

UPIN IPIN ANIMATION: The Media of Malaysia's Identity Politics

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ABSTRACT

"Upin Ipin" animation is a popular children's film series in Indonesia, including Denpasar from 2010-2023. The Upin Ipin animation shows the background of a Malaysian village with its own culture, and the characters who play a role in it can represent the Malay-Malaysian identity and the various tribes that exist in Malaysia. The research used qualitative methods, and data were analyzed using discourse analysis theory and ideology theory. The results show that the issue of Malay-Malaysian identity plays a role in the production of Upin Ipin animation. The identity is visualized through the characters in the story, along with the environment that considers the socio-cultural background of the local Malaysian community. The construction of the environment, socio-cultural life, religion and culture, and language represent the Malaysian identity. This article contributes to the understanding that Upin Ipin animation is not just entertainment but a medium to introduce the Malay-Malaysian cultural identity.

Keywords: animation, Upin Ipin, identity politics, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Between 2010-2023, the Malaysian Upin Ipin animation captivated Indonesian audiences through its serialized broadcast on MNCTV television station. It was unprecedented for a Malaysian animated series to appeal widely to Indonesian audiences, including children in Denpasar. Presented in Malay, Upin Ipin is easily digested by Indonesian audiences without realizing that this animation is not just an entertaining spectacle but an entertainment that promotes Malaysian identity, especially Malayness.

While still appreciating Upin Ipin animation as entertainment for all ages, especially children, this research pays special attention to identity politics in Upin Ipin animation. Upin Ipin's animation visualizes various characters that have different characteristics and

identities. The visualization of Upin Ipin animation can represent Malay-Malaysian identity because the main characters in this animation have Malay characteristics such as Malay clothes, tudung, and the language used. These characters represent the various ethnicities, religions, and cultures that exist in Malaysia. From a broader perspective, the Malay-Malaysian identity can be seen through the values of local wisdom, tradition, and history in Upin Ipin's stories. In addition, Upin Ipin animation also has a strong moral message, teaching Islamic values and often raising social issues.

In addition to the spirit of Islamic religious beliefs, ethnic and cultural issues are essential to Upin Ipin's animation visualization in the spirit of Islamic religious beliefs. This culturally-based animation performance can revive various traditions and signify Malaysian Malay identity. This cultural-based animation is inseparable from identity's role in identifying something, whether it is identifying race, ethnicity, nation, or others. Therefore, identity is a cultural product formed from commonalities such as values, norms, symbols, cultural practices, and others with historical, political, and social contexts.

Studies related to identity politics in an animated film have been conducted previously by Nieuwstraten, Huynh & Devito, Shelton, and Banziger & Budiman. Nieuwstraten et al. discuss how gender, race, and social class identities are represented in animated films produced by Disney. Nieuwstraten et al.'s study analyzes the interrelated and mutually influencing identities in the representation of animated film characters. The results show that the characters produced by Disney have limited and not always inclusive representations and are closely related to the company's business interests and political economy.

In their study, Huynh & Devito (2017) describe the representation of racial/ethnic and sexual identity in animated films produced by Disney/Pixar. In their study, Huynh & Devito (2017) analyzed characters in 14 Disney/Pixar animated films to find out the represented identities. The results show that positively represented characters tend to be limited to majority groups, while minority characters are represented as caricatures.

Meanwhile, Shelton (2016) highlighted how identities such as gender, race, sexuality, and disability are represented in animated film media and how these representations can influence children's views of themselves and others. In her study, Shelton (2016) concluded that animation has representational power and helps raise awareness about identity diversity and reduce discrimination. In another study, Banziger & Budiman (2018) analyzed the provocative political and social messages presented in animated films aimed at children. When discussing Zootopia and The Lego Movie

animated films, Banziger & Budiman (2018) explored social and political issues such as racism, stereotypes, and capitalism. The results show that animated films can effectively spread political and social messages, especially to young audiences.

