

**PART 3**  
**New Sources for the Study of Singapore's Past**



# CHAPTER 8

## Films as a source of Social History—P. Ramlee's "Seniman Bujang Lapok" and Malays in Singapore (1950s-1960s)

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied

### Introduction

Despite their sheer importance in portraying the social conditions of Malays<sup>1</sup> in post-World War 2 Singapore, Malay films of the 1950s and 1960s are still in the margins of what is perceived as other important historical sources at that time. As Anthony Milner has observed, such negation is a product of the methods and sources that "colonial archive historians" have adopted in the study of Malay history. Colonial records were (and still are) regarded as more "reliable" at the expense of other useful Malay-based sources. Indeed, it has impacted the kinds of questions and perspectives of historians of the Malay World.<sup>2</sup> In their pursuit of linear narratives written from vintage points of a selected few, such genre of historians have often overlooked alternative sources, which could give an illuminating insight into the social history of the Malays. Foremost amongst sources that could give an intimate Malay perspective of their own conditions, as Timothy Barnard forcefully argues, "is Malay film, but it remains largely untapped."<sup>3</sup>

Malay films produced in Singapore of the 1950s and 1960s coincided at a time, when the island was undergoing rapid social, political, religious and economic changes. Directed towards an audience whose avenues of visual entertainment were fairly limited, Malay films often reflected and, at the same time, influenced Malay consciousness. So potent was the power of such films that till today, many of the movie lines have established themselves as new additions within the corpus of Malay metaphors!<sup>4</sup> Two film companies, Cathay Keris and Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions, emerged strongly in the post-war film industry producing more than two hundred and fifty films in merely two decades. Featuring actors and actresses from varied social backgrounds, such films drew thousands every weekend to cinemas, regardless of age and class. Judging from present day standards, it can be said that a large number amongst such artists became "Idols" for the young and old then. Most prominent amongst them was Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh or more popularly known as P. Ramlee (1929-1973), who remains fresh in the minds of Malays today as an entertainer and also a 'teacher' *par excellence*. He was a scriptwriter, comedian, dramatist, musician (composer and singer) as well as director, all manifested in a man who was concerned with the state of Malays during his time.<sup>5</sup>

In view of his pervasive influence within the Malay film industry, this article will critically examine one of P. Ramlee's celebrated comedies, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (known in English as "The Nitwit Movie Stars") (1961).<sup>6</sup> The film narrates the story of three unmarried and impoverished men, Ramlee, Aziz and Sudin, and their anxieties, challenges as well as romance whilst residing in a crowded rented house. Frantically in search of a proper job, the three men attended an audition to be 'movie stars'. After many hiccups and hilarious unintended mistakes, they were subsequently employed by the Malay Film Productions. It proved to be a critical juncture of their lives. However, their enthusiasm in memorising the movie lines was interrupted by various difficulties. Foremost amongst these was the

disturbances caused by the neighbours within their rented house. Amongst such disturbances were deafening arguments between two couples, a man repairing his spoilt motorcycle and an eccentric musician practising his skills in playing the trumpet. This was followed by the almost impossible ambitions of the three men to find their love mates and be happily married. Ramlee was in love with a nurse, Salmah, who was at the same time courted by a neighbourhood hooligan, Sharif. The movie reaches its climax with the burning of the rented house by Sharif due solely to Salmah's rejection of his marriage proposal. Upon discovering Sharif's crime, Ramlee confronted the former and handed him to the villagers to be sent to the police station. The story ends with each of the three men meeting their loved ones to be happily married.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will discuss two important contexts which shaped the production of *Seniman Bujang Lapok*. This will be followed by a discussion of various major themes in the movie that mirrored the varied challenges faced by the Malay society in 1950s and 1960s Singapore. The expositions that follow are but drops of an ocean of historical data that could be extracted from the movies and songs that have been produced by P. Ramlee. Nonetheless, it is hoped that such analytical discussions of *Seniman Bujang Lapok* will convincingly put forth films as useful 'historical sources' for the study of Malays in Singapore during the post war years.

## Films and Contexts

Before engaging on an analysis of the film, it is pertinent to state two salient contexts that have influenced its creation and therefore would, to a great extent, justify it as a useful historical source. The first would be the background of the creator or producer of such films. Many, if not all, of P. Ramlee's biographers are in consensus that his works were, in many ways, products of his personal life experiences. Wan Hamzah Awang, a renowned Malaysian film critic, went as far to assert that P. Ramlee's songs and films had *never* departed from realities of his personal life and milieu. Even when his films entered into the realm of fantasy, he was, in fact, indirectly portraying to his audiences the realities of life in which he was an organic part.<sup>8</sup> Although only handful amongst P. Ramlee's biographers are professional historians and thus lacking of historical profundity, a cursory glance at important moments in P. Ramlee's life does indeed attest to such line of reasoning.

