

“FILMS AS SOCIAL HISTORY”

P. Ramlee's "Seniman Bujang
Lapok" and Malays in Singapore
(1950s-1960s)

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FILMS AS HISTORICAL SOURCES

- Malay films at the “Margins”.
- Anthony Milner - “British Records History”.
- Linear conception of History
- Timothy Barnard – “Malay Films are useful sources but largely untapped”.

MALAY FILMS IN POSTWAR S'PORE

- Two major film companies.
- Cathay Keris and Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions.
- "Idols" of that Age - Dress, Hairstyle etc.



TEUKU ZAKARIA @ P. RAMLEE (1929-1973)

- ❑ Scriptwriter, comedian, musician, director, singer, reformer etc.
- ❑ Most popular comedy series, "Bujang Lapok".
- ❑ Bujang Lapok (1957), Pendekar Bujang Lapok (1959), Ali-Baba Bujang Lapok (1961) and...



SENIMAN BUJANG LAPOK (1961)



- ❑ “Best Comedy Film” - 9th Asian Film Festival (1963).
- ❑ Story of three impoverished men (Ramli, Aziz and Sudin).
- ❑ Earn a living through acting in comedies.

SENIMAN BUJANG LAPOK (1961)

- ❑ Met with several challenges.
- ❑ Crowded rented house eventually burned down.
- ❑ Neighbourhood hooligan, Sharif captured.
- ❑ Bujang Lapok happily married.

HOW COULD MALAY FILMS BE REGARDED AS HISTORICAL SOURCES?

- Two salient contexts:
 - The CREATOR of the Film
 - The SOCIAL Conditions of the Era

(1) CREATOR OF THE FILM

- ❑ P. Ramlee, a son of the Great Depression.
- ❑ Grew up from a poor yet religious family background.
- ❑ Witnessed the onslaught of modernity in cosmopolitan Penang.
- ❑ **His films are autobiographical expositions of his life-story.**



(2) SOCIAL CONDITIONS

- “Films are products of the social attitudes and ideological trends of a given period”.
- Malayan Union Episode.
- Food shortages, diseases, unemployment, vices and violence.
- SUMNO, Kesatuan Melayu Singapura, ASAS 50, etc.(116 Malay Organisations)

ANGKATAN SASTERAWAN 50 (ASAS 50)

- “Seni untuk Masyarakat” (Arts for Society)
- Stress on Malay nationalism, Malay language as Lingua Franca and Social reformation.
- “REALIST” mode of writing.
- Depicting the true suffering of the common people.

P. Ramlee and ASAS 50

- ❑ Influenced by Asraf (Ideologue of ASAS 50).
- ❑ Bujang Lapok Series reflected ASAS 50 ideological motives.
- ❑ Four major themes which P. Ramlee often reiterated in most of his films - not exhaustive.
- ❑ (1) After-effects of Japanese Occupation, (2) The Challenge of Modernity, (3) Malay Understanding of Islam and (4) Poverty

(1) AFTER-EFFECTS OF JAPANESE OCCUPATION

1. Socio-Psychological Impact.
 - Bomb Scares (Sudin hiding under table)
2. Low educational backgrounds (Primary 4.5).
 - “Bodoh” (Stupid) and “Bahalol” (Idiot)



(2) THE CHALLENGE OF MODERNITY

1. Preserving Malay Values.
 - “Adab” (Etiquette) and “Gotong Royong” (Cohesiveness).
2. Adopting aspects of MODERNITY.
 - Banks to safe-keep money.

(3) ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM

1. Exploitation of Islamic Laws.
 - Polygamy.
2. Magic and Superstitions.
 - Stone of Fortune.

(4) POVERTY (KEMISKINAN)

1. Lack of Basic Necessities.
 - Iron and New Underwear.
2. Poor Sanitation.
 - Tuberculosis, Dilapidated Toilets and Long Queues.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

- ❑ “Seniman Bujang Lapok” as a sample of hundreds of “reality-based” Malay films.
- ❑ Films must be complemented by oral histories, memoirs, newspapers, coroner’s records, etc.
- ❑ Such history, like *all* histories, may not be perfect, but it may help open doors and provoke new questions.