Ramlee is even more startled]

Ramlee: [stuttering] Uhm, actually slight – it was not even a slight bit, I flicked it and smack! It landed right on Director Ahmad Nisfu's face!

Sudin: [Immediately] Ah that means that Director Ahmad Nisfu is about to die!

Ahmad Nisfu: Aarhhh why! Why me I have nothing to do with this scene....

[Ahmad Nisfu faints]

Of course the premonition by Sudin as the fortune-teller about Director Ahmad Nisfu dying is coincidental with the director actually fainting on set. The director was understandably too frustrated by the continuous nonsense, and could well die from it if the trio were to keep it up. Every single one of Sudin's premonitions as the *Ahli Nujum* has clearly been nonsense, but it received a response that came from the pre-Islamic reverence towards shamans and premonitions. The fact that Ramlee was startled (perhaps more than he ought to be), indicates that Sudin's lines (made up or otherwise) jerked at a pre-Islamic reflex that left him uneasy even if the ominous lines were indeed slapstick nonsense, and not

directed to him but the character he was acting as. Being more startled than he should be implies that the pre-Islamic sensibilities of a feudal Malay Sultan ended up resonating through to the working-class Malay man of 1960s Singapore playing him. The primary consequence for this persistent animist sensibilities – frustration.

What is consistent in the magical-stone scene and the Sultan-Ramlee scene is that the continued persistence of animist beliefs, even if residual by the 1960s, is a source of frustration for the trio and of course, director Ahmad Nisfu. It left the trio swindled by the pedlar, and here it gives high blood pressure to Director Ahmad Nisfu.

Apart from problematising this residual subscription to animist beliefs, the lax in observing important Islamic precepts is also problematised. This is most evident through the polygamous Kuswadinata. He attempts to reason with Tina his first wife by bringing up the permission Islam gives for Muslim men to have multiple wives, but is absolutely unconcerned about, as Tina points out, prayers or fasting, the obligatory and fundamental precepts. He is not much different from Tuah actually, for interpreting Islam in favour of his aim. That said, Tina calls out Kuswadinata's opportunistic, warped interpretation of Islam more openly than Jebat does Tuah⁴⁷.

So if we were to compare the way the two films bring up notions of Islam as well as animism, it is clear that instead of suppressing them like *Hang Jebat* does, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* raises them for scrutiny. Despite drawing attention to the residual subscriptions to animism as well as the lax in observing Islamic teachings, the composition of the plot assigns these two issues their own scenes, rather than having them appear simultaneously in one scene. While it can be easy to connect the two issues by seeing how a subscription to ideas like charmed objects is exactly a symptom of being lax in observing Islamic teachings,

⁴⁷ Jebat's initial plea for Tuah to not disregard his wife and child and to be responsible for them, coheres with the teachings of Islam for a man to be responsible to his wife. However, Jebat only presents that as a general moral plea though, instead of saying it is the right thing Muslim should do.

Seniman Bujang Lapok problematises the two issues separately and on their own terms. For instance, after realising they have been cheated by the street peddler, Sudin throws the stone into a drain and the camera immediately cuts to another scene instead of there being a kind of regret for not having supplicated or turning to God for help. Could they have simply been too ignorant about Islamic teaching to do this? I would think that the film does make their Islamic illiteracy an issue of course, but it would be more plausible to read this cinematic choice as auteur P.Ramlee intentionally refusing to didactically propose Islamic literacy as an answer.

Khairudin explains that P.Ramlee was simultaneously, “critical of what seemed to him as traditional interpretations of Islamic law” whilst having “[inclinations] to inner and mystical practises, what is termed as *ilmu batin* (esoteric knowledge) rather than mere laws and rituals” (5). I am not arguing here that P.Ramlee was out to convince people to start embracing mystical practices, but in segregating references to animism and Islam in separate scenes, I believe the larger aim is to move the discussion past the reductive and simplistic diagnosis that believing in animism is a symptom of Islamic impiety, and instead to start recognising animism as a coping mechanism for the poorly-educated working class. Instead of defining Malays who believe in magic simply in terms of lack, the film calls for us to consider their living conditions from which this sensibility springs from: their lifestyle, neighbours, their community, their *kampung*, seeing how they struggle to get money, seeing how they help each other.

