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**Editors**

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Norzarina Mohd Zaharim  
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Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh

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## Locating the Voices of Malaysian Independent Documentary Filmmakers

Candida Jau Emang<sup>a</sup>, Mahyuddin Ahmad<sup>b</sup> & Adrian Lee Yuen Beng<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

<sup>b</sup> School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Pulau Pinang

Email of corresponding author: candidajau@gmail.com

### Abstract

Since 2000, the advent of digital filmmaking in Malaysia has become the catalyst to the rise of independent documentary filmmakers. This phenomenon has garnered a steady interest amongst young and urban filmmakers led by Amir Muhammad who has released documentaries about Malaysians such as *The Big Durian* (2004), and *The Last Communist* (2006), *Village People Radio Show* (2007). These works, then paved the way for more independent (indie) documentary filmmakers whose works are aligned with the increased concerns about human rights, social and political injustice, environmental issues as well as displaced community. Despite their efforts, there still remains a lacking in terms of acceptance by local cinemas or TV stations towards the documentaries by such independent filmmakers. Nevertheless, their presence continues to stir a steady debate as to where these talented documentary filmmakers are headed to in the context of social activism and social engagement that seem to rise significantly among the urbanites. This too, led to the discussion on public discourse about how documentaries are capable of providing spaces for discussion and engagement. This article, therefore, maps the works of selected documentary filmmakers while discussing how their works emerge as a site for negotiating human rights, social and political issues in Malaysia today.

**Keywords:** Independent documentary filmmakers, social activism, public sphere, Malaysia

### 1. Introduction

The recent development in Malaysia socio-political landscapes takes a very interesting turn that not only it sparks sentiments among the publics, but it also has opened up space for activism activities to sprout from various social movement groups including the Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs). While Malaysia enjoy some significant developments in its socioeconomic status, however, the issue about human rights, race supremacy, social and political injustice, religion, and corruption are still lurking in the society, and even more apparent in the recent years. The impact of the aforementioned issues has brought Malaysians to react and respond, hence the social movement and activism in many forms have escalating significantly. The advancement of digital technology has too, one of the catalysts to empower the visibility of social movements including the existence of the independent filmmakers in Malaysia to which it plays an integral part in launching the career for some of these filmmakers, as well as facilitating the growth of their filmmaking activities (Khoo 2008; Khoo 2001; Irawanto 2014).

## **2. A brief overview on social movements and NGOs in Malaysia**

The growing concern over socio-political development in the civil society today quickly pick-up by many NGOs that are umbrella under social movements, thus make it necessary to look briefly into its history. Since independence, Malaysia has had facing numerous socio-political upheavals that lead to the rise of social movements related to the human rights movement, environmental movement, women's rights, religions and many more. At the new millennium, social activism through documentary, joined the growing list of social movements through its association with the human rights NGOs. There are many contributing factors that happened in the country that cause the movements. Apart from the May 13th, 1969 incident, the implementation of New Economy Policy (NEP), National Culture Policy and other social policies that affect the civil rights in Malaysia (Soong, 2005), many recent articles on civil society, social movements, and NGOs in Malaysia, have stated that the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from his post as a deputy prime minister in September 1998 was one of the catalysts of change in civil society that leads to *Reformasi* movement in the new millennium ( Verma, 2002; Khoo, 2008; Case, 2010; Balassiano & Pandi, 2013). On the other hand, Weiss (2003, p.7) mentions that the rise of social movements in Malaysia which took place since early twentieth century largely due to various issues related to “welfare, religious, commercial and communal progress and self-help bodies”. Rodan (2014) who critically studied the NGOs development in Malaysia which association is with the political parties are becoming distinct in recent years. He further mentioned that the segmentation of races based on political parties are mirrored through the NGOs in which the secular NGOs are predominantly occupied by the Chinese and Indians ethnicities, while Malays mostly occupied the rural-based Muslim organisations. Social movement are defined among other things as an outcry for democracy (Small, 1897), a movement that is collectively organized or staged to promote or to resist the changes (McAdam, 1982 as cited from de Souza, 2010) and “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities?” (Diani, 1992). Social movement and NGOs occurred within the global civil society movement (de Souza 2010).

