

## The Storytellers: In-depth Interviews with Malaysian Documentary Filmmakers

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### ABSTRACT

The study is based on a series of interviews conducted with the Malaysian documentary filmmakers Lau Kek-Huat, Amir Muhammad, Fahmi Reza, Harun Rahman, and Lara Ariffin between 2018 and 2021. The interviews aimed to probe into the documentary filmmaking process and investigate the underlying factors that motivate filmmakers to compose films about the Malaysian pre- and post-independence period. In the documentary, the filmmakers took the audience on a nostalgic and self-discovery journey. The documentary focused on people's history, often overlooked in official history material. The storyteller's role is to preserve the narrative and emphasize the value of people's history in bridging the gaps within the nation's history. Films have become an important source of meaning, contestation, and negotiation by providing an alternative history to their audience. The documentary probes the question of what it truly means to be Malaysian. The study utilizes the concept of the mediation of memory to comprehend the complex interaction between cultural memory and identity. The study employed thematic analysis as a systematic approach to examine interview data. The study explores cultural memory dimensions, focusing on film production, memory, and identity. The interviews revealed that the filmmaker's role as a storyteller is critical for preserving and highlighting people's history, as well as educating the audience, particularly Malaysia's younger generation, to ensure that history is not lost and forgotten.

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### INTRODUCTION

Storytellers play a pivotal role in entertaining, instilling cultural values, and reinforcing social norms within their audience.

Filmmakers, who consider themselves storytellers, craft immersive worlds through their camera lenses. This is particularly evident in documentary filmmaking, which focuses on spotlighting everyday life issues. Documentary storytelling involves extensive research into a subject's narrative and creatively using narrative techniques such as structure, character, questions, point of view, and tone to articulate the truth effectively (Bernard, 2016).

Documentaries cover a wide range of intriguing subjects, including biographies, politics, societal issues, and history. In the past, documentary subjects were often viewed as uninteresting due to the predominantly factual reporting style. However, contemporary documentary filmmakers have revitalized the genre by employing creative narrative techniques to captivate audiences. Bell (2011) notes a rising interest in historical documentaries. Channels like National Geographic, History, and Discovery have successfully carved out strong brand identities in this market.

This research explores the creative processes in producing historical documentaries based on interviews with Malaysian filmmakers Lau Kek-Huat, Amir Muhammad, Fahmi Reza, Harun Rahman, and Lara Ariffin. Their films, portraying events leading up to Malaysia's independence, have received local and international acclaim. They present an approach to people's history that resonates deeply with Malaysia's multiracial society, offering an alternative perspective on Malaysian history.

The official history of Malaysia often emphasizes the positive aspects, particularly highlighting the British colonial contribution to Malaya and the significant roles of the country's elite leaders in its unification. The narrative of independence is usually depicted as a result of successful negotiations between the nation's leading political figures and the British authorities, with minimal emphasis on the local population's struggles and opposition against the British. Post-independence, the ruling government has continued to produce documentary films that predominantly convey governmental messages.

The privatization of Malaysian broadcast stations in the 1980s led to a shift in documentary production, aligning more closely with government guidelines. This era saw the emergence of commercial films that supported and promoted the government's ideology, often glorifying the role of British colonial rule and the contributions of elite leaders in the country's development. Unfortunately, this resulted in a single dominant narrative, overshadowing the stories of the common people and thereby risking the diminishment of people's history in the societal consciousness.

According to Ali (2018), people's history emphasizes the roles and contributions of individuals or groups from the lower social strata, whose part in the country's development and historical narrative is often neglected or dismissed. Disregarding their historical significance can weaken these groups' sense of national belonging. A documentary film focusing on people's

history could fill this societal gap. Ali (2018) asserts that history is crucial in aiding individuals and societies in self-recognition.

The filmmakers in this study delve into historical subjects, offering a unique interpretation of Malaysian history. Their primary aim is to bring forward individual voices and uncover untold stories, thereby enriching the historical narrative. The study at hand seeks to understand the motivations driving their filmmaking process. It aims to delve into the filmmakers' thoughts, experiences, and roles as storytellers. Central to this study is the concept of memory mediation, which involves reconstructing historical narratives through modern media technologies like film. Employing the theory of cultural memory, the study aims to explore the interplay between memory and identity.

### **The Development of the Malaysian Documentary Films**

The genesis of documentary film production in Malaysia dates back to 1946, coinciding with the establishment of the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) during British colonization. The name “Malaya” was officially changed to “Malaysia” on September 16, 1963. Within Malaysian cinema, documentary films have often highlighted the nation-building efforts of ethnic leaders and the political contributions of the upper class. The MFU was instrumental in unifying Malaysians of diverse ethnic backgrounds, promoting a Malayan identity to counter the threat of Communist ideology (Hee, 2017). Notable MFU documentary films,

such as *Abu Nawas*—the first documentary produced in Kuala Lumpur—focused on the British efforts to combat communism in Malaya. Post-independence, the MFU evolved into the National Film Department of Malaysia (FINAS) in 1963. FINAS has been pivotal in developing the Malaysian film industry, offering funding, training, and facilities to local filmmakers. Documentary films produced by FINAS continue to reinforce the official history and support the government's agenda. The industry saw further advancement in the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence of television and private television stations, taking documentary film production to a commercial scale. The Malaysian documentary industry during this period heavily focused on human-interest subjects, often infusing sensational elements such as superstition and horror to enhance program ratings (Yasin, 2006).