Image 21 – Penniless

Image 22 – Selling collected recyclables

Image 23 – Helping a semi-deaf neighbour

Image 24 – Long wait for the toilet

With all those other images and moments, is the only working definition here for these people thus simply, ‘un-Islamic’? In forcing audiences to see the intimate details, the joys and pains in the life of a working-class neighbourhood, P.Ramlee is giving a different vocabulary through which audiences can define what being a Malay means - a visual vocabulary that could offer a less harsh and more sympathetic understanding that locates these Malays in their realities. Certainly an understanding that is less harsh than simply interpreting them as impious Malays. In other words, with the availability of such images, it would be unfair to diagnose the believers of magic as nothing more than ‘un-Islamic’, in very much the same sense it would be unfair to define Malay identity simply through Hikayats.

Of course it is not that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* does not see Islamic literacy as the way forward, it is just that the film’s refraining from making a direct relation between Islamic

illiteracy with the existence of pre-Islamic beliefs, creates a space for audiences to look at the two beliefs systems as more than just opposing ends of a dichotomy. Being able to look at them separately allows audiences to understand animism through terms *other than* Islamic vocabulary. That perhaps, if we take a closer look at the intimate details surrounding the lives of the working-class Malays, that there is an entire set of terms and definitions we can make use of to understand what being a Malay of the 1961 Singapore could mean.

To recap, the primary business of this chapter is to investigate the way each film depicts the interaction (or lack of) between Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs. A comparison this way reveals that both films appear to similarly segregate issues relating to the two belief systems instead of drawing out any connection or antagonistic relationship between the two. For *Hang Jebat*, this enables us to pin down how Tuah's core impulse – subservience to the Sultan - as the true fuel of his actions and not beliefs, whether Islamic or pre-Islamic. For *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, preventing any interaction between the two belief systems allows for the pre-Islamic beliefs to be understood other than through the vocabulary of Islamic piety, which would otherwise risk narrowly labelling working-class Malays as simply impious individuals. Now let's take a moment to see how these ideas configure into the main message of each film.

In pinpointing subservient impulses instead of religion as the culprit behind Tuah's actions, *Hang Jebat* effectively exonerates Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs from receiving any blame – neither belief system had any real part in the misdeeds. This argument also fits well with the literary activist group ASAS50's aims to get rid of the debilitating influence of feudal ideas that mixed myths, Islam and superstition⁴⁸. So the literary activists would have been very proud of Hussein's film. But how does this somewhat pro-religious argument fit with *Seniman Bujang Lapok*'s idea to move away from the religious vocabulary and offer an

⁴⁸ See quote by Khairudin 8-9 in page 94 of this project.

alternative vocabulary to define Malay identity? I maintain that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is not actually criticising the Islamic/religious vocabulary itself, but is instead criticising the people who utilise *only that* vocabulary to narrowly define the Malays, people who do not look at the social context of 1961 Singapore to understand that these Malays are nothing more than superstitious/un-Islamic individuals. It may have been easy for members of the Kaum Tua or Kaum Muda factions to look at working-class Malays that way, but the wisdom that the film *Hang Jebat* offers to a reading of *Seniman Bujang Lapok*'s characters is: look at the core impulse of the character. Sudin sacrificed ten dollars to buy a magical stone not to cause harm to anyone, but to help Ramlee his friend. While this shows Sudin's lack of Islamic sensibilities, *Hang Jebat*'s directive to look at Sudin's core will allow us to label this working-class Malay as a good friend. *Hang Jebat*'s directive, in this sense, supports rather than contradicts *Seniman Bujang Lapok*'s aim to offer alternative definitions or vocabulary to read Malay identity.

CHAPTER 5

Other Races

It is true that the other races do not appear as much as the Malay characters, but it is not possible or at least, unwise, to have a discussion about the Malay Muslim identity as depicted in both of the films without mentioning the other races that are depicted in it, as well as their contribution to the discussion.

This chapter will look at how the reconsiderations of Malay identity offered in chapters 2,3 and 4 are collectively reified through interracial interactions. My main argument in this chapter is that the other races consolidate an understanding of the main characters as Malay Muslims. While the interracial dynamics does help to expand and develop discussions about Malay identity, the development of the non-Malay characters take a toll because there is a sense in which Malay identity is more easily developed when it is contrasted against a fixed and collective idea of what a non-Malay character can be.

Several other writers have also noted how it is curious that the Malay studio movies had a predominantly Malay cast even though Malaya had a multi-racial community and Singapore, an ethnic Chinese majority⁴⁹. But very few went on to make an argument of why that might be so or how the other characters contributed to Malay identity, with the exception of M.Ahmad and Y.B Lee as we will later see.