The NGOs, an organization that operates on a basis of a non-profit organization, plays a significant role in various fields and functions. This article, partly will discuss the operation of the independent (indie) documentary filmmakers within the context of social movement in negotiating issues that are ignored, and marginalised due to political sensitivity. While most documentaries produced in Malaysia are for public screening through mainstream broadcasting and government controlled channels, there are numerous other documentary films will not enjoy the same opportunity. Hence, this article seeks to locate the voices of the independent documentary filmmakers in playing their role as an advocate and mediator in discussing marginalised issues that are not publicly discussed or screened through the mainstream broadcast channels or local cinemas. It is within this context, the partnership between the independent documentary filmmakers and the local NGOs is established. The result of this partnership has contributed to social engagement and discussion among the filmmakers and the communities, and that social documentary film is an opportunity and platform for public sphere advocacy.

## **3. The independent documentary filmmaking in Malaysia**

It has been widely reported that the advent of digital technology in early 2000 sets a remarkable development in filmmaking landscape in Malaysia. This is the period that sees a new generation of young and mostly urban filmmakers emerge, and as a consequence, a brand new filmmaking style and community is quickly formed. This new generation of filmmakers is led by Amir Muhammad together with Tan Chui Mui, Deepak Kumaran Menon, James Lee, Yasmin Ahmad,

and Ho Yu Hang (Mahyuddin, et al., 2016) and hence the label independent (indie) filmmaking movement (Khoo 2007) exists to refer to this group. The group expanding rapidly by producing films in various forms and genres, from short narratives, experimental, to short documentaries. These indie filmmakers approach towards filmmaking attract not only those with a formal filmmaking background, but it also garnered interest from the self-taught filmmakers (Khoo 2007). The increased availability and accessibility of the Internet have too benefited these young and enthusiastic filmmakers to gain knowledge and exposure via various websites and YouTube that dedicate its space for self-learning or tutorial online.

The indie filmmakers are sometimes overlapping with the independent documentary filmmakers. It is coincidence that the new indie documentary filmmakers is too, led by Amir Muhammad together with Ho Yu Hang, Haanim Bamadhaj, Tan Chui Mui, Khoo Eng Yow, Zan Azlee, Mohd. Naguib Razak and Chi Too (Khoo, 2010). Despite having been operating on limited funds and budgets, these filmmakers strive to produce documentaries that were not only appreciated by the local film community but these filmmakers were too recognised at the international arena. Amir's *Big Durian* (2003), has won a few awards from international film festival circuits like Yamagata International Film Festival and Vancouver International Film Festival in year 2003 and 2004 respectively (Anon., n.d.).

As to when and why are these indie documentary filmmakers started to film marginalised and isolated subjects, one has to trace the history from the beginning of their movement. The group exists not long after the political unrest due to the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from his post as the deputy prime minister in September 1998. The sacking leads to the *Reformasi* movement that fight for a change in the society. The plead for political transparencies sweep through into the new millennium and in some way or another, have influenced the young filmmakers with a 'uncompromising desire of creating change in the society' (Mahyuddin, et al., 2016, p. 3). The political suppression, media controlled and political interference as well as the curbing of freedom of speech alongside the exposure gained from the foreign counterpart on the notion of democracy and human rights, contribute to the activism activities among these filmmakers thriving, and translated into the kind of documentaries that they produced. They depict the marginalised issues, mostly to do with the violation of human rights, discrete community whom are badly affected by the development and modernization, LGBT, religions, environmental issues and many more sensitive issues that will not be screened by mainstream broadcast stations, be it government owned or private stations. The depiction of subject matters itself, has indirectly connecting these filmmakers to the NGOs, whose movements are based on the human rights movement and justice in the civil society. Hence, there is no doubt that the operation of these filmmakers footed strongly in social activism, thanks to the supports they received from the NGOs, such as KOMAS.

#### **4. The linkages between the independent documentary filmmakers and the NGOs**

KOMAS is one of the leading NGOs that fight for the human rights movements and its mission is "to promote and enhance democracy and equality through the use of popular media? (Anon., n.d.). It recognizes that documentary is one of the effective ways to spread awareness and to propagate issues that are ignored by the authority. Social realities in the civil society needs to be highlighted, hence KOMAS stands as an advocate to encourage the filmmaker to document and critique social realities without fear or hesitation. Generally, the role of documentary in the context of social activism is expanding steadily all over the world. Equipped with their filmmaking tools, they document issues that are being sidelined.

