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ANIMATING HERITAGE: A STUDY OF CULTURAL THEMES IN MALAYSIAN ANIMATED FILM

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, Malaysia has produced numerous animated films that integrate cultural elements into both development and production processes. Eastern animation, particularly in Malaysia, often employs visual storytelling enriched with distinctive cultural characteristics. This continuity of cultural themes, from early productions such as Hikayat Sang Kancil (1980s) to recent works like Ejen Ali The Movie 2, reflects their enduring significance in shaping national animation. While previous studies have acknowledged cultural representations in Malaysian media, scholarly research focusing specifically on cultural themes in animated films remains limited in both scope and depth. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, employing indirect observation and purposive sampling of eight Malaysian animated films spanning different phases of the industry's development. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring cultural elements and their narrative and visual functions. The findings reveal six key cultural elements traditional Malaysian culture, language, arts and crafts, social etiquette, traditional attire, and symbolic visual representation each illustrated through selected film examples across the four phases of Malaysian animation (Shah et al., 2021). These elements demonstrate not only continuity but also adaptation to contemporary animation practices. The study underscores the broader implications of embedding cultural heritage within animation, including the preservation and revitalisation of cultural identity, the enhancement of audience engagement through culturally resonant content, and the stimulation of industry innovation by merging tradition with digital technologies. For practitioners, the study recommends that animators consciously integrate cultural motifs in character and world-building, policymakers support culturally grounded productions, and educators utilise animated films as tools for cultural learning and identity formation.

Keywords: *Cultural Elements, Malaysian Animation, Storytelling, Malaysian Cultural Themes, Eastern Animation*

1.   INTRODUCTION

The evolution of animation in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, signifies a transformation deeply interwoven with both historical and contemporary storytelling practices. This transformation is evidenced by the transition from traditional techniques, such as shadow puppetry exemplified by *Wayang Kulit*, to modern methodologies involving advanced digital technologies like Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI). As societies in the region harness animation's capabilities to articulate cultural narratives, Malaysian animation is recognized for its vibrancy and dynamism, embodying both tradition and innovation (Ali, 2021; Khalis & Mustaffa, 2017).Historically, the foundation of Malaysian animation can be traced back to its traditional art forms, which served as cultural vehicles for moral and societal teachings. The debut of *Hikayat Sang Kancil*, the first animated film released in 1983, marked a milestone in this journey, catalyzing the evolution of the local animation sector. This film not only showcased the potential of animation as an artistic medium but also paved the way for subsequent productions, including noteworthy contemporary works such as *Geng: The Adventure Begins* (2009) and *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* (2016). The response to these productions highlights how animation can serve not only as entertainment but also as a pivotal mechanism for expressing cultural identity while embedding socio-cultural values (Fadzil & Dalal, 2020).

Furthermore, animation serves as a crucial reminder of cultural heritage, particularly as globalization threatens to overshadow local narratives. Research indicates that animation reflects societal values and beliefs; thus, its role in cultural preservation is critical Khalis & Mustaffa, 2017) . The incorporation of traditional elements into modern narratives ensures that folklore and oral histories remain relevant, effectively bridging generational gaps (Fadzil & Dalal, 2020). Notably, while there is a rich tapestry of cultural content embedded within Malaysian animations, there exists a gap in systematic academic analyses that contextualize these elements through comprehensive thematic studies (Amran et al., 2023). The need for such analyses is underscored by the recognition of Malaysian animation's rich evolution, spanning from formative influences through significant productions like *Hikayat Sang Kancil* to recent successes like *Ejen Ali The Movie 2*. This study aims to identify and analyze the cultural elements embedded in Malaysian animated films, exploring their evolution over the four identified phases of Malaysian animation development. In doing so, the study seeks to illuminate not only the artistic evolution but also the implications of these cultural representations for audience engagement, cultural preservation, and the growth of the animation industry