This chapter begins by looking at what kind of significance interracial reactions have to offer in each films. In engaging with the idea of what threatens social stability, *Hang Jebat* locates the threat within that of another race while *Seniman Bujang Lapok* appears to locate the threat within weak interracial bonds.

⁴⁹ See Amir 120, Van der Heide 73 and M.Ahmad and Y.B Lee 415.

The Javanese Threat In The Melakan Court

There are several things to note about the contribution of the Javanese court official, Patch Kerma Wijaya, to the progress of the plot. At least for the film of *Hang Jebat*, the Patch (a ministerial title, the Javanese equivalent of the Malay Datuk) arguably served more as a plot device rather than a proper antagonist because his antagonist role is taken over and later completely overshadowed by the heartless, Sultan-obsessed Tuah the moment the warrior returns to the narrative. Nevertheless, even as a plot device, it is of course important to recognise him as the mastermind who managed to manipulate the Melakan monarch to sentence both his admirals, Tuah and Jebat to death, during their respective times as the *Laksmana* (though of course it took less convincing for the case of Jebat).

Image 25 – The Cunning Patch

From the onset the Patch is depicted as cunning, but his ability to attain the trust of the Sultan is also registered visually through his attire; unlike other adaptations, he puts on the complete traditional outfit of Malay nobility and this underplays his Javanese identity⁵⁰. This

⁵⁰ In *Hang Tuah* (1956) the Patch was dressed in a traditional outfit of Javanese nobility instead of the Malay Baju Kurung this Patch dons in this adaptation.

contrasts against the Javanese princess whose outfit still appears to be identifiably Javanese - but then again she had no need to appear more 'Malay' to earn the Sultan's trust if that is indeed the design of the Pateh in wearing a Malay outfit.

Image 26 – The Pateh in Baju Kurung

Image 27 – The Javanese princess (right)

While he died before he saw Jebat and Tuah duel to the death, in the larger scheme of things, the Pateh is the one to have inadvertently set the stage for the two Malay warriors to go against each other, effectively fleshing out their conflicting Malay values which they fight for to the death. Perhaps the political historical competition between the Majapahit empire of Java and the Malay Kingdom can account for the depiction of Pateh Kerma Wijaya as representing a Javanese who harbours ill will and cannot be trusted⁵¹. Be that as it may it is important to remember that this Javanese character only set the conflict in motion for the crack to turn into a near-collapse, indicating that there were problems within the feudal social order to begin with. Additionally, the fact that the Pateh is able to do so through a manipulation of the Sultan of Melaka, indicates the film's engagement with exactly what Chung would identify as "Political concerns regarding the legitimacy of the leadership and issues surrounding the role of the monarchy" (147). In this regard, the Javanese Pateh is fundamental as a character that tests the extent to which the Malay identity revolving around the venerating or rejecting of the monarchy can work. Chung concurs with Shahrudin

⁵¹ See Braginsky 468 for an explanation on the depiction of the Melaka-Majapahit and Johor-Jambi conflict.

though, that the “point that what was achieved by Hang Jebat was simply a minor shift in political mindset by replacing one form of feudalism for another” because to her despite the “glimpse of opportunity for independent thought and judgement....any strong-willed determination for self-expression that opposes the status quo will ultimately be suppressed” (145). Van der Heide has also argued along the same lines about what the film’s achievement in terms of agenda but again, I suggest a stronger consideration for the role the Islamic identity of the characters to avoid a myopic interpretation of the film⁵². As I have argued, the ‘point’ that Jebat makes through his speech and actions, is not at all coherent and researchers have a readiness to jump at this incoherence as a psychological trait to its own end rather than understanding it as a directorial gambit, in that the incoherence is not just simply a feature that adorns Jebat’s character, but a tactical stepping stone from which the film can launch its own point – and for this, a sensitivity towards what the elements of film can offer, is fundamental.

Chung’s argument has two fundamental components, where she first relates the undercurrent of shifting ideologies that initiated the production of Malay feudal epic films. She also urges an attention towards the discourse of film itself, quoting Higson, to consider patterns of consumption by the local audience and the ‘use’ of cinematic structure in film such as image, sound, and narrative. In her latter component though, Chung appears less comprehensive, making only one brief reference to the camera’s framing as suggesting Jebat’s claustrophobic mental scape⁵³.