The advent of the new millennium and the rise of affordable digital filmmaking technology marked a turning point for Malaysian independent filmmakers, who began producing documentaries for niche Internet audiences. These independent films are typically self-financed, shot without permits, and not intended for mainstream distribution, allowing greater freedom in creative, social, and political expression (Khoo, 2008). The increase in independent filmmakers has spurred a wave of creative works within the film industry, including bold and innovative documentaries in both techniques and narratives. This burgeoning independent film scene has drawn attention to historical films that emphasize people's history.

This shift has influenced commercial documentary filmmaking, with several filmmakers now producing historical documentaries focusing on people's history. These narratives highlight the experiences of individuals from various racial and cultural backgrounds, including descendants of migrants who came to Malaya during British rule. The documentaries explore the deep emotional connections these individuals have with Malaya, revealing the compelling reasons behind their active participation in the struggle for national independence. Documentaries engage audiences through logic and emotional and sensory experiences, aiding in understanding our identities (Bondebjerg, 2014). These documentaries offer windows into the past, enabling Malaysians to reconnect with their heritage and cultivate a stronger sense of belonging.

### **Documentary Films as an Alternative and People's History**

Documentaries have been closely associated with depicting history from the earliest days of filmmaking, and they are known for their ability to accurately represent events (Ogunleye, 2005). As Weinstein (2016) posits, a film can offer an unparalleled portrayal, providing insights, raising questions, and prompting further research, even when it only touches the surface of historical reality. Documentaries exploring people's history are particularly significant as they present alternative viewpoints, introducing audiences to perspectives that might challenge the established narrative.

However, such alternative historical accounts are sometimes seen as contentious, potentially disrupting national unity.

In Malaysia, the prevailing government ideology underscores the role of the ruling elite and the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition in achieving the nation's independence and unification. Recognizing the importance of history in fostering national unity and aiding nation-building (Ahmad et al., 2010), Malaysian policymakers have leveraged historical narratives for these purposes. Television programs like '*Hari Ini Dalam Sejarah*,' produced by Radio Television Malaysia (RTM)—the national public broadcaster—use historical events in media content to promote peace and harmony within the multi-ethnic society (Lee & Mohd Safar, 2016). This strategy is part of the government's broader effort to reinforce the official Malaysian narrative through mass media.

However, this emphasis on government narratives has spurred the growth of films focusing on grassroots movements and collective voices. The documentary format, in particular, has become a vehicle for presenting alternative historical narratives. According to Rosentone (1992), historical films are not windows into the past but constructions of the past. In this process of historical reconstruction, the storyteller's role is crucial, as their perspective significantly influences the narrative. Therefore, understanding the mediation of historical narratives through documentaries is critical.

## Mediation of Memory

“Mediated memories” describe the media’s role in bridging the past and present (van Dijck, 2004). Documentaries transport audiences back to the era of British rule in Malaya, capturing the country’s history of resistance to foreign domination. These films share firsthand experiences and recollections of those who lived through the conflict. As individuals interpret their own lives, documentary films allow audiences to re-live these experiences, gaining a new perspective on history. The mediation of memory suggests that the past is accessible only through private and publicly articulated memories presented from the present perspective (Drake, 2003).

The phrase “We are unaware that we are but an echo,” by Halbwachs (1980) highlights how collective memory shapes individual recollection. Halbwachs coined the term “collective memory” and explained that it survives and gains strength from a community of individuals whose memories support each other. His foundational work has greatly influenced the study of cultural memory. This study resonates with Erlil (2008) definition of cultural memory, which posits that (1) no memory is purely individual but is always shaped by collective contexts, and (2) cultural memory represents a symbolic order where social groups use media, institutions, and behaviors to establish a shared past. The study examines how filmmakers traverse various dimensions—material (artifacts and media), mental (culturally defined ways of thinking and mentalities), and

social (people, social relations, institutions) aspects (Erlil, 2008)—to impact Malaysian social history significantly.

Halbwachs emphasizes that collective memory is always selective; different human groups create distinct collective memories, giving rise to diverse behavioral modes (Anheier & Isar, 2011). The films present an alternative history to the audience, exposing the consistent exclusion of minorities in the official narrative and how the concept of Malaysian identity is not inclusive. Foucault (1977) refers to such memory as a counter-memory. Counter-memory presents a new truth, a residual or resistant strain that challenges official versions (Spence & Avc, 2013). For instance, documentary films depicting the involvement of left-wing political groups or the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP) are banned from public screenings in Malaysia.

Malaysia’s censorship system is shaped by two major factors: the legacy of British colonialism and the nation’s postcolonial politics and development after separating from Singapore in 1965 (Freedom Film Network, 2022). The first Act specifically addressing film censorship in Malaya was the Cinematograph Films Ordinance of 1952, enforced by the Minister of Home Affairs (Mahmud et al., 2011). The Film Censorship Board (LPF) was established in 1954, playing a significant role in censoring films related to sensitive issues such as religion, sexuality, and violence (Rao, 2013).