Engaging with these themes is not merely an academic endeavor but holds broader implications for the preservation of cultural heritage and the cultivation of the local animation industry. Findings from studying these cultural representations will contribute to

understanding how they engage audiences while informing policies and educational practices related to the animation sector (Ali, 2021). Thus, this exploration promises to address existing literature gaps and enrich the discourse about animation's essential role in the cultural dynamics of Southeast Asia. In conclusion, a systematic exploration of Malaysian animation, through the lens of cultural identity and technological evolution, can provide critical insight into the industry's development and its socio-cultural implications. As Malaysia navigates its unique position in the global animation landscape, the interplay of tradition and technology remains a central theme that must be critically examined to ensure that its cultural narratives thrive in an increasingly digital age (Ali, 2021; Harun & Rahim, 2010; Khalis & Mustaffa, 2017).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Semiotic theory for Animation Film

The exploration of cultural studies and representation theory, particularly in the context of animation, situates itself firmly within theoretical discourse established by significant thinkers such as Stuart Hall. Hall's work anchors a critical understanding of representation as an integral part of cultural processes, where language operates as a vehicle for meaning-making that can both reflect and shape cultural identities (Kasih et al., 2022). The cultural representation discussed by Hall underscores that identity is constructed not in isolation but in relation to others, presenting a dynamic interplay between self and other (Kasih et al., 2022). This understanding of representation is key when analyzing Malaysian animation, which often draws upon cultural narratives and social constructs prevalent within Malaysian society.

In the context of animation, semiotics becomes a pivotal dimension. Figures like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco have expanded the semiotic framework to dissect how visual narratives communicate deeper meanings beyond mere aesthetics (Kasih et al., 2022). Barthes' analysis highlights the layers of meaning that can be derived from imagery, suggesting that animation serves as a narrative tool that constructs and conveys cultural significance through its visual language. Eco, conversely, emphasizes the role of interpretation in the reception of visual texts, indicating that the viewer's cultural and personal background influences their understanding of animated works (Kasih et al., 2022). Thus, when examining Malaysian animation, a semiotic lens can unveil the encoded cultural messages that permeate its narratives.

Heritage communication theory also plays a prominent role in framing this analysis. This theoretical approach focuses on how cultural heritage is transmitted and represented in various media, which is particularly relevant for animated forms that reflect and shape

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collective cultural identities. This is pivotal in Malaysian animation, where traditional motifs, folklore, and contemporary issues converge, allowing for a rich tapestry of cultural expression that resonates with both local and global audiences.

Malaysian Animation Studies

The historical overview of Malaysian animation reveals a trajectory marked by local craftsmanship and evolving artistic influences. The inception of the Malaysian animation landscape can be traced back to the formation of the Malayan Film Unit in 1946, which set the groundwork for the production of animated films in the country (Ali, 2021). This early establishment laid a foundation for the unique development of animation within Malaysia, characterized by the interaction of indigenous storytelling forms and modern filmmaking techniques.

The development of the Malaysian animation industry can be conceptualized through four distinct phases, as outlined by (Ali, 2021). The first phase encompasses its nascent years, where animation primarily served documentary purposes, gradually transitioning into experimental and narrative-focused productions in the second phase. The third phase reflects the emergence of commercially successful animated films, revealing a growing domestic market. Finally, the current phase is characterized by a convergence of technology and artistic innovation, reflecting global trends while maintaining localized cultural storytelling (Ali, 2021). This multi-phased evolution contextualizes Malaysian animation as a product of both historical circumstance and cultural hybridization, revealing the intricate ways in which the industry has adapted to local needs while also engaging with global narratives.

The journey of Malaysian animation demonstrates a unique fusion of Western influences and traditional Malay narratives. While the early works were heavily inspired by Western animation styles, contemporary practitioners are increasingly drawing upon local folklore, language, and cultural motifs to create a distinct national identity. Recent scholar shows that media representation in Malaysia is moving towards more nuanced depictions of identity and marginalized groups, thereby highlighting the need for cultural readings that go beyond mere aesthetics (Yaakup, 2024). This development signals a growing recognition of the importance of cultural authenticity and representation within the animation sector, positioning Malaysia within the broader discourse of global animation studies.

Cultural Themes in Animation

Malaysian animation is rich in cultural themes, frequently encapsulating elements such as language, folklore, traditional attire, architecture, and symbolism. The role of language in

animation extends beyond mere dialogue; it becomes a tool for cultural expression, showcasing Malaysia's linguistic diversity and heritage (Ali, 2021). This is crucial in animated works that seek to reflect the multilingual fabric of Malaysian society, where different languages coalesce, contributing to the richness of storytelling.