In contrast to but also drawing inspiration from these studies, this article aims to analyze identity politics in Upin Ipin animation through the overall visualization and the characters that play a role. This article looks at how the characters in Upin Ipin animation represent different ethnic, religious, and cultural-based identity politics and how moral messages and Malay identity are represented in Upin Ipin animation. In addition, this article also analyses how the depiction of identity politics in Upin Ipin animation can influence children's perceptions of diversity and tolerance. In the context of a multicultural Indonesia, it is essential to strengthen understanding and awareness of the importance of tolerance between ethnicities, religions, and cultures.

This article explains how animation, perceived as entertainment, can influence children's perception and understanding of identity politics. By studying identity politics in Upin Ipin animations, this article can help develop media to shape a solid and positive national identity for Indonesian audiences.

METHODS

The research method used in this study is a qualitative method with descriptive critical analysis. Data were collected by observing several Upin Ipin animated video series and literature. The Upin Ipin animated videos used as samples include all series from season 1 (2007) to season 13 (2020). The selection of all series from all seasons was made because each series shows or illustrates the Malay-Malaysian identity consistently and is rich in cultural elements, traditions, and daily life that reflect the heritage and uniqueness of the Malay-Malaysian community. By including all series, this research can see the development and visual consistency associated with the Malay-Malaysian identity over a long period. The analysis stage begins with data collection steps, conducting descriptive analysis, describing all findings from the data obtained, then interpreting. The object of analysis of Upin Ipin animation is the form of symbolic interaction and various forms of communication, which can be in the form of speech or dialogue, text, pictures, images, sound effects, or music..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Upin Ipin Animations is a top-rated Malaysian animation series. The series follows the adventures of two twin brothers, Upin and Ipin, and their friends in the village of Kampung

Durian Runtuh. The animated story is based on children's daily lives and contains educational values, friendship, and kindness. Upin and Ipin are cheerful, energetic, and curious twins. The stories in the series often focus on minor problems and conflicts faced by Upin Ipin and his friends, such as finding ways to overcome problems, resolving disputes, or learning from experiences. In the process, they learn to appreciate the value of friendship, honesty, cooperation, and kindness. They live with their grandmother in a small, peaceful village. The characters in Upin Ipin animation are played by Upin and Ipin, Kak Ros, Opah, Tok Dalang, Ehzan, Fizi, Mail, Jarjit, Uncle Muthu, Saleh, Susanti, Mei Mei, Dzul, Devi, Cikgu Melati, Cikgu Besar, Cikgu Jasmine, Ah Tong, Abang Tiger, Rajoo, and other supporting characters.

In addition to containing elements of comedy and humor that make it appealing to a child audience, the Upin Ipin animation also displays a political identity medium from Malaysia. According to Barker (2018: 134), identity politics deals with creating and managing cultural rights for those who claim identity in society and culture. This opinion shows that identity can be constructed based on culture. In other words, culture can be used as a characterizing identity. Identity politics in Upin Ipin animation is visualized in four ways, namely: (1) setting or environment, (2) religion and culture, (3) social life of the community, and (4) language. The four ways are accumulated in one story and visual unity and are described as follows.

Les' Copaque, the company that produced the Upin Ipin animation, has a mission to visualize the Malaysian identity. A mission to promote Malaysian identity through the setting or environment is affirmed in Les' Copaque's official website as follows: "So after months of discussion, they agreed to produce an adventure story with a Malaysian 'kampung' background" (lescopaque.com, 2005-2017). At the beginning of the creation of the Upin Ipin animation, the production team held months of discussions. Finally, they agreed to tell a story with the background of a Malaysian village, complete with its culture. The animators created a story with a background that shows the identity of local wisdom from Malaysia, namely kampung. They created a story in which there are elements of this local wisdom.