In 1966, the LPF was established in Kuala Lumpur, implementing a censorship

system across Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak (Mahmud et al., 2011). On May 13, 1969, a racial riot erupted in Kuala Lumpur following the Malaysian general election, triggered by political party members' discontent. In response, the government introduced The Second Malaysia Plan to mitigate the riot's effects.

The plan aimed to foster a cohesive, socially and economically equal, and progressive Malaysian nation, adhering to the principles of *Rukunegara* (National Ideology) (Ministry of Economy, 1971). The *Rukunegara* comprises five principles: belief in God, loyalty to the king and country, upholding the Constitution, rule of law, and good behavior and morality (Lent, 1974). The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting established guidelines for media compliance with the Second Malaysia Plan and *Rukunegara* (Lent, 1974).

In the 1990s, the Malaysian government introduced *Wawasan 2020*, a vision to transform the country into a developed nation by 2020. This vision encompassed economic development and reforms in cultural regulation and media sectors (Freedom Film Network, 2022). In 2002, the Film Censorship Act was revised, mandating that films screened in Malaysian cinemas must be certified by the Board of Film Censorship. Decisions to alter, ban, or classify a movie are made by the Board of Censors, the Appeal Committee, and the Minister of Home Affairs (MOHA) (Rao, 2013; Wood et al., 2022).

As a result, many filmmakers exercise caution in their subject choices to avoid

government censure, often engaging in self-censorship. For instance, Fahmi Reza and Amir Muhammad chose not to submit their films to the Malaysian Censorship Board. Although available online, their documentaries are not broadcast on national television or screened in cinemas. Films like *The Last Communist* (Muhammad, 2006) and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung?* (Muhammad, 2007), both by Amir Muhammad and were banned for their communist themes. Similarly, Lau Kek-Huat's film *Absent without Leave* (Lau & Chen, 2017) was barred from the Malaysian Film Festival for documenting the history of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).

Counter-memory suggests that memory functions under the influence of challenges and alternatives (Davis & Starn, 2010). The advent of mobile digital video cameras and a strong desire for social change has inspired a new generation of film activists in Malaysia, tackling societal antagonism and oppression on different platforms (Ahmad et al., 2017). Personal memories, especially on-camera testimonials of violence and suffering, are potent tools for questioning state narratives (Spence & Avc, 2013). Freedom Filmfest, an annual human rights film festival in Malaysia, illustrates how film can be a powerful social institution representing national struggles and influencing public opinion regarding problems like death in custody, Indigenous rights, elections, and democracy (Danker, 2015).

Nichols (1983) notes that the documentary form, ideological contestation, and notions of realism have evolved

throughout film history. In the twenty-first century, the understanding of authenticity has shifted, moving away from single-perspective realities. This change fosters open dialogue and brings silenced opinions to the fore (Gul, 2018). Both personal and collective memories can reshape perceptions, adding depth and meaning to history. Documentaries provide a platform for showcasing diverse perspectives, allowing individuals who have personally experienced historical events to share their memories.

### **Identity and Belonging**

Personal reminiscences feature prominently in these documentary films, illuminating the shared experiences of those who fought for the country's independence. Shared history and its representations are key elements in constructing national identity (Rigney, 2018). According to Smith (1988), nations are forged from both civic and ethnic components; the civic component extends legal rights and duties across all strata and secures a homeland, while the ethnic component consists of historical memories and myths of descent.

Post-British colonization, Malaysia evolved into a "plural society," where racial and cultural distinctions were mirrored in occupational and economic roles (Zawawi, 2005). Malaysia is a country that embraces pluralism in all its aspects, including ethnicity, language, religion, culture, and others (Embong, 2001). Each ethnic community preserved its identity, influenced by implementing racial categorization

(Hagiwara, 1974). Race is an integral part of Malaysian identity, with racial categories recorded in birth certificates and identity cards, identifying citizens as Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others.

According to the Malaysian Census Report 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010), Malaysia's population stood at 28.3 million, consisting of 67.4% Bumiputera, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians, and 0.7% others. Malays were the dominant ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia, representing 63.1%. In Sarawak, Ibans constituted 30.3% of the total citizens, while Kadazan/Dusun comprised 24.5% in Sabah. The Malays and Indigenous groups, collectively known as Bumiputera or "sons of the soil," enjoy constitutionally protected 'special rights.'

Shamsul (1995) notes that empirical research and analyses on nation-building, national identity, and multiculturalism in Malaysia often concentrate on "Malay supremacy" and "Malay hegemony," with less attention to minority perspectives, which are most pronounced at the grassroots and in everyday life. Focusing on ordinary Malaysians offers a deeper insight into identity beyond the state-defined concept of nationhood. Loh (2019) posits that ethnic politics has had a significant impact on Malaysian politics. However, it is important to recognize that not all Malaysians are swayed by it. While some may be drawn to ethnic-based politics, others prefer multi-ethnic politics that are more class-based.

In Malaysia, national identity can also denote a "nation-state" and a united

Malaysian nation or *Bangsa Malaysia*, which also acknowledges the Bumiputera's special position constitutionally (Shamsul, 1995). Former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad introduced the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* as part of Vision 2020. Mohamad (1991) emphasized the necessity of affirmative action to create an equitable society, ensuring a fair ethnic balance in professions and major employment sectors and promoting the development of a robust Bumiputera commercial and industrial community.