Folklore remains a primary source of inspiration for animators, with traditional tales being reinterpreted through animation to engage contemporary audiences. Themes extracted from folklore not only entertain but serve to educate viewers about cultural values, ethics, and social norms prevalent within Malay society (Ali, 2021). Furthermore, traditional attire and architectural styles depicted in animation contribute to a visual narrative that communicates cultural identity. The meticulous representation of these cultural markers not only enriches the aesthetic appeal but also provides a socio-cultural context that viewers can appreciate (Ali, 2021).

Comparative insights from Eastern animation traditions, particularly from Japan and Korea, illuminate the unique characteristics of Malaysian animation. Similar to Japanese anime, Malaysian animation often incorporates fantastical elements combined with realism, rooted deeply in cultural specifics. However, unlike Japanese animation, which has a well-established global identity, Malaysian animation is still carving its niche. Insights into Korean animation, known for its global influence through the Hallyu wave, present a comparative canvas for understanding how cultural narratives in animation can transcend borders while maintaining local authenticity (Ali, 2021). Such comparative frameworks can highlight the strengths and opportunities for Malaysian animation to contribute meaningfully to the global discourse on animated storytelling.

Limitation of Existing Studies

Despite the increasing scholarship surrounding Malaysian animation, there exists a significant research gap, particularly in cross-decade thematic analyses of animated films. Most existing studies tend to focus on specific films or trends within isolated periods, thereby neglecting a comprehensive exploration of thematic evolution over time (Ali, 2021). This gap suggests an opportunity for future research to delve into how cultural and societal shifts impact thematic content across different decades of Malaysian animation. Understanding these shifts can provide insights not only into the evolution of animation in Malaysia but also into the broader socio-cultural transformations occurring within the nation.

An integrated approach that encapsulates thematic continuity and change across decades will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Malaysian animation. Future studies may incorporate mixed methods, drawing on quantitative content analyses alongside qualitative interpretations of cultural meanings. This would facilitate a robust exploration

of how themes such as identity, tradition, and modernity are negotiated through animated narratives, ultimately contributing to a richer discourse surrounding cultural representation in Malaysian animation.

In conclusion, the landscape of Malaysian animation is deeply intertwined with cultural studies, representation theory, and heritage communication. Historical and thematic explorations reveal the dual forces of local tradition and global influence and highlight the importance of animated forms as carriers of cultural identity. By addressing existing research gaps and employing comprehensive methodological approaches, future research can further illuminate the significance of Malaysian animation within the global framework of animated storytelling.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative thematic analysis approach, following Braun and Clarke's framework for thematic analysis as articulated in their work (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is appropriate as it enables the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within qualitative data, thereby allowing for a comprehensive understanding of cultural narratives represented in Malaysian animation. With thematic analysis, the focus lies on interpreting the meanings embedded in the visual and textual elements of selected animated films, thus aligning with the research objectives of exploring cultural representation and themes. The flexibility of thematic analysis allows for a nuanced approach to the data, as it facilitates both inductive and deductive reasoning. This study thus aims to identify emergent themes within the films while also testing existing theories surrounding cultural representation and semiotics in animation. By employing this method, the research will ultimately aim to provide rich, in-depth insights into the cultural dynamics represented through the evolving landscape of Malaysian animation across different historical phases.

The sampling strategy for this research involves a purposive selection of films that epitomize four distinct phases of Malaysian animation from the 1980s to the 2020s. The selected films reflect significant shifts in animation styles, technological advancements, and thematic content, thereby providing a comprehensive view of the Malaysian animation landscape. The films are categorized as follows (see Table 1)

Table 1: Evolution of Malaysia Animation (4 Phases)

Phase	Film Example	Description	Cultural & Narrative Significance
1. Early Traditional	*Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1983)	Represents the formative years of	Serves as a cultural artifact showcasing early

		Malaysian animation, when traditional storytelling was first adapted into animated formats.	animation techniques and narrative conventions rooted in Malaysian folklore.
2. Transitional	*Silat Lagenda* (1998)	Marks a shift towards greater narrative complexity with stronger emphasis on identity and heritage.	Illustrates the influence of globalization on local narratives while retaining traditional cultural motifs (e.g., silat, keris, Malay legends).
3. Digital Emergence	*Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019)	Exemplifies the modern era of animation using digital technology to engage wider audiences.	Demonstrates how digital methodologies shape storytelling and cultural representation, blending tradition with modern appeal.
4. Contemporary	*Mechamato* (2022)	Represents the most recent stage of Malaysian animation, using contemporary techniques and addressing societal issues.	Explores themes of youth empowerment, technology, and hybrid cultural identity within a fast-evolving digital landscape.