Based on the above statement, there is an excellent desire behind the realization of the Upin Ipin animation from Les' Copaque to show the Malaysian environment, especially the traditional village. This condition can also be interpreted as a form of depiction that in a developed and modernized Malaysia with the hustle and bustle of urban society, there is still a beautiful traditional environment and the social life of the people

who obey religious teachings, full of kinship and tolerance.

Malaysian identity through the cultural approach visualized in the Upin Ipin animation appears in the religious practices and the culture that wraps it. Culture dominates in Upin Ipin, related to the spirit of Islamic religious belief values as a religion embraced by most Malaysians. This belief value gave birth to the basic idea of Upin Ipin's creation. The simple Malay village, the community's social life, and the distinctive Malay language depict Malaysian culture Malay. They all create a distinctive feature and become the main sign that can indirectly form an identity.

The issue of Malay-Malaysian identity plays a role in the production of Upin Ipin animation. The realization of Upin Ipin animation results from the relationship associated with the activities of the social system represented by the animators. In the realization of Upin Ipin animation, the animators utilized issues related to identity in their community and considered the socio-cultural background of the local Malaysian community. According to Barker (2018: 132-133), identity is a cultural construction that departs from the sources of discourse that form the material foundation for cultural identity formation. Identity is imagined as something universal, timeless, and an essence that marks the difference between oneself and others. Therefore, identity can be marked through several signs, such as feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles.

Local issues and Malay-Malaysian culture are symbolically used to produce an animation that defines Malay-Malaysian local identity. One of the aims is to show Malaysia as Truly Asia. It is one of the animators' brilliance in connecting local issues and phenomena into an animated visual. As animators, they certainly have a high sense of responsibility and awareness of the social values and cultural systems that exist in their region. In addition, when viewed in the context of market needs, Upin Ipin animation is one of the media for identity promotion that can represent the country of Malaysia. The animators took the setting of the environment, socio-cultural life, religion and culture, and language to represent the Malaysian identity.

Adopting the culture of a particular place as an idea for animation creation is not only done in the creation of Upin Ipin animation. Still, it has also been done in other famous animation productions, such as animations produced by Disney. This phenomenon was acknowledged by one of the administrators of the Indonesian Animation Association (AINAKI), Deddy Syamsuddin, in the FGD of LIPI Animation Studies with AINAKI-Aspect of Animation Education, which was held on Friday, 18 September 2020, from 15.00 - 18.00 WITA. Syamsudin said:

"When creating animation, it is important to consider the cultural aspects of a place to be used as an idea. It is done by many famous animation producers such as Disney".

The audience and the animators can capture the Malaysian identity and culture visualized in the Upin Ipin animation. An active viewer of Upin Ipin animation, Brahma Ananda Antriksa (22 years old, Denpasar) said:

"Upin Ipin animation can introduce Malaysia, starting from culture, language, and others. Children who initially did not know at all became at least familiar with our neighboring country Malaysia" (interview, 11 August 2020).

Ari Triwibowo (36, Yogyakarta), an animator from Panangkaran Bening Studio, expressed a similar sentiment: "Upin Ipin animation can introduce local wisdom such as games, culture, etc., and insert moral messages to children in particular and parents" (interview, 12 August 2020).

This opinion shows that Upin Ipin animation can introduce local wisdom to children, such as traditional games, culture, and other things related to local life. In addition, Upin Ipin animation also contains moral messages conveyed to children, especially in terms of good values and behavior. In addition to children, parents can also benefit from the moral messages inserted in this animation.

The traditions and culture in Malaysia are expressed in the dialogue played by Upin Ipin and Opah. In episode 9 (nine), entitled Adat, there is a scene that displays the traditions and culture of Malaysian Muslims during the fasting month, namely, sharing food among each other. In this scene, Opah asks Upin Ipin to help deliver food to Atuk Dalang. Upin asked Opah, what is the purpose of sharing food? Opah replied: "This is the month of puasa ni melok can get alms; this is our custom ."Based on this expression, it can be interpreted that sharing food or giving alms to others during fasting is a tradition and culture of Malaysian Muslims.