Previously, I have argued the film completes Jebat’s gesture through cinematography, in order to invite a reconsideration of the Muslim identity of the Malay characters. I now return to the character of Pateh Kerma Wijaya as I identify a similar subtle gesturing done by

⁵² See van der Heide 197-198

⁵³ See Chung 145

the camera towards the Pateh's own religion. In a scene where the Pateh is in his own room and making further plans with his nephew, the scene begins not with a shot of his face, but his hand placed on a wooden idol that adorns the upper wall of his room. Audiences would easily miss this reference to idolatry had it not been contrasted with a similar cinematic gesture where the camera specifically zooms up on a calligraphy of "Allah" in the upper wall of his Malay counterpart's room, the Datuk Bendahara's room.

Image 28 – The Javanese minister's idol

Image 29 – Calligraphy of "Allah" in the Malay minister's room

The film is bespeckled with such quiet contemplative moments which either start a scene or end it – indeed Hussein has an underrated penchant for creating such graceful yet striking moments of silence which calls for the direct attention to the mise-en-scene or the visual details and composition of a scene before it is invaded by the dialogue and action. Specifically for the stills above, there is an implied imperative to think about how faith is configured in the motivations that drive the characters' respective actions. The presence of such an idol suggests that the Pateh is not Muslim, and socio-historical records can support this idea because the Majapahit empire was, relative to feudal Melaka, predominantly more Hindu⁵⁴. The Pateh's depiction as a threat to Melaka is bound up with his race and faith, though the explicit reference to the latter is more subtle, as the idol never makes an appearance again nor does the Pateh illustrate any kind of Hindu act of worship throughout

⁵⁴ See Alatas 6-7 for a more detailed account of how Malay became the language of Islamic literature in the archipelago and replacing the hegemony of the Javanese and Hinduism.

the rest of his appearance. The thing is, “Malay filmmakers occupied the commercial sector of popular mainstream culture and were thus cautiously less radical” (Chung 141) – Chung makes this statement after a general focus on race but I gather it is applicable to the film’s depiction of religion as well. I do not think it is in the design of the film to throw another religion under the bus in order to champion Islam. It is in the very subtle reference to the Pateh’s religion that we can perhaps conclude that the film is not trying to relate the evilness of a character down to his religion either, when it is clear the Malay characters do not even seem to practice their own religion properly, much too obsessed with venerating or opposing the Sultan.

Bringing in the idea of the character’s different races into the discussion though, allows us to understand that what *Hang Jebat* tries to emphasise, specifically through the aesthetics of cinematography Hussein has a penchant for, is that the problem is not religion itself, but an interpretation or configuration of it in a way which supports negative impulses for any race. This misconfiguration of faith to achieve a personal end is more clear for Tuah but is also applicable for the Pateh, making the two characters more similar than previous studies on this *Hikayat* might suggest. In conclusion, the threat to feudal Melaka that ostensibly takes the form of a Javanese Hindu Pateh, actually finds its cross-ethnic cross-religion corollary in the Malay Muslim Tuah. If Jebat’s incomplete gesture is completed by the film’s cinematography, then it is in a very similar cinematic gesture that Tuah is seen to complete the Pateh’s misdeed.

Importance of Interracial Bonds

While *Hang Jebat* may locate the instigatory threat within a non-Malay character, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* locates the threat in a weak social bonds, including interracial bonds. Social cohesion is a large concern because the film does not only depict a rather dense living

settlement but also a multi-racial and multi-religious society, much more so than the predominantly mono-ethnic social context depicted in *Hang Jebat*. In such a packed environment, everyone has to learn to get along. Amongst some notable appearances of characters from other races or religions include the Singh security guard questioning the Malay values of the trio, the Chinese *karung guni* man (rag-and-bone man) buying collected recyclables off of the trio, a neighbouring Indian couple quarrelling in the middle of the night and the Indian peddler whom Sudin bought the magical stone from⁵⁵. In the film studio, the trio also take up roles that strike as caricatures of certain races as well, one of the most interesting being the aforementioned scene where Ramlee is acting as the Sultan, Aziz as the prime minister and Sudin as the royal shaman who is notably dressed as a Javanese – not just identifiable through the clothes of Javanese nobility but with wings at his back (called *sayap sandang*), suggesting a vague reference to divine Javanese-Hindu epic characters. If anything, it again rehearses the image of the Javanese as a non-Muslim, advising and giving guidance to, again, a naïve and hare-brained Malay Sultan. As a scene within a scene, one message the court scene offers is that rehearsing old familiar feudal visual tropes can become so cliché they appear comical rather than serious or proper discussions about Malay identity.

The interracial engagement that happens outside the studio however, is a much more fertile ground for any proper discussion about Malay identity, but specifically on manners and socioeconomic status. Recall the Indian Sikh security guard who had met the trio with scorn for not practicing Malay values. The scene actually continues with another Malay man who asked him what the trio's business was coming to the studio.