Through the selection of these films, the study seeks to comprehensively document the diverse trajectories of Malaysian animation and its evolution, thereby facilitating an in-depth analysis that encompasses multiple decades and significant cultural transformations. Data collection for this study will employ indirect observation and visual-textual analysis methods. Indirect observation involves examining the films through a critical lens, focusing on their visual narrative, character design, and cultural elements presented on screen. This method allows for a holistic understanding of how animation techniques convey cultural messages and themes. Additionally, visual-textual analysis will integrate both visual and narrative components within the selected films. This dual analysis will consider the interplay between audio, visual elements, and textual narratives while specifically addressing identified cultural components that shape representation. By assessing both visual cues, such as animation style and color palette, alongside textual elements, such as dialogue and plot structure, the study will systematically analyze how these aspects collaborate to produce meaning.

The thematic analysis will follow Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework to systematically code and categorize the visual-textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This framework includes the following phases (see Table 2)

Table 2: Phases of Thematic Analysis Employed in the Study

Phase	Description (Adapted to this Study)
1. Familiarisation	Immersing in the data by repeatedly viewing the selected films to gain comprehensive understanding of their content.
2. Generating Initial Codes	Coding based on cultural elements: traditional culture, language, arts & crafts, social etiquette, attire, and symbolic visuals. Each film examined for how these manifest in narratives.
3. Searching for Themes	Identifying broader cultural themes, examining their relation to representation, identity, and Malaysia's socio-political context.
4. Reviewing Themes	Refining and cross-checking themes against data and literature to ensure validity and theoretical grounding.
5. Defining & Naming Themes	Clearly defining each theme to capture its essence and role in Malaysian animation.
6. Producing the Report	Presenting findings as a coherent narrative showing how films convey cultural narratives reflective of Malaysian society.

To enhance of the findings, the research will utilize triangulation with secondary sources, including academic literature on cultural representation and analyses of previous works on Malaysian animation. The incorporation of diverse perspectives will help mitigate bias and lend credibility to the interpretations made throughout the analysis. Additionally, the study will ensure intercoder reliability by involving multiple researchers in the coding process. By having multiple coders analyze the films independently and later converge on thematic interpretations, the findings are likely to be more robust and reflective of collective insights. One key limitation arises from the focus on selected films from distinct periods, which may not represent the entirety of the Malaysian animation landscape. The subjective selection of films could lead to potential bias in interpretations and findings. Moreover, challenges in language-specific interpretation may arise, particularly with films containing dialogue in Malay or other local dialects. Such linguistic nuances can significantly impact cultural meanings and pose obstacles in achieving a comprehensive understanding of the films without access to the cultural context. Therefore, language translation and cultural

interpretation will remain crucial aspects of the analysis to consider. In conclusion, this methodology presents a structured approach to understanding Malaysian animation through qualitative thematic analysis, facilitating a detailed exploration of cultural narratives represented within the selected films. By employing purposively sampled films and rigorous analytical frameworks, the study aims to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on culture, representation, and identity in Malaysian animated works.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research examines six key cultural elements across selected Malaysian animated films, focusing on how these elements reflect the evolution of Malaysian culture and identity. The analysis involves a description of each element, examples from the films, their evolution over time, and corresponding visual evidence where applicable.

1. Traditional Malaysian Culture

Traditional Malaysian culture, encompassing folklore, myths, and moral values, serves as a cornerstone of animated storytelling. In *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1983), the tale is rooted in local folklore where the clever mouse deer outwits larger beasts, imparting moral lessons about wisdom and humility. The animation depicts rural landscapes and traditional values, making it accessible for children while preserving essential cultural stories. Moving to more contemporary films, *Mechamato* (2022) integrates themes of courage and friendship within a high-tech environment, blending traditional values with modern societal issues. This showcases how traditional narratives are adapted to resonate with younger audiences and contemporary challenges. Over the decades, animation has evolved from strictly local narratives to a fusion of traditional and modern themes, representative of Malaysia's multicultural identity.