In terms of history, Malay culture is the result of mixing between Malay and diaspora cultures such as Indian, Chinese, Arab, and Western. Geographically, Malay is closer to the Southeast Asian region with Austronesian ancestors. Still, in its development, the Malaysian constitution created the Malay identity through religion, cultural customs, and language. Related to this, Prayogi (2016: 10) argues:

"...According to the Malaysian constitution, the so-called Malays must fulfill three criteria: being Muslim, practicing Malay cultural customs, and speaking Malay".

The above opinion explains that a person considered a "Malay" must fulfill three criteria under the Malaysian constitution. Firstly, they must be Muslim, indicating Islam's

importance in the Malay identity. Secondly, they must practice Malay cultural customs, which refer to the customs, traditions, and cultural values unique to the Malay tribe. Thirdly, they must speak Malay, which indicates the importance of language as a component of Malay identity.

Malaysian Muslim identity is visualized through the characters who play roles with a background in Islamic tradition. The female characters, Opah (Upin Ipin's grandmother) and Kak Ros (Upin Ipin's sister) are visualized as women with spiritual firmness and religious observance. This visualization shows an effort to popularise Islam through film. Weintraub (in Muhammad, 2018: 18) mentions that there has been an increase in the popularity of Islamic content in Malaysian films in recent decades. According to him, the presence of Islamic content has unwittingly become popular culture. In addition, this condition is believed to improve the image of Malay Muslim women.

This fact shows that the identity of Malay Muslim women is one of the representative objects in making a film. Gray (2015: 49) states that the character of Malay-Muslim women represented in the narratives of several contemporary Malaysian films results from sociocultural and political ideologies. Furthermore, it is said that popular media (film) is interconnected with politics, religion, and Malaysian society. Meanwhile, Cheng (in Muhammad, 2018: 18) argues that some filmmakers in Malaysia are interested in bringing up the theme of Malay customs accompanied by constructing a dynamic and modern postcolonial identity. This opinion is expected to differentiate Malaysia from Western cultural ideas.

Cheng further said that prime minister Mahathir Mohamad initiated and propagated the development towards 'more Islam' in Malaysia in 1984. According to Cheng, it was a political agenda to 'Islamise' the nation and introduce the concept of 'moderate Islam' instead of Middle Eastern Islam. This political agenda then impacted the film censorship process. Films featuring content outside of active Islamic teachings have been censored since 1984 by Malaysia's censorship board. The visualization of Islam in films is represented through camera angles, colors, lighting, property, storyline, background music, audio, and others to create a cinematic and religious atmosphere.

Religious beliefs, Malaysian social life, environment, and language used in the visualization of Upin Ipin animation indirectly introduce Malaysian identity. Malaysian identity visualization in Upin Ipin animation can also be understood as a symbolic reaction of the animators unconsciously to the behavior experienced directly in the daily social system.

An identity is created starting from each affiliated with the social relations or social structure in which he is located. As Abdullah (2014: 226-227) says, the existence of each individual is inseparable from the structures that help define their identity. His identity will provide a framework for distinguishing symbols from one another. Furthermore, it is said by quoting Burke's opinion that human self-identity cannot be limited to who he is. Still, self-identity can only be explained through the social relations surrounding the "actor," with these social relations forming the prevailing social structure in society.

While related to individuals as social objects, Stone (1962: 93) says: "One's identity is established when others place him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or announces ."According to him, identity is given to a person or individual when others place him as a social object by giving him the exact words of identity he appropriates for himself or announces.