Malay Man: Singh, what do those three want?

Security Guard: They are looking for work.

⁵⁵ I am careful to add that Sikhism is not a religion but here it becomes the feature which identifies him as being another race

Malay Man: They want to be film stars with faces like that?!

Security Guard: They are just looking for a job, so why make fun of them? How will your people progress?

Malay Man: You're snubbing me Singh, you're being crass with me.

Security Guard: It's not that. You get to eat if it's your fortune, they get to eat if it's their fortune. What's wrong in being able to just eat together?

[Malay Man scratches his head]

This scene allows not just the trio but the spiteful Malay man to cleanse themselves of values decidedly un-Malay so that they can unite as a race and be more progressive. More importantly, an ability to see the security guard beyond being an Indian Sikh, and as a man offering wisdom to the Malay community shows that looking beyond race and developing interracial bonds and respect are beneficial. A lack of interracial respect threatens Malays to a solipsistic mindset that traps them, like the above Malay man, in a bitter logic that is only threatening and destructive to the Malay community. Here, the existence of other races does not compromise but enhances Malay identity instead. This constitutes a moment of positive depiction of a non-Malay character. A less positive depiction occurs when the trio, and the general community of the rented house, are roused from sleep from a quarrelling Indian couple.

Image 30 – Another domestic squabble

Image 31 – “It’s just your child’s poo, just wash it away”

The man explains that his wife refused to change their child’s diapers, so he does the changing instead. Unfortunately, in the process of changing, their child kicks the diaper and some of the diaper’s contents splatters on his face, thus making him angry. Ramlee gives advice by replying that he can just wash his face off and that it is not worth it to make it a big matter, ending with a softer tone by asking them to make up instead.

While the couple does not make a direct commentary about Malay values the way the security guard did, they give a chance for the trio to shine as the helpful mediators of a domestic crisis. At a glance this can appear to support Mahyuddin and Lee’s argument about the way P.Ramlee films are to them, about “building a society that locates the Malays at the pinnacle of every aspect of social life” (415). Even the staging appears to suggest this because the trio gives advice and judgment from a higher position (elevated veranda) than the Indian couple (who were at the porch of their own house). However, I argue for a bit of nuance by identifying the socioeconomic subtext that is also implied in the staging. Living in a separate house suggests that the Indian couple is more financially well-to-do, hence affording them the larger and more private living space compared to the cramped rental housing the trio stay in. The fact that the two different social classes continue to appear in separate frames in this scene spatially accentuates their class difference too. Instead of highlighting the Malay characters as being at the “pinnacle”, this scene locates the Malay characters in a relatively humble socio-economic position. But what about the fact that it was the Malay characters that were giving advice, does this not propose them as still being at the pinnacle of social life somewhat still? One only needs to look at every other scene in the film to realise that domestic issues are by no means racially tagged – in fact every other domestic

issue depicted in the film is faced by a Malay family⁵⁶. Let us also not forget that the Indian Sikh security guard gave advice to not one, but four Malay characters about having Malay values as well as good values in general. While Mahyuddin and Lee analyse many of P.Ramlee's other films and persuasively argue how they "articulate a right-wing nationalist sentiment upholding the sovereignty of the dominant Malay while undermining the existence of other ethnic communities"(409), it is hard to say that *Seniman Bujang Lapok* does this through a depiction of the "Malays as the superior race" (415). Perhaps this is exactly the reason why their research article did not include *Seniman Bujang Lapok* in their analysis.

That said I do concede that the way the film focuses mostly on Malay characters and their developments makes it difficult to completely justify it as simply a film advocating for an egalitarian society. I do however see the way advice and help exchanged between the Malay and non-Malay characters, alongside the depiction of their problems that plague both the Malay and other ethnic communities, as constituting what Chung puts, an attempt "to construct a cohesive and inclusive national profile" (150).