Film	Year	Cultural Element (Traditional Malaysian Culture)	Description
Hikayat Sang Kancil	1983	Local Folklore	Represents wisdom through traditional stories
Silat Lagenda	1998	Martial Arts and Heritage	Incorporates cultural identity and respect

Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal	2019	Modern Themes with Traditional Roots	Combines friendship with folklore
Mechamato	*2022*	Overcoming Contemporary Challenges	Highlights friendships in modern contexts

Table 1.2: Evolution of Traditional Malaysian Culture in Animation 2. Language

The use of language is pivotal in reflecting Malaysia's multicultural society. *Hikayat Sang Kancil* predominantly employs the Malay language, presenting narratives that enhance cultural authenticity. It serves not just as a communication tool but also reinforces cultural identity among young viewers. In *Silat Lagenda* (1998) and *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019), characters engage in code-switching between English and Malay, showcasing the linguistic diversity of Malaysian society and the bilingual context in which many viewers exist. This reflects current trends where language becomes a symbol of cultural negotiation and identity, highlighting a shift from a singular cultural perspective to a more integrated, bilingual narrative. The linguistic evolution observed in these films aligns with changing societal dynamics and attitudes towards language, as younger generations embrace a hybrid linguistic identity that fosters both cultural maintenance and adaptation.

3. Arts and Crafts

Arts and crafts, such as batik and wood carving motifs, play an important role within animation as a medium to showcase cultural pride. In *Mechamato (2022)*, vibrant batik patterns enhance visual storytelling, offering a visually dynamic representation of traditional craftsmanship in modern contexts. This contrasts with the minimalistic representations of arts and crafts found in earlier films like *Hikayat Sang Kancil*, where the focus remained primarily on narrative rather than detailed artwork. The evolution from simple representations to intricate designs demonstrates both advancements in animation technology and a growing appreciation for cultural heritage. The influence of local artisans in recent animations can be seen as a way to preserve and propagate Malaysian arts, which are increasingly recognized as vibrant aspects of cultural identity.

Film	Year	Cultural Element (Arts and Craft)	Visual interpretation
Silat Lagenda	1998	Traditional Costumes and Textiles	 *-Design Costume and Weapon Silat Lagenda Team*
Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal	2019	Weaponry and Craftsmanship	 *-Keris Siamang Tunggal* *-Gambus (Nakhoda Ragam)*
Mechamato	2022	Craft & Design in Technology	 - Weapon (Keris) and mix Custome

Table 1.3: Visual interpretation of Cultural Elements in Arts and Craft

4. Social Etiquette

Social etiquette, which includes specific gestures, greetings, and respect for hierarchy, is intricately woven into Malaysian animation narratives. *Silat Lagenda* (1998) emphasizes martial arts as a means of expressing respect, illustrating gestures of politeness and community values central to Malaysian culture. Characters' interactions frequently demonstrate principles of respect, particularly towards elders, reinforcing societal norms.

In contemporary films like *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal*, social interactions showcase both traditional customs and modern interpretations of etiquette, connecting generations between past and present. This evolution reflects changes in societal attitudes towards respect and community engagement, adapting traditional notions of etiquette to resonate with current cultural practices.

Film/Period	Depiction of Social Etiquette	Cultural Meaning	Evolution/Impact	Visual Intepretation
Silat Lagenda (1998)	Gestures in **silat movements** emphasize respect (bowing, hand salutation); interactions show **deference to elders and leaders**.	Highlights **hierarchy, politeness, and community values** rooted in Malay culture.	Reinforces **traditional codes of conduct** and martial arts as expressions of discipline and respect.	
Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal (2019)	Characters display **court etiquette** (bowing to royalty, ceremonial respect)	Bridges **traditional hierarchy** (royalty vs. rakyat) with **modern social**	Illustrates **continuity across generations**, adapting etiquette to both historical and modern contexts.	

Film/Period			
alongside casual village interactions.	**values** (friendship, teamwork).		
Mechamato (2022)	Etiquette shown in **friendship, cooperation, and respect between peers and mentors**, in school and community settings.	Reflects **modern Malaysian youth culture** where respect is negotiated in more egalitarian ways.	Shifts etiquette from strict hierarchy to **inclusive community engagement**, aligning with globalized social norms.	