According to Embong (2001), Malaysia underwent a significant transformation after gaining independence, resulting in a new middle class. This class brought new ideas for balancing the state, market, and civil society and introduced new forms of association and self-expression. Due to the rapid process of globalization, there is a convergence of values in consumption culture and lifestyle among the middle classes (Embong, 2007).

Anderson (2006) highlights that nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism are cultural constructs of an 'imagined community'; despite existing inequalities, the nation is perceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. The concept of pluralism in Malaysia has cultivated its unique sense of definition, progressing to encompass the notion of diversity, identity, and society to a more mature sense of belonging that has brought new ideas to the screens. Documentary film serves as an effective medium for mediating memories about origins and beginnings, and stories can

be a potent tool for fostering connection and loyalty (Rigney, 2018). The goal of interviewing the filmmakers is to understand their perspectives and motivations for making the films and to explore the role these films play in defining Malaysian identity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The interview process was extensive, spanning from 2018 to 2021. Five filmmakers consented to be interviewed: Lau Kek-Huat, Amir Muhammad, Fahmi Reza, Harun Rahman, and Lara Ariffin. These interviews aimed to offer insight into the creative filmmaking process. All interviewees are Malaysian-born filmmakers who produced historical documentaries about Malaysia, focusing on pre- and post-independence periods.

The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews, which allowed the interviewees to freely share their opinions. Ten questions were prepared by the researcher as guidelines, with the duration of each interview ranging from 20 minutes to an hour. The researcher submitted the questions and the consent form, completed by the participating filmmakers, to the University's Ethical Committee to ensure proper processes were followed during the interviews.

The researcher encouraged the interviewees to openly express their views on the subject matter. Understanding the emotions of the documentary filmmakers is crucial to fully appreciating the significance of their work. According to De Caro (2012),



the analysis of shorter narratives embedded in a larger interview (such as those found in everyday conversation) can be extremely valuable in understanding an interviewee's attitudes and, by extension, the general attitudes and perspectives of a group, culture, or period.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed into Word documents for analysis. Transcription software, such as Ottranscribe and Word transcription, included verbatim responses and timestamps. The main researcher completed the transcription to ensure the reliability of the data. The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The main researcher performed the coding using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), Quirkos. This CAQDAS software efficiently stores, organizes, manages, and reconfigures data to facilitate human analytic reflection (Saldana, 2009).

## DISCUSSION

Table 1, titled "Source Summary" (See Table 1), highlights the interviews conducted with filmmakers and the length of the interview transcripts. All filmmakers were interviewed individually, except for Lara Ariffin and Harun Rahman, who were interviewed together due to their collaboration in documentary film production. In total, 235 quotes were coded from the transcripts. Organizing the quotes and categorizing the codes was based on a hybrid approach, resulting in 92 codes (refer to Table 2, "List of Codes"). Some codes were merged and

included as sub-categories, reducing the total number of quotes to 205.

During the coding exercise, several codes, often particular and narrow, are expected to be created to capture the complexity and diversity of the data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Inductive coding allows for developing unexpected themes, potentially enriching the data analysis further (Roberts et al., 2019). The coding process continues as the researcher identifies new codes, refines existing ones, and reorganizes them into various categories to ensure alignment with theoretical frameworks.

The codes were grouped under similar categories defined by the researcher to reflect the issues highlighted in the interviews. Table 3, titled "Main Categories" (See Table 3), illustrates the 11 categories ranging from hope and challenges the filmmakers face to their feelings and experiences during film production. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the films and the filmmakers' intentions and roles as storytellers. According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), creating higher-level categories draws on existing theories and concepts related to the phenomenon.

The researcher reflected on the research objectives and theory to identify the key themes relevant to the interviews. Themes developed from codes are constructed at the intersection of the data, the researcher's subjectivity, theoretical and conceptual understanding, and training and experience (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The interview process and subsequent data analysis reveal

how the mediation of cultural memory impacts every aspect of the film production process. This study explores the process of creating historical documentaries, focusing on the roles of storytellers and cultural memory factors to understand the complexities of preserving and sharing collective history. The discussion aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the dimensions of cultural memory, material, mental, and social, in filmmaking (Table 4).

Table 1

*Sources summary*

Title	Author	Length	Quotes Count
Interview Fahmi Reza	R1	36644	62
Interview Lau Kek-Huat	R1	25713	92
Interview Amir Muhammad	R1	13072	16
Harun & Lara Interview	R1	38745	65
Total			235

*Source:* Authors' work

Table 2

*Lists of codes*

Category	Codes	Quotes Count
Hope	To show appreciation to the older generation (1), to reach out to a wider audience (4), to ensure history is accessible to the public (3), to change people's perception (1), to educate the audience (4), to preserve history (5), to attract the younger audience (4), to highlight alternative history (4)	26
Challenges	Filming secretly (2), a small number of interviewees (2), difficulty locating subjects (2), no permit (1), a film banned and censorship (5), a burden to tell the story (1), risks defying the authority (4), family opposition (1), small budget (1), reluctant to tell the story (2)	21
First generation	Why do they fight? (1), politically young-minded people (1), resisting foreign power (6), shared idealism (2), protecting their homeland (2), seeking a better life (4), camaraderie spirit (4), belongingness (4)	24
Generation gap	Severed family ties (9), reconciliation (5), respect for the older generation (2), appreciation towards history (1), different political ideology (4)	21