It is noted that social documentary provides spaces for the filmmakers and its audiences to engage in discussion. Viviani (2014, pp.107-123) states that “documentary films have an impact on audiences, whose members are consequently motivated to engage in discussion and action.” In addition, Aguayo (2005, p.23) mentions that documentary has “potential to create the conditions for public deliberation, and to transform the once consumption oriented medium into an interactive communication process.” Therefore, the existence of the young and mostly urban independent documentary filmmakers, at first might be inspired by the advancement of technology in early 2000, however, as they becoming more exposed to the international issues and agenda spread through either by social media or the Internet, the group flourished into a community whom shared the same vision and interest, and genuinely supporting each other (Khoo, 2007). Through this activism did they find their purpose, and through their international exposure it has inevitably sparked more awareness. Throughout the process, these filmmakers learn “to better comprehend the current political and cultural suppression in their own country such as state film regulations and censorship” (Mahyuddin, et al., 2016, p. 10).

The strong linkages and networking with the NGOs, in such instance, KOMAS, has liberated the social documentaries in Malaysia. This is done through its own established film festival called FreedomFilmFestival (FFF). This annual festival was launched in 2003, dedicates its platform for filmmakers to screen and discuss their films with strong human rights as its theme. It screens the documentary that needs not to go through the censorship board, and most importantly, it has provided a platform for alternative issues to be screened. This platform too has encouraged discussion to take place between the filmmakers and the film community, hence the notion of public discourse through documentary.

In locating the voices of these filmmakers in the context of social activism, one of the film to highlight is *Lot, Umah Am* (2011). This short documentary was directed by Liaw Pey Wen and produced by KOMAS is to highlight the plight of the lesser known indigenous tribe called the Orang Asli Seletar. Orang Seletar have resided the Straits of Johor for many generations and is now facing the displacement due to industrial and residential development along the Straits of Johor. Being a community whose identity is tied up with the sea, there is a growing concern over their fate in the future. Elsewhere in the world, through industrial expansions, there are many native communities being affected and facing the same issue. In China for example, there were hundreds of thousands people have been displaced and lost their thousand years of civilisations due to the three gorges dam in Yangtze River, the biggest and most ambitious dam project in the world that sees an entire city submerged in water (Up the Yangtze, 2007). The plight of the discrete community will not be highlighted through a documentary produced by the mainstream producers. Hence, Liaw together with her production crews approached and engaged with the community through this documentary.

Apart from KOMAS, Peoples Documentary Foundation formed by Chou Z Lam actively producing social documentaries that highlighted the plights of the local native community that are affected by the environmental destruction also due to economic and industrial expansion. One of his documentaries entitled *The Bakun Trilogy* (2010), a social documentary that examines the social impacts on the affected Orang Ulu community in Belaga due to Bakun Dam. The series consists of two parts, originally produced for the RTM's TV2 under the Chinese program called *Galeri Mandarin Nasional* (Anon., 2011). However due to its content and disclosures, the documentary was banned and eventually shelved. The government controlled over the media have left many individuals turn to activism and use documentary as the tool.

*The Bakun Trilogy*, unlike Liaw's *Lot, Umah Am*, highlights the social impacts on the local community years after Bakun dam was completed. There were many issues faced by the community, including the land ownership and schools that are located far from the resettlement estate provided by the government. Through one of the interviews, a resident highlighted his predicament for having to pay about RM300 a month for his children's school transportation. Being a displaced community with a limited source of incomes, this has left them with no choice but to allow some of their children to drop school. In this instance, again, the independent documentary filmmakers played a significant role by exposing this marginalised issues through the tools they know best which is documentary. As the civil society becoming more aware of the importance of freedom of speech and human rights, there will be a continuous effort to highlight the socio-political issues that suppressed the society today in hoping that the 'fight' will be heard and notified by the necessary party.

## 5. Conclusion

There have been many articles discussed the visibility of the independent documentary filmmakers in Malaysia. It is time to critically assess the movement and the contribution of these independent documentary filmmakers in creating awareness through documentary as a tool of social activism. KOMAS, the leading human rights NGOs through its own grass root film festival, Freedomfilmfest (FFF) has provided a platform for alternative issues to be exposed, creating awareness among the civil society and continuously supporting effort to document social realities among the community. In relation to that, the effort and partnership created among the filmmakers and the NGOs need to be examined closely in order to establish perhaps a new framework, particularly in the developing countries, such as Malaysia. The other crucial area that need to focus on is distribution, decision making and sustainability, as these issues may affect the future of these independent directors. Despite the continuous exposure via various means of social media and the Internet, what important is the direction of this movement within the context of nation building and activism. The fact that social documentary is fast growing throughout the world. *Lot, Umah Am* and *The Bakun Trilogy* may have been produced many years now, but a full understanding of their impacts requires further study within the civil society under the banner of social activism that thrives to empower the marginalised community.

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