Table 1.4: Representation of Social Etiquette in Malaysian Animation & Film

5. Traditional Attire

Depictions of traditional attire such as baju kurung, baju melayu, and songket are prevalent in these animations, serving as cultural markers. In *Hikayat Sang Kancil*, characters are dressed in traditional fabric that reflects the historical context of the stories being told. The use of bright colors and distinctive patterns captures viewers' attention while reinforcing a sense of cultural identity.

As the animation industry has progressed, recent films like *Mechamato(2022)* have integrated traditional attire into modern settings, showcasing how cultural identity is preserved and celebrated alongside contemporary fashion influences. This evolution highlights a commitment to maintaining cultural heritage while embracing modernity, suggesting an ongoing dialogue between past and present representations of Malaysian identity.

Film/Period	Depiction of Traditional Attire	Cultural Significance	Evolution/Impact	Visual Interpretation

Silat Lagenda (1998)	Emphasis on **songket, samping, tengkolok (headgear)** in court scenes, silat uniforms echo traditional fabrics.	Reinforces **Malay identity and martial heritage** within a folkloric-historical frame.	Highlights grandeur of tradition through costume realism.	
Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal (2019)	Royal characters wear **ornate songket and batik motifs.** villagers in simple traditional clothing.	Attire distinguishes **royalty vs. rakyat**, reflecting social hierarchy in Malay culture.	Revives folkloric grandeur in digital animation, connecting heritage to fantasy.	
Mechamato (2022)	Main characters in **modern casual wear**, but cultural nods appear in secondary attire (sarong, school uniforms) and festive episodes.	Shows **everyday Malaysian identity** in an urban sci-fi setting.	Marks a shift: tradition less visual, but cultural belonging persists in subtle, modernized forms.	

Table 1.5: Representation of Traditional Attire in Malaysian Animation & Film

6. Symbolism of Culture

Symbolism in Malaysian animation employs recurring visual metaphors, colors, and motifs that resonate with cultural significance. In *Hikayat Sang Kancil,* the cleverness of the mouse deer symbolizes intelligence overcoming brute strength, a revered value in Malay culture. Colors such as red symbolize courage, while green often represents nature and harmony elements consistently reflected in character designs and backgrounds throughout various films.

In *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal,* the incorporation of national symbols, such as the Malaysian flag, serves as an emblem of unity and identity amid diverse cultural narratives. The continual evolution from traditional to contemporary symbols mirrors changes in Malaysian society, where visual cues within animation engage audiences and inspire national pride while addressing contemporary themes. This comprehensive examination of cultural elements in Malaysian animation highlights the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, providing insights into how these films mirror both historical and contemporary facets of Malaysian identity. The ongoing evolution of these elements underscores the adaptability and resilience of cultural narratives in the face of changing societal contexts.

Film/Period	Symbolism Used	Cultural Meaning	Evolution/Impact	Visual Intepretation
Hikayat Sang Kancil (1980s)	Mouse deer (sang kancil) as metaphor for wit, color symbolism (red = courage, green = nature/harmony).	Emphasizes intelligence over brute strength, echoing Malay folktale values; colors reinforce moral and environmental balance.	Establishes foundation of traditional Malay symbolism in early animation, rooted in folklore and morality.	
Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal (2019)	National flag (Jalur Gemilang), royal regalia, mythical keris.	Flag = unity and national identity; keris = heritage, bravery, continuity of tradition.	Expands symbolism from folklore into national pride, blending heritage with modern nationhood.	
Mechamato (2022)	Everyday urban Malaysian life (signboards, food stalls, multilingual signage),	Represents multicultural unity and resilience in a globalized,	Symbolism becomes subtle and contemporary, shifting from folklore and	

	occasional festive cues.	technological era.	national emblems to everyday cultural markers.	

Table 1.6: Symbolism of Culture in Malaysian Animation

Discussion

This section discusses the findings of Malaysian animated films through the lens of evolving cultural representation, cultural identity, audience engagement, industry implications, and comparisons with other Asian animations. By connecting these aspects, the discussion seeks to elaborate on how Malaysian animation both preserves and modernizes cultural narratives within a global context.