Table 2 (Continue)

Category	Codes	Quotes Count
Second or third generation (3)	Too young to remember (1), searching for family roots (1), money is more important than politics (3), lack of historical knowledge (4), resentment (4), taking for granted (2), ignorance (1)	19
Untold history (5)	Challenging the dominant history (4), alternative history (2), a fair representation of history (7), unexplainable circumstances (1)	19
People's stories (8)	Confronting the past (1), stories from ex-British soldiers (2), stories from the grassroots (4), and an abundance of stories in Malaysia (1), the stories are finally heard (2)	18
Do not belong	Choose to leave (2), accused of treachery (3), unacknowledged contribution (2), hidden identity (1), 2 <sup>nd</sup> class citizen (1), not allowed to return (4), fighting a lost cause (3)	16
Audience (2)	Film as historical facts (6), shared sentiments (1), positive receptions (5), people are unaware of the history (1)	15
Memory	Absence of memory (1), childhood memories (1), personal memories (1), memories of younger days (4), dying memories (3), war memories (1), suppressed memories (3)	14
Official History	Colonizers (3), ruling elites (1), propaganda (1), state-controlled narrative (5), biased narrative (2)	12
Total		205

Source: Authors' work

Table 3  
Main categories

Category	Description	Quotes Count
Hope	Filmmakers' motivation in producing the historical documentary film and what they would like to achieve from the production.	26

Table 3 (Continue)

Category	Description	Quotes Count
Challenges	Challenges that the filmmakers faced during production included censorship and film banning by the government.	21
First generation	The first generation refers to those who resided in Malaya and fought for independence.	24
Generation gap	The generation gap highlights the difference and reconciliation between the first, second and third generations.	21
Second or third-generation	Second of the third generation of Malaysians born after the country gained independence.	19
Untold history	The narration of history differs from the state-controlled narrative.	19
People's stories	People's stories refer to the historical narratives from the perspective of common folks/people.	18
Do not belong	Those who fought for Malaya and non- <i>Bumiputera</i> who were born in the country but feel they are not accepted as citizens.	16
Audience	Feedback from the local and foreign audiences in terms of the subject matter.	15
Memory	It encompasses the suppressed memory, absence of memory, childhood memory, the memory of younger days, dying memory, and personal memory.	14
Official History	State narrative or the dominant history	13
Total		205

Source: Authors' work

Table 4

*Dimensions of cultural memory and main themes*

Material Dimension	Mental Dimension	Social Dimension
Film Production	Memory	Identity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience</li> <li>• Challenges</li> <li>• Hope</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People's stories</li> <li>• Untold history</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First generation</li> <li>• Second or third-generation</li> <li>• Generation gap</li> <li>• Do not belong</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' work

## Material Dimension

The study explores the significance of documentaries as cultural artifacts. Ndede et al. (2020) assert that films serve as vital sites and artifacts, providing access to information about a community's history and heritage. The study illuminates the documentary production process and how these films bridge the past and present, captivating audiences with history through storytelling. Interviews were conducted with documentary filmmakers to understand their motivations for using documentaries to present alternative historical perspectives.

To delve into the film production process, filmmakers were asked several questions about their motivations and experiences, including: (1) What motivated you to produce the documentary? (2) Can you describe the process of producing the documentary? (3) What challenges did you encounter during production? (4) What were your hopes for the film? (5) How did audiences react to the documentary?

These interviews were instrumental in gaining insights into the objectives and methodologies of the film's production. Daniels (2022) notes that the mediation of memory and history in documentaries can be achieved through non-linear narratives and hybrid film strategies. These strategies may incorporate elements of realism, fiction, voice-overs, the refilming of analog footage, and various formats and resolutions. The filmmakers' ambition to create historical documentaries stems from their belief that this storytelling can engage viewers, particularly younger audiences.

The filmmakers' motivations varied but commonly included reaching a broader audience and appealing to younger viewers. As a realistic medium, the documentary film offers viewers a fresh historical perspective. Scottish filmmaker and theorist John Grierson defined a documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality." Plantinga (2005) suggests that while the line between non-fiction and documentary films is not always distinct, documentaries can be seen as a subset of non-fiction films distinguished by their greater aesthetic, social, rhetorical, and political ambitions than typical corporate or instructional videos.

The new generation of Malaysian filmmakers utilizes hybrid filmmaking techniques to create engaging stories that make history appealing. For instance, Fahmi Reza stated, "To make a compelling documentary, I treat it as a story rather than merely presenting facts. Otherwise, it would be a boring documentary because my target audience is young people who dislike documentaries and hate history. So, to make it compelling, I have to tell an interesting story" (F. Reza, personal communication, January 13, 2020). Fahmi Reza chose not to state facts; instead employed a 3-act structure standard in fiction films. In the film's opening, he introduced the protagonists (The Malaysians) and the antagonist (the British colony).