While the presence of other ethnic communities work to depict *Seniman Bujang Lapok* as based on a plural society, the existence of the Javanese characters in *Hang Jebat* does not automatically define its society as similarly plural. Chung notes this too, quoting J.S Furnivall to define the feudal society depicted as "a society of plural features but not a plural society" (137). She further explains how over time, migrants to the Malay kingdoms "assimilated into the dominant Malay society and their ethnic characteristics became subsumed through cultural adoption of the language and practices of their host society" (138) – this befits society depicted in *Hang Jebat*. The society depicted in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* on the other hand, can be understood as a plural society, and Chung quotes Smith's definition

⁵⁶ Apart from Kuswadinata and Tina, the earlier half of the film shows an elderly Malay couple in debt because the husband had to pay an ostentatiously high dowry for the wife's hand in marriage.

for this – a plural society is where “different sections of the community – made up of ethnic groups with their own religion, culture, language, ideas and customs – live alongside but separately from each other” (138). Furnivall and Smith’s ideas about a plural society and a society of plural features are reified in the two films most notably through language. For instance, the Javanese characters of *Hang Jebat* are never shown to speak their mother-tongue. In fact they speak Malay in an accent that bears no discernible difference from the Malay characters themselves. It is perhaps what makes them even more dangerous, the fact that they blend in so impeccably amongst the Malay characters, being threats that are difficult to detect. This contrasts against the Indian couple in *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, who not only speak Malay in accents noticeably inflected by their own mother-tongue, but they also occasionally speak Tamil. Interestingly, no subtitles are offered during their exchange in Tamil, inadvertently compelling non-Tamil speakers to identify them through the relatability of their domestic issue and of the emotions on display instead. In this sense, the depiction of the other ethnic communities in both films collectively challenge the assumption that a Malay society is threatened by the lack of linguistic assimilation on the part of the non-Malays.

Religion Within Race

Putting both films side by side here makes it more apparent that there is a way in which religion is initially brought up as an added feature to distinguish between the races, but it then gets blurred out when the races interact and the characters are presented as racial characters instead of religious characters. While the trio does give advice to the bickering Indian couple, we have to bear in mind that they, along with the Malays in the rented house, are not exactly well-informed about Islam so this suggests that the advice might have come from a general social sensibility rather than a religious one. It is easier to say they were trying to be good neighbours than it is to say that they were trying to be good Muslim neighbours.

Likewise, the symmetry between Tuah and the Pateh that grows apparent as the plot progresses, also blurs out their differing religious backgrounds which was brought up in the first half of the film⁵⁷. But does the blurring extend to blurring racial differences?

While the difference between religions appears to be blurred, the distinction between races remains in both films because there is a sense in which a discussion of the Malay identity is made easier when there are identifiably fixed elements in other races to contrast Malay identity against. M.Ahmad and Lee note that “other ethnic groups are represented through a narrow conception of stereotyped images deeply embedded within the social relations of ethnic society” (415). Some ethnic stereotypes concerning the Indian community include the assumption that they are “emotionally volatile” and are “great pretenders and liars” (Gabriel 11) – the first stereotype is perpetuated through the image of the arguing Indian couple and the second, through the image of the Indian peddler who swindled Sudin with his magical-stone business. The Chinese are always depicted to be in some sort of trade and this is as presented in the character of the rag-and-bone man⁵⁸. These stereotypes still dot the narrative and social landscape in which the Malay characters inhabit, functioning as a foil for the Malay characters’ development, instead of seeing any individual development themselves⁵⁹. Realistically, the different races would definitely influence Malay identity differently but unfortunately, the consistent tendency to depict them in films without having any development on their own, flattens and homogenizes them in a way that makes it difficult to ascertain at length how differently they each influenced Malay identity. To M.Ahmad and Lee, such shallow representations construct them as a collective Other and their presence is “either completely disavowed or becomes dissolved into the social, cultural, and political

⁵⁷ Here I mean to refer to both the characters’ plans to eliminate Jebat and the potential greed that motivates both of them to do that.

⁵⁸ See M.Ahmad and Y.B Lee 416 and Amir 25 for other examples of the Chinese characters being in other kinds of trade.

⁵⁹ See Van der Heide 80-81 for a brief explanation on the inter-ethnic relations in the Malay peninsula from the colonial period to the early post-colonial period.

frameworks of the dominant Malays” (416). While the two writers do not go on to give examples in films of how these other races become ‘dissolved’, I find an unfortunate and striking similarity between what the Indian couple, Indian peddler and the Chinese rag-and-bone and what their appearance really say about the Malay trio. The staging of the quarrelling Indian couple scene, as I have mentioned, subtly underline the trio’s more humble socioeconomic position. Ramlee’s failed attempt in selling his tattered shorts to the Chinese rag-and-bone man blatantly highlights the trio’s poverty⁶⁰. As for the Indian peddler, if we are being generous to Sudin, we can say his gullibility is a contributor to his poverty. If we are being critical, we can say that it points to the Malay community’s struggle to get money or if we stretch it even more, a stereotypical tendency to find shortcuts to get money that could earn the label of indolence. The theme that arises in the interracial interactions thus becomes clear, there is an issue of financial struggle. M.Ahmad and Lee posit that “The politics of ethnic difference is highlighted as the main cause of instability in society when the actual problem is more likely at the level of class and economic relations” (417). What the Indian and Chinese characters consistently imply is an anxiety that as Van der Heide would put it, concerning “increasing non-Malay economic and political power” (84).