Evolution of Cultural Representation

The findings reveal a clear trajectory in the evolution of cultural representation across the four identified phases of Malaysian animation. During the Early Traditional phase, exemplified by *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1983), the focus was on promoting local folklore, myths, and moral values rooted in Malaysian heritage. Themes emphasized in this phase highlight morality, wisdom, and respect for nature, providing foundational narratives for subsequent generations.

Transitioning to the Transitional phase with *Silat Lagenda* (1998), there is an infusion of more complex storylines that engage with themes of identity, community, and respect. This film not only upholds traditional narratives but also adapts to the societal changes wrought by the influx of global influences. The characters' representations reflect a blending of local customs within a narrative framework that integrates modern elements, illustrating the impact of globalization on Malaysian storytelling.

In the Digital Emergence phase, as seen in *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019), modernization is paramount. The animations leverage advancements in digital technologies while infusing traditional culture with contemporary themes. This duality is significant as it creates a bridge between the past and present, illustrating a conscious effort to modernize cultural representation while maintaining deep-rooted values.

Finally, the Contemporary phase, represented by *Mechamato(2022*), underscores an ongoing evolution that responds to the current socio-political landscape. Themes of urbanization, technology, and collaboration resonate with younger viewers, reflecting how Malaysian animation engages with and reflects contemporary realities. This evolution embodies a multi-faceted narrative that showcases the dynamic interplay between

traditional and modern cultural expressions. Similarly, there a study on the portrayal of mental illness in Malaysian media demonstrates that local visual narratives are gradually evolving to challenge stigma and encourage empathy (Wan et al., 2018). This finding parallels the current study's argument that Malaysian animation can also humanize cultural experiences by integrating moral and emotional depth within its storytelling.

Cultural Identity & Audience Engagement

The findings demonstrate a strong resonance with Malaysian audiences, which speaks to the effective utilization of cultural elements that audiences can identify with. The portrayal of traditional values, social norms, and familiar settings fosters a sense of belonging and identity among viewers, reinforcing a collective Malaysian identity. The inclusion of cultural symbols, metaphors, and typical Malaysian scenarios enhances relatability, encouraging audience engagement.

Moreover, Malaysian animated films hold educational potential, functioning as vehicles for soft power that promote cultural understanding beyond the national borders. By globalizing narratives rooted in local culture, Malaysian animations become tools for intercultural dialogue. For instance, through its representation of cultural norms and practices, the *Upin & Ipin* series not only entertains but also educates audiences about Malaysian customs, fostering understanding among international viewers.

The soft power potential of animating Malaysian culture is significant, as these narratives can positively contribute to the country's image globally, facilitating cultural exchange and mutual appreciation. By engaging diverse audiences, these animated films can play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of Malaysia as a vibrant, culturally rich nation.

Industry Implications

The integration of heritage into global markets poses both opportunities and challenges for the Malaysian animation industry. One strategy for sustaining cultural heritage within a global context is to adopt creative strategies that emphasize the unique aspects of Malaysian culture while also appealing to universal themes. Animators can harness the strengths of traditional storytelling practices, merging them with innovative animation techniques that attract international audiences. For instance, the success of *Ejen Ali* illustrates how storylines underpinned by local identity can break through into the international sphere while maintaining authenticity.

However, balancing tradition with modern appeal presents challenges, particularly in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. As global entertainment trends shift towards dynamic narratives and fast-paced visuals, there exists pressure on Malaysian animators to innovate

while remaining rooted in cultural authenticity. The industry faces the constant challenge of balancing creative exploration with the preservation of traditional themes and values.

Furthermore, the increasing use of technology in animation introduces complexities regarding the preservation of cultural integrity amidst rapid modernization. Animators must navigate a landscape where audience expectations for universal themes may threaten the representation of local stories. As a result, strategic approaches must prioritize not only commercial success but also the sustainability of cultural narratives within animation.

Comparison with Other Asian Animations

When comparing Malaysian animations to other prominent animations in Asia, particularly Japanese anime and Korean manhwa adaptations, several lessons emerge. Japan's anime industry has successfully merged traditional cultures with a modern aesthetic, achieving global popularity. Much like Malaysian animations, anime often intertwines folklore themes with contemporary issues, but with the advantage of having established a robust global fan base through extensive marketing and merchandise strategies. For example, the monumental success of works such as *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Attack on Titan* illustrates how anime has successfully created narratives that resonate across cultural borders while maintaining a sense of cultural identity.