P. Ramlee was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1929 in Penang and grew up at a time when Malaya was undergoing the stresses of the Great Depression. His father was an odd job labourer and, predictably, the household was plagued by poverty and ill health. As the only son through his mother's second marriage, P. Ramlee had fond yet painful memories of his early years. He sought to portray this predicament in the film *Ibu* (Mother) (1953) which narrates the unceasing love between a child and his mother. Such an autobiographical exposition of his life was further depicted in his first successful film, *Penarek Beca* (The Trishaw Driver) (1955). The intended messages of class divisions and poverty within Malay society during his time were featured so effectively in the film that it won several prestigious awards.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to most Malays in Penang of the 1930s, P. Ramlee grew up learning the rudimentary aspects of Islam. In fact, he was known amongst village youths for his melodious recital of the Quran and curiosities in many areas of Islamic knowledge. P. Ramlee was, however, critical of what seemed to him as traditional interpretations of Islamic laws. In *Semerah Padi* (1956), P. Ramlee launched such critiques through the stories of two couples who were punished severely for adultery and fornication. That being said, the main message of the film was almost crystal clear to his audience: Malays are

Muslims and should adhere strongly to such a potent belief. Indeed, according to Yusnor Ef, P. Ramlee was much inclined to inner and mystical practises, what is termed as *ilmu batin* (esoteric knowledge) rather than mere laws and rituals.<sup>10</sup>

Moving on to his early life, as early as eight years old, P. Ramlee had developed interests in singing and playing of several musical instruments. Some few years later, he soon became well known for his multiple talents and was respected as a profound musician in the Penang Orchestra.<sup>11</sup> His fame soon attracted the attention of B.S. Rahjans, an Indian director from Shaw Brothers' film production. The meeting between the two men proved to be the first important milestone that contributed to P. Ramlee's meteoric rise in the Singapore film industry. At Jalan Ampas studio, P. Ramlee received the support and encouragement of prominent film directors. This was coupled by the excellent facilities and skilled technicians who helped give the maximum effects needed for every film P. Ramlee acted.<sup>12</sup> Having sung, taken up major roles and won prestigious awards through several successful films, P. Ramlee was soon appointed as a Film Director in 1955. Eight more films were produced under his directorship and by the time *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961) was screened in the cinemas, it almost became hard for his fans to differentiate P. Ramlee the actor from the man in real life. The two roles seemed to have conflated within a person who was undergoing a process of self-discovery and relentless commitment towards social reformation.

One of P. Ramlee's central concerns as reflected in the films produced in cosmopolitan Singapore was the complexities of having to maintain traditional Malay values whilst at the same time, keeping up with the coming of modernity. P. Ramlee believed in a symbiotic relationship of both elements in the daily lives of Malays of his time. In his films, P. Ramlee highlighted that Malays must adopt what was best from their corpus of inherited values as well as Western modernity. He felt that it was the rigid and extreme adherence towards Malay values that had brought about an unquestioning loyalty towards their rulers as well as also other forms of social problems. He portrayed such criticisms in his film *Hang Tuah* (1956), which was based on a celebrated Malay classic. P. Ramlee ended the movie with a departure from the classical Malay text by adding a significant monologue of the victor, Hang Tuah, whom after having killed his friend, doubted whether such absolute faithfulness towards an unjust ruler's orders was truly an act of honour. Furthermore, to P. Ramlee, a modern society should have within it rudiments of morality and social cohesion along with the adoption of scientific knowledge and technological advancement. Such issues were subtly infused in the *Seniman Bujang Lapok* and will be elaborated in the later part of this essay.

The second important factor to be considered would be the social context in which the film has been produced. This is important because films are products of the social attitudes and ideological trends of a certain period and place.<sup>13</sup> *Seniman Bujang Lapok* was filmed at a time, which coincided with the 'reawakening' of the Malays, particularly the literary elites.<sup>14</sup> A major event that induced Malays in Singapore into full-blown activism in the postwar years was the Malayan Union Scheme, which was announced in October 1945. This scheme was introduced by the British with the hope of consolidating their hold on the Malay States. Singapore was, however, excluded from proposed set up.<sup>15</sup> Malays in the Peninsular who were disturbed by such a proposal saw the implementation of the Malayan Union as an attempt to erode the powers of the Sultans and a dilution of Malay special rights. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was thus registered in 1946, campaigning for an alternative set up known later as the Federation of Malaya. Singapore was again excluded due to the Peninsular Malays' concerns about Chinese numerical dominance on the island. Although some Malays in Singapore accepted such rationale of political separation, many hoped that they would soon be incorporated into the larger mainland Malay community where many of their families and friends lived. To ensure that the rights of Malays in Singapore were also protected, UMNO decided upon the

establishment of its branch known as Singapore UMNO (SUMNO) in 1948.<sup>16</sup> Its influence amongst the Malays alongside the Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS) was to reach its peak in 1957. Greatly affected by the Malayan Union episode, large numbers of Malays in Singapore became more active in the public sphere than ever before. Various organizations, which articulated a plethora of interests, mushroomed in the cosmopolitan colony. Issues of class divisions, identity, belonging, culture, religion and language were contested, leading to a rise of polemics and tensions between various ethnic groups on the island.<sup>17</sup> Contrastingly, in the realm of everyday life, food shortages, diseases, unemployment, vices and violence came to a height. Malays who were mainly lowly educated and engaged in fishing, poultry rearing and crop industries had to absorb such ever-increasing challenges in the postwar era.