What about the Indian Sikh security guard, he didn’t point to the trio’s poverty did he? Not in a monetary sense no, but more in a moral sense, meaning the trio’s lack of manners. He needs to exist specifically as a non-Malay in order for his criticism about the trio’s lack of manners to be as sharp as it was – in the context of such a self-aware film, giving such scathing lines to a Malay character instead would have left it falling flat as an act of self-righteousness. But yet the critical service that his comments does is more visible for Malay identity than his own racial identity – past his debut at the studio compound, we never

⁶⁰ See Khairuddin 15-16 for a more extensive description of how the theme of poverty in Malay society is established in the film.

see him again, let alone his development, as is the case for all other non-Malay characters. It would be good to be able to say that the Indian Sikh security guard contributed to Malay identity in the film differently from the other non-Malay characters, but unfortunately this hypothesis is severely limited by the fact that his scathing lines could have been given to any non-Malay character for them to work, and had little to do with his own unique ethnic and religious identity, at least in the stylised world of *Seniman Bujang Lapok*.

As for the Javanese Pateh of *Hang Jebat*, his screen time is comparable to the screen time of the Indian and Chinese characters of *Seniman Bujang Lapok* combined. Now *he* could not be just any race, he needs to be specifically Javanese in order for the Hikayat to successfully “confirm the superiority of Melaka *even if* Majapahit had been at the zenith of its power at the same time as Melaka” (Van der Heide 63). As a Javanese, he came to Melaka’s court as an outsider, and also died as an outsider – he was killed by Jebat literally a step outside the royal court. As a Javanese *villain*, he provided a problem which allowed the characters Jebat and Tuah to develop through a big battle regarding feudal Malay identity. Even though the film Pateh makes his debut hundreds of years after his Hikayat counterpart, he still, much like his predecessor, dies midway through the story and has no character development, consequently falling into relative oblivion when the drama between the two warriors culminates and overshadows his contribution to the plot. Unfortunately, his racial identity is essential for the film insofar that it aids the development and growth of the Malay characters’ identity. Interestingly, the Pateh finds his corollary in the form of the Javanese Ahli Nujum role played by Sudin in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* – similarly hard to trust, similarly the supporting character. Given all that has been said, it is not too hard to imagine the extent to which the unnamed period film the trio were acting in will develop Malay identity at the expense of a fixed Javanese identity.

Renowned Malaysian auteur Yasmin Ahmad remarks that “all works of art are about humanity [and to blur out race] you need to bring it up and then you blur it out” [03:18-03:29]. Here, both films do bring up the distinction between races but never end up blurring it out, at most blurring out the fact that the characters had differing religions, but still maintaining an awareness of there being different races. I do not believe the films were as committed to overcoming race as they were in expanding discussions about Malay identity and Malay identity *only*, and this commitment appeared to have unfortunately depended on certain racial stereotypes and a sense of collective fixity when it came to the non-Malays.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

As a project that started off with the narrow focus of trying to find the tension between Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs in early Malay films, I was hard-pressed to find much to substantiate an argument around such a tension from these two films. But that is also what got me wondering - what then is it, can these two films contribute to the discussions about Malay identity, if they do not develop such a tension on screen? Do they even add anything to the discussions surrounding Malay identity?

As indicated, I wished to argue that primarily, both films do expand discussions about Malay identity, and what the films have to say is filtered through rather unprecedented ways of looking at a piece of Hikayat. The argument has been set out in four parts, where chapter 2 and 3 focused on analysing them separately while chapters 4 and 5 compared them more closely based on a common theme.

The first chapter saw me glossing through the social context of feudal Malay society in general as well as that of 1961 Singapore. In the second chapter I looked solely at *Hang Jebat* and argued how the film completed Jebat's critical gesture in order to open up more room to reconsider how faith could be configured in a Malay Muslim identity that triangulates *adat* (customs), *daulat* (reverence for the Sultan) and Islam.

In the third chapter I looked solely at *Seniman Bujang Lapok* to argue that it is an exploration of the possibility of moving beyond identity politics reliant on Hikayat films. I contended that it is important to establish their respective concerns before I attempt to do a more comparative style of analysis.