Similarly, the Korean manhwa adaptations in animations such as *Tower of God* and *The God of High School* have tapped into both local culture and universal themes, achieving international acclaim through platforms like Netflix and Crunchyroll. These adaptations have emphasized fast-paced, engaging storylines and modern aesthetics that appeal to both local and global audiences, leveraging both visual storytelling and marketing strategies that help further their reach.

Malaysian animation can draw important insights from these examples, particularly in terms of adopting effective techniques for storytelling, audience engagement, and globalization. Developing comprehensive marketing strategies, leveraging social media platforms, and engaging with the global diaspora can propel Malaysian animated films into wider markets.

In conclusion, the discussion underscores the importance of understanding the evolution of cultural representation in Malaysian animation as it navigates modernization and globalization. The findings reveal that while cultural identity remains central to audience engagement, the industry faces challenges in integrating tradition within a global framework. By drawing lessons from the successes of other Asian animations, there is potential for Malaysian animation to solidify its position as a noteworthy player in the global cultural landscape.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research illuminate the integral role of culture in Malaysian animated films, highlighting eight cultural elements that are consistently embedded within the narratives. These elements include traditional Malaysian culture, language, arts and crafts, social etiquette, traditional attire, and the symbolism of culture. Across the various phases of Malaysian animation from the Early Traditional phase exemplified by *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1983) to the Contemporary phase represented by *Mechamato* (2022)mthe gradual hybridization of tradition and modernity is evident. The films reveal a remarkable evolution over time, adapting traditional narratives to address contemporary issues while maintaining a core connection to cultural heritage. This hybridization reflects broader societal changes influenced by globalization, technological advancement, and shifting audience preferences. As Malaysian animation develops, it continues to redefine cultural representation, serving as both a means of preserving local narratives and engaging with a global audience.From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes significantly to cultural representation theory in media. By examining how Malaysian animations frame and reframe cultural narratives, this study provides insights into the complex interactions between globalization and local identity. The findings underscore the importance of understanding cultural representation not merely as static portrayals of identity but as dynamic constructions that evolve over time in response to technological innovations and audience expectations. This exploration of cultural representation in the context of animation complements existing theories by emphasizing the role of popular media in cultural maintenance and transformation, aligning with Postcolonial theories that advocate for the visibility of marginalized voices in global narratives. Furthermore, the study reinforces the idea that animated films are not only entertainment but crucial mediums for cultural education and identity formation. The practical implications of this research extend to various stakeholders, including animators, educators, and policymakers. For animators, understanding the cultural elements identified in this study can inform the development of new works that resonate deeply with local and international audiences. By incorporating these elements thoughtfully, animators can create culturally rich narratives that uphold and celebrate Malaysian heritage while also exploring themes that connect with current global issues. Educators can leverage animated films as pedagogical tools, using them to teach cultural values and narratives to young audiences. By incorporating Malaysian animated films into curricula, educators can promote cultural literacy and enhance students' understanding of their heritage, thereby fostering a sense of pride and identity among Malaysian youth.

Policymakers are also encouraged to support the animation industry through funding and incentives for projects that prioritize cultural representation. By recognizing the economic

and cultural value of animation, governments can create an environment that nurtures creative talent and encourages the production of culturally significant content. While this study has highlighted significant findings related to cultural representation in Malaysian animation, there are several avenues for future research. Firstly, audience reception studies can provide valuable insights into how different demographics engage with and interpret the cultural narratives presented in animated films. Understanding audience perspectives will assist animators in creating content that is both culturally sensitive and broadly appealing. Additionally, future research could expand beyond the Malaysian context to include comparative studies with other Southeast Asian countries. By analyzing cultural representation in animation across different nations such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines researchers can identify shared themes, influences, or unique expressions of culture that enrich the regional animation landscape. This comparative approach can facilitate a more profound understanding of Southeast Asian identity and cultural dynamics in the face of globalization. In conclusion, the intersection of culture and animation in Malaysia presents a multifaceted narrative worthy of continued exploration. By embracing the dynamic nature of cultural representation, animators can contribute to a vibrant cultural discourse that resonates within Malaysia and beyond.

6.   BIODATA (not more than 50 words)

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