The drama peaked with the *Hartal* incident, which triggered widespread protests throughout Malaya. *Hartal* refers to the nationwide strike led by the All-Malayan Council Joint Action (AMCJA) and *Pusat*

*Tenaga Rakyat Melayu* (PUTERA) against the British proposal for the Federation of Malaya (Tan, 2015). The filmmaker used diverse materials such as interviews, footage, newspaper clippings, and scanned photos to recreate *Hartal's* memory, achieving impactful storytelling through well-structured narratives and evidence presentation.

In *The Big Durian*, Muhammad (2003) utilized staged interviews to highlight political tension in 1989. Absent without Leave by Lau and Chen (2017) serves as a semi-autobiographical account of his grandfather, a member of the MCP, exploring how the movement impacted his family and mediated the memory of the Communist insurrection in Malaya. In *The Malayan Emergency*, Rahman and Ariffin (2020) focused on personal memories from both sides of the conflict, providing a multifaceted view of historical events.

While producing their films, the filmmakers faced numerous challenges, including working within limited budgets, finding suitable subjects, and overcoming the reluctance of Malaysian Communist Party (MCP) members to participate in interviews due to the stigma surrounding communism. Lau Kek-Huat also encountered resistance from his father and other family members as he sought to uncover painful memories. Additionally, these filmmakers were often subject to censorship and faced barriers from the Malaysian film censorship board for challenging the dominant narratives.

This censorship predominantly affected independent filmmakers. From the onset

of their film productions, Fahmi Reza and Amir Muhammad did not intend to submit their films for approval by the Malaysian Film Censorship Board. However, with the advent of the Internet and the option to screen their films at private showings and film festivals, they could still reach their intended audiences. Lau Kek-Huat mentioned that his film was not permitted to be screened at the Malaysian Film Festival for unspecified reasons. He was surprised: “The first time I heard about the ban was because of the Malaysia Film Festival. We did not expect it to be banned because the content was okay—I mean, I was not deliberately touching on the topic politically, saying MCP is right, politically right. Moreover, if you realize, most of the people I interviewed were not leaders; they were just soldiers. That was my point. I wanted to show them as human beings, instead of presenting this topic in a particular way. That was my motive. I did not expect it to be banned. It was surprising because I never thought it would be banned” (K.-H. Lau, personal communication, July 18, 2018). The resistance these filmmakers encountered highlights the critical need to preserve people’s history.

These filmmakers aim to make history more accessible to the public and ensure it is not forgotten. The audience’s reception, locally and internationally, was overwhelmingly positive. Many local viewers could relate to the historical events in stories their parents and grandparents shared, affirming their sense of identity. For younger audiences, these documentaries

present history as a meaningful narrative, providing an emotional connection rather than perceiving it as a distant past.

The filmmakers also stressed the importance of presenting their perspectives. Harun Rahman said, “We were conscious of how these stories are told. From a Western perspective, like BBC or ITV, they have the financial funds...they want to cover their side of the story. They are not so interested in Malaysia. I think for us, moving forward, we want to tell Malaysian stories” (H. Rahman, personal communication, May 24, 2021). Harun Rahman emphasizes the need for local filmmakers to bring forward stories from the grassroots level.

Amir Muhammad observed that the response from the local audience was more enthusiastic than the international audience, which typically attracts a niche market (A. Muhammad, personal communication, January 23, 2020). Over the years, Southeast Asian scholars like Ahmad and Ee (2003) have underscored the significance of adopting Asia-centric viewpoints in historical documentation. In Malaysian filmmaking, filmmakers must create a counter-narrative to ensure local voices are heard and represented.

### **Mental Dimension**

The mental aspect of cultural memory highlights culturally defined ways of thinking and mentalities (Erll, 2008). The study of memory is closely linked to the history of mentalities, which shapes people’s understanding of the past through

beliefs, practices, and symbols (Confino, 1997). The field of mentalities in history focuses on ordinary people’s everyday attitudes and culture (Hutton, 1981) and is sometimes referred to as cultural history (Andrea, 1991). The history of mentalities emphasizes that the history of the powerless and illiterate is as vital as that of the elite classes. However, it often unfolds at a different pace and with a different mindset (Andrea, 1991).

This study examines the mental aspect of cultural memory, concentrating on the depiction of people’s history and its significance in amplifying the voices of minorities. Sharif (2022) underscores the importance of preserving local history and enriching the national historical narrative by investigating aspects and locations previously overlooked in national historiography. The goal is to enrich, rather than contest, the official history by emphasizing the significance of memory. This discussion focuses on personal stories that reveal hidden aspects of history to the audience.

In an interview, Amir Muhammad reflected on why he directed a historical documentary over other topics related to Malaysia. Amir Muhammad recalled his teenage years and memories of Prebet Adam, saying, “I remember certain things from my teenage years, like Prebet Adam, and that was the starting point of my interest. I was curious not so much about Prebet Adam but about the circumstances around that time. How could the country panic so easily, and that kind of thing?”

So, it started from a personal experience; even though I'm not a direct participant, I was affected because I was around then. Initially, it didn't occur to me as political or non-political" (A. Muhammad, personal communication, January 23, 2020). These reflections shaped his understanding of the nation's escalating political instability, inspiring him to direct *The Big Durian*, among other documentaries.

Halbwachs et al. (1980) propose that individuals can reconstruct memories through interactions, as memories are often vicariously experienced. Documentary films act like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, aiding audiences to remember stories by filling historical voids. Erll (2008) posits that social groups construct a shared past, and individuals recall within a sociocultural framework. Memory plays a crucial role in shaping self-awareness (identity) at both personal and collective levels (Assman, 2008).