The existence of Malaysia as an independent nation is shown through the identity of the country's flag in welcoming Independence Day. An episode entitled "Kami Satu Malaysia" is visualized from Upin Ipin and his friends discussing war-time food to installing the flag at Atuk Dalang's house. The conversation about food is related to the food that existed and was consumed by Malaysians during the war and the food consumed after independence. Furthermore, Upin Ipin and his friends were invited by Atuk Dalang to celebrate the independence of Malaysia by installing flags and painting houses with pictures of the Malaysian flag as an expression of pride. Atuk Dalang told Upin Ipin and his friends: "Let everyone be proud to be Malaysian ."Upin Ipin and his friends enthusiastically drew the Malaysian flag on the wall of Atuk Dalang's house. Even one of the characters named Jarjit (one of Upin Ipin's friends from Indian ethnicity) had his face painted with the Malaysian flag and shouted: "I am a Malaysian, I am a Malaysian ."At the end of the episode, they say together: "Happy national day, kite united Malaysia." This scene can be seen in the following picture.



Figure 1. Malaysia flag in Upin Ipin episode
Source: YouTube Screen Print, 2020

The Malay language used in Upin Ipin animation is an essential element reflecting the Malaysian identity. Using the Malay language is one of the ways to present a solid Malaysian identity and introduce the audience, especially children, to Malaysia's culture, language, and diversity. Malay is the national and official language of Malaysia. In Upin Ipin animation, Malay consistently portrays Malaysian culture and identity to the audience, especially children. In the Malay language, there is a variety of rhythms and accents that differ between regions and ethnicities in Malaysia. In this animation, the audience can hear Malay rhythms and accents typical of the Kampung Durian Runtuh area, where Upin, Ipin, and other characters live. This atmosphere adds to the authenticity and distinctiveness of showing Malaysia's culture and linguistic diversity.

The Upin Ipin animation often uses Malay expressions and idioms in dialogues and song lyrics. These expressions present Malaysian cultural and linguistic characteristics and can also help viewers, especially children, to learn Malay vocabulary and expressions. The Malay language in this animation also represents Malaysia's inclusiveness and cultural diversity. Although Malay is the primary language, the characters in Upin Ipin also use words and expressions from other languages, such as English, Mandarin, Tamil, and several other ethnic languages. These conditions show the diversity and plurality of Malaysian society. Using the Malay language in the Upin Ipin animation helps enrich and maintain Malaysia's cultural heritage. The use of Malay helps to broaden the audience's understanding of the Malaysian language and culture and maintains the sustainability and importance of the Malay language in Malaysia's national identity.

A person's identity in a country and nation is needed because it can function as a personality trait and a differentiator between nations and countries. Identity is essential so that the world is not uniform or monotonous. It can be imagined that if everywhere people wear the same clothes, have houses or live in places that are uniformly shaped throughout the world, worship in the same way, and many others, then this world will feel very boring. The world would not look beautiful because beauty is created through differences. Therefore, each country and nation always tries to maintain its own identity.

CONCLUSION

More than just entertainment that captivates children, the Upin Ipin animation has a strong message about aspects of Malaysian culture and identity, such as the Malay nation, the religion of Islam, the Malay language, and the diversity of cultures and traditional games owned by Malaysians. Promoting Malaysian identity through Upin Ipin animation can be

understood as an effort to introduce and promote Malaysian culture and local wisdom to the world and strengthen Malaysians' sense of pride in their identity. Malaysia's existence as an independent nation is reflected in the identity of the country's flag in celebrating Independence Day. This condition is to show how Upin Ipin displays Malaysia's national identity and the spirit of unity in one country.

The cultural approach is reflected in the simple Malay kampung background, the social life of the community, and the use of the distinctive Malay language. These become the cultural depiction of Malaysia as Malay and can indirectly shape the nation's identity. The animators pay attention to identity-related issues within their society to create animations that accurately portray Malaysia's cultural identity and highlight the local wisdom of the Malaysian people. Upin Ipin is also one of the media to promote the identity that can represent the country of Malaysia, where the animators take the environment, sociocultural life, religion and culture, and language to represent the identity.

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