In the fourth chapter I built upon the concerns about Islam that were fleshed out in chapter 2 and 3. I specifically looked at the depiction of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs in both films, identifying that both similarly refused to place the two belief systems in

antagonistic terms. In the absence of tension between the two, attention could be shed solely on the human impulse that informs Tuah's decisions. As for *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, the absence of such a tension gave way for an invitation to read the working-class Malays through the vocabulary of their struggles and joys rather than through the prism of Islamic impiety.

In the fifth chapter I sought to shed light at how the earlier arguments are reified through interracial interactions. I specifically looked at the way both films depicted the non-Malay characters, arguing that they function to consolidate an understanding of the Malay identity of the main characters.

Still, I feel that five chapters are inadequate to cover all interesting elements in the films and to fully flesh out what they might have to say about Malay identity. For one, the treatment of gender roles is an aspect that I regrettably shed very little light upon. Seeing that Dang Baru is accorded the unprecedented position to end Jebat's final prayer and the entire film altogether, and the fact that the most explicit questioner of poor Islamic practice is a scorned woman in *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, are instances which gives me reasons to believe studying gender, especially the evolution of female roles, would be a good pursuit.

A more comprehensive consideration for the medium of film, and the components that come with it, would also be helpful. In my analysis I point out the lack of attention that other academics give towards the cinematic components, but I am in no way suggesting my own project looks at the cinematic components comprehensively enough either, especially since my arguments are made possible by standing on the shoulders of these academic giants. This is admittedly on account of my own limited knowledge, plus the fact that that my investment in this project is as a student of literature with a sensitivity towards film aesthetics, not as an experienced postgraduate student of film studies. But I do genuinely hope that future academics will indeed pursue an analysis of early Malay films beyond the

primary focus on the narrative and with a greater attention to aspects like mise-en-scene, editing, cinematography and sound, especially since it seems cinematography turned out to be what is fundamental to the way Hussein crafted a critical gesture towards Islam. Both films made very good use of film's faculties as a means to rework the way a Hikayat can be used to tell a story, where *Hang Jebat* re-orientes the focus of a feudal epic to what was formerly an antagonist, while *Seniman Bujang Lapok* uses a feudal epic setting as a foil for its primary setting, the "real-life" of 1961 Singapore. Both offer refreshing ways to look at a Hikayat. If Hussein's *Hang Jebat* says "Let's look here instead", then P.Ramlee's *Seniman Bujang Lapok* replies with "I know. But let's also look outside."

APPENDIX: LIST OF KNOWN FILMS FROM 1961

Abu Nawas. Directed by A.R. Tompel, Merdeka Film Productions, 1961.

Gado-Gado, Directed by P.Ramlee, Cathay-Keris Film, 1961.

Hang Jebat, Directed by Hussein Haniff, Cathay-Keris Film, 1961.

Indera Bangsawan, Directed by Dhiresh Ghosh, Malay Film Productions, 1961.

Jalak Lenteng, Directed by Salleh Ghani, Cathay-Keris Film, 1961.

Lela Satria, Directed by S.Romai Noor, Cathay Keris Film, 1961.

Mas Merah, Directed by Dhiresh Gosh, Malay Film Productions, 1961.

Panji Semarang, Directed by Omar Rojik, Malay Film Productions 1961.

Puteri Gunong Ledang, Directed by S.Roomai Noor, Cathay-Keris Film, 1961

Seniman Bujang Lapok, Directed by P,Ramlee, Malay Film Productions, 1961.

Si Tanggung, Directed By Jamil Sulong, Malay Film Productions, 1961.

Singapura Dilanggar Todak, Directed by Omar Rojik, Malay Film Productions, 1961.

Siti Zubaidah, Directed by B.N. Rao, Cathay-Keris Film, Maria Menado Production Co-Production, 1961.

Sri Tanjung, Directed by Jamil Sulong, Malay Film Productions, 1961.

Sultan Mahmood Mangkat Di-Julang, Directed by K.M. Basker, Cathay-Keris Film, 1961.

Sumpitan Rachun, Directed by S.Roomai Noor, Cathay-Keris Film, 1961.

Tun Teja, Directed by L.Krishnan, Merdeka Film Productions, 1961.

Tunggal, Directed by S.Kadarisman, Merdeka Film Productions, 1961.

Yatim Mustapha, Directed by B.N. Rao, Cathay-Keris Film, 1961.

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