In developing their narratives, filmmakers focused on sourcing and presenting subject-centered arguments. Personal accounts and expert interviews offer an alternative narrative contrasting the state-controlled version. Bearing witness enables historical memory, underscoring the malleable nature of memories (Kwa, 2008; Spence & Avc, 2013). Films emphasizing cultural memories can profoundly impact audiences, resonating with a specific time's shared beliefs and cultural values (Bordwell et al., 2017). Foucault and Lotringer (1989) argue that memory is crucial to resistance;

manipulating someone's memory can influence their behavior.

Fahmi Reza pointed out that mainstream media's depiction of Malaysian history primarily highlights the "elitist" or "right" movement led by Western-educated Malay elites, particularly the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) (F. Reza, personal communication, January 13, 2020). Arifin (2014) notes that, in addition to Malay nationalist movements, various right-wing, leftist, and communist movements also fought for independence from British colonial rule. One of Fahmi Reza's motivations for producing *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (Reza, 2007) was to educate the audience about the left-wing party's movement and document its history.

In Malaysia, official history often excludes the contributions of leftist and communist parties, and this aspect of history is not included in school curriculums. In an interview, Fahmi Reza revealed that the suppressed history of the *Hartal* movement on October 20, 1947, was recently added to Malaysian school history textbooks following the release of his documentary, *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (Reza, 2007). He remarked, "The role of the history of the left is finally included in the history textbook (form four). I contributed in some small way; the documentary contributed" (F. Reza, personal communication, January 13, 2020). He believes that this historical documentary significantly influenced the Malaysian audience before 2008.



The 12th general election 2008 marked a significant shift in Malaysian politics, with an unprecedented cross-ethnic vote against the ruling government. This election led to the opposition alliance winning control of five state governments and ending the government's two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time (Fee & Appudurai, 2011). Malaysians were generally optimistic that this political change signaled a move toward a more open and transparent government where public voices could be heard without censorship. However, strict censorship laws continued to regulate the Malaysian film industry heavily, encompassing bureaucratic procedures, regulatory legislation, and cultural and religious constraints, making the concept of film as a platform for ideological contestation largely theoretical (Ahmad et al., 2017).

In *The Malayan Emergency*, Rahman and Ariffin (2010) employed conversational techniques to present both the “right” and the “left” political perspectives, allowing history to speak for itself. By focusing on ordinary people, the film enables audiences to connect with the subject matter and appreciate living in today's multicultural society. The emphasis on multiracial representation in documentary films prompts viewers to reflect on belonging. Harun Rahman observed, “Malaya at that time was very different from today's Malaysia, especially in terms of the strength of nationalism” (H. Rahman, personal communication, May 24, 2021). He noted that documentary films can evoke a wide range of emotions, including laughter, anger, and tears, in their audiences.

## **Social Dimension**

The social dimensions of memory emphasize that memory is not solely an individual process but a collective one. Collective memory underscores the relationship between the individual, society, culture, and memory (Sadowski, 2016). It must be understood within the social frame, which highlights the implicit or explicit framework of shared concerns, values, experiences, and narratives among people in a society (Assman, 2008).

The filmmakers are intimately connected to the community and history they depict. As second—or third-generation Malaysians born after independence, their drive to create historical documentaries stems from their experiences growing up in a multiracial society and witnessing the nation's progress and challenges. Historical documentaries promote reconciliation and understanding by bridging diverse backgrounds through shared experiences.

Shamsul (1995) points out a growing disparity in political views and beliefs among various ethnic groups among younger Malaysians. This lack of awareness about historical and contemporary issues challenges fostering a cohesive and unified nation. Blackburn (2009) suggests that reflecting on a shared past and demonstrating a willingness to make sacrifices during conflicts can significantly strengthen a collective national identity.

These films underscore the importance of cultural memory in discussions about identity, posing questions such as “Why do people fight for their country?” and

“What impact does this have on national perception?” They also highlight the generational gap between immigrants who fought for Malaya and those born after independence. History may seem distant to the younger generation, born into an independent Malaysia. Filmmakers like Harun Rahman, Lara Ariffin, Fahmi Reza, and Lau Kek-Huat have noted that many Malaysians are unaware of their country’s past (F. Reza, January 13, 2020; H. Rahman & L. Ariffin, personal communication, May 24, 2021; K.-H. Lau, July 18, 2018). Their documentaries have sparked interest among locals, encouraging them to explore their history further. A sense of shared memory, history, and culture can aid nation-building (Blackburn, 2009).

Mediating memories through social interactions aids recall. According to Halbwachs (1980), our memories are often shared and remembered with others, suggesting we are never truly alone with our memories. The group imagines its unity and uniqueness through a shared memory of its past (Assmann et al., 1995). Oral histories in documentaries give a voice to those often excluded from historical records (Hepp & Stine, 2015). For example, Fahmi Reza was motivated to direct his documentary because of the widespread ignorance about the *Hartal* movement (F. Reza, personal communication, January 13, 2020).

Film culture, intertwined with rituals of remembrance (Grainge, 2003), redefines social structures and connects imagined communities (Rigney, 2018). Remembering involves not just reminiscing but also

recognizing what has been forgotten. Cognitive theories describe memory as our ability to recall the past and our tendency to forget it (van Dijk, 2008). The challenge for the second and third generations is to embrace their identity, often feeling detached from their past.

Lau Kek-Huat’s motivation to produce *Absent without Leave* stemmed from his limited knowledge of his family history. He said, “I never met my grandfather. My father also had never met him... Originally, it was about my grandfather, but not intentionally about my father. At first, I didn’t expect to put so much about my relationship with my father” (K.-H. Lau, personal communication, July 18, 2018). He embarked on a journey to explore his grandfather’s background in the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), uncovering stories of ex-MCP members who fought against British colonialism. This exploration also led him to discover family history that had never been discussed within his family.

The documentary altered Lau’s perception of identity and belonging. Feeling marginalized in his own country, he gained new insights into privilege and sacrifice through his encounters with ex-MCP members (K.-H. Lau, personal communication, July 18, 2018). According to Smith (1988), a nation outside the Western context encompasses shared ancestry, democratic solidarity, common customs, languages, and a shared history.

The act of remembering underscores the significance of belonging. Harun Rahman discovered that ex-members of the

Malayan Communist Party joined not out of ideological commitment but to fight for independence, emphasizing the importance of belonging over political ideology. Rahman shared, “When we interviewed the communists, they mentioned that they were not really into establishing a communist state. They wanted the British out. To them, they were very nationalist. In that sense, they were not fighting for communism but for Malaya” (H. Rahman, personal communication, May 24, 2021).

Rahman also stresses the importance of presenting all perspectives and allowing the audience to form their opinions (H. Rahman, personal communication, May 24, 2021). Assmann (2008) posits that the recent surge in interest in memory reflects a broader trend of wanting to reclaim the past as an essential part of the present. This trend includes a desire to reassess and revalue individual biographies and position oneself in a broader historical context. It emphasizes how the social dimension of cultural memory affects our understanding of history.

## CONCLUSION

The research findings highlight the filmmaker’s role as the storyteller in preserving people’s history, as well as the importance of cultural memory in historical narratives. The documentary mediates between the past and present, allowing the audience to rediscover their original roots and identities. It raises concerns about how the absence of people’s history from official material history affects their sense of belonging. The documentary creates a

platform for critical dialogue on Malaysian history, as well as an alternative history, to the audiences in a rigid atmosphere where the history of minorities is ignored.

Alternative history uncovers the inconsistency between the people’s history and the country’s dominant narrative. While the latter focuses on politicians and leaders fighting for independence, individual stories are often overlooked. Despite making significant progress in development since becoming independent, Malaysia still faces issues with racial politics and national unity, and minorities continue to feel ignored.

Documentary films serve as an arena wherein meanings are contested and negotiated as ordinary Malaysians share past challenges and future hopes for their country. The filmmakers emphasize the sense of solidarity in the Malayan multiracial society to encourage the audience to reexamine the past to build a better Malaysia. At the end of each interview, when asked about their hopes in producing the documentary films, the filmmakers provided a modest response. Their motivation to produce these films is to share them with a wider audience. They emphasized the importance of preserving history, as many stories gradually fade.

## Implication for Theory (Theory of Cultural Memory) and Practice

The interdisciplinary field of cultural memory encompasses media studies, social and political science, psychology, history, and ongoing research into new areas. The theory of cultural memory has important implications for understanding the role of

the filmmaker in the filmmaking process and the significance of cultural memory in providing audiences with alternative narratives.

Based on the interviews' findings, the filmmaker's role as a storyteller is critical for preserving and highlighting people's history while ensuring that it is not forgotten. The filmmakers found it their responsibility to educate the audience, particularly Malaysia's younger generation, so that they could connect with their history. Documentaries have emerged as an important space for meaningful negotiation, contestation, and the presentation of alternative history.

Cultural heritage and memories are essential in creating collective identities for individuals, groups, and communities (Apaydin, 2020). Cultural memory has a significant impact on Malaysia's marginalized and minority communities because it allows them to rediscover their history and heritage. Malaysia's marginalized and minority communities, especially the younger generation born after the country's independence, have found it difficult to find a balance between integrating into society and transcending their past. They risk losing connection with their cultural heritage and Malaysian identity.

The emphasis on cultural memory allows people's history to be thoroughly documented and preserved, ensuring that it is passed down to future generations. It, in turn, fosters a thriving discussion on alternative history, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the past and

its complexities and facilitating ongoing conversations about identity and belonging.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The study is limited to documentary films that concentrate on pre- and post-independence periods. The researcher chose a small sample of filmmakers to interview because qualitative research requires in-depth study and is time-consuming. From initially contacting the filmmakers through the completion of the analysis, the interview procedure took four years. The study does not cover the entire history of Malaysia; it specifically concentrates on Peninsular Malaysia.

One area of concentration for future research on historical documentaries is the work of Malaysian filmmakers from East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), who are actively involved in chronicling the history of their people. The union of Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia is also an important historical landmark. It is also worth highlighting the work of the younger Malaysian filmmakers to understand their historical perspectives. The local academics' investigation of Malaysian history could contribute to a greater understanding of the past and the present to ensure that the people's history is not forgotten.

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