Amidst such anxieties and challenges faced by Malays, on 6th August, 1950, a group of prominent teachers and journalists decided upon the formation of a dynamic and creative movement, *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (ASAS 50) (meaning the Literary Generation of 1950; the acronym ASAS means “basis”). Driven by the motto of *Seni Untuk Masyarakat* (Arts for Society), the group championed several forceful aims amongst which were: (1) to free Malay society from those elements of its culture that were obstructing or negating the pursuit of modernity and progress; (2) to advance the intellectual awareness of the *ra’ayat* (Malay masses) towards the ideals of social justice, prosperity, peace and harmony; (3) to foster Malay nationalism; and last but not least, 4) to refine and promote the Malay language as the lingua franca of Malaya.<sup>18</sup> Most prominent amongst the members of ASAS 50 were Kamaludin Muhamad (Keris Mas), Usman Awang (Tongkat Warant), Suratman Markasan, Masuri S. N., Abdul Ghani Hamid, Muhammad Ariff Ahmad (Mas) and Asraf Haji Wahab. Members of the ASAS 50 adopted the realist mode of writing novels, short stories and poems. Such style of writing was emphasised upon by ideologues of ASAS 50 from time to time with the deliberate intent of going against preceding genres, which, to them, were too preoccupied with stylistics and trivial aspects of human life, and hence not reflecting the true suffering of the common people. It is worth quoting Keris Mas at length who succinctly described the ASAS 50 at the peak of their engagement with the context in which they operated:

“In the field of literature, the proponents of ASAS 50 adopted a new breathe of style, employing a mode of language that is fresh, departing from the preceding genre of writers, propounding the themes of societal awareness, politics and culture with the aim of revitalizing the spirit of freedom, the spirit of independence of a people (bangsa) of its own unique sense of honour and identity, upholding justice and combating oppression...

We criticised societal backwardness and those whom we regard as the instruments responsible for the birth of such backwardness. We criticised colonialism and its instruments, that is, the elite class, those whose consciousness have been frozen by the influence of feudalism and myths, and superstition that has been enmeshed with religion. (author’s translation)”<sup>19</sup>

P. Ramlee was very much influenced by such developments and these ideals were reflected in the films he produced in Singapore. In fact, P. Ramlee was personally affiliated with members of ASAS 50. His own film magazine, *Bintang* (Star), was edited by Fatimah Murad who was the wife of ASAS 50 ideologue, Asraf. By the early 1960s, Asraf was already a well-known writer and was

responsible for infusing intellectual ideas of ASAS 50 into *Bintang* as well as sharing his thoughts with P. Ramlee.<sup>20</sup> As observed by a film historian, parallel to the objectives of ASAS 50, the *Bujang Lapok* Series<sup>21</sup> were comedies “*mengandung sindiran-sindiran tajam terhadap masyarakat* (that has, within it, sharp criticisms of the society)” at that time.<sup>22</sup> Thus, similar to the trend of realism in Malay writing in the 1950s, male characters of *Seniman Bujang Lapok* were portrayed as economically and socially downtrodden. Representing the predicament of a large segment of Malay men at that time, these three comical figures (Ramlee, Sudin and Aziz) had left their villages to seek employment in the urban areas without any special skill or knowledge that would enable them to secure lucrative or prestigious occupations.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, the characters were given names that were, in reality, their own. According to Aziz Sattar (one of the *Bujang Lapok*), P. Ramlee had always wanted the actors (himself included) during filming to be what they were *truly* like in real life. Through this, P. Ramlee hoped to highlight the true feelings and conditions of the common people.<sup>24</sup>

## Major Themes of *Seniman Bujang Lapok*

From the earlier discussion, it is undeniable that the *Seniman Bujang Lapok* as well as other films produced by P. Ramlee are important sources of reference for the social history of the Malays. In this section, instead of examining the film as it unfolds diachronically or approaching it from the perspective of its technical, artistic and linguistic sophistications, I will attempt to highlight some major themes that were propounded through the film that had functioned as representations of the Malay society in the 1950s and 1960s Singapore. To avoid falling into the fallacy of ‘reading too much’ into the film, I have included the findings of several academic studies and also insights from published memoirs by P. Ramlee’s contemporaries which are in line with the issues highlighted by him.

## The After Effects of the Japanese Occupation

One of the major themes propounded in the film was the after effect of the Japanese occupation. In this, P. Ramlee had brought to light two powerful effects. The first, socio-psychological in nature, was the phobia of bomb attacks. This was reflected in the character Sudin, who had instantaneously taken cover under the table of a coffee shop when one of the tyres of a lorry burst. When asked by Ramlee why he had reacted in such a way, Sudin replied that he remembered the times when the Japanese had bombed the country. Ramlee then reminded Sudin to forget about such incidences and concentrate upon their efforts to look for a decent job. Although trivial to many, this short scene propounds the social psychology of the rural Malays then, who had scarcely recovered from the shock of the Japanese occupation. It is worthwhile to note that no academic studies have so far been undertaken to examine in this aspect of Malay life in Singapore. Useful (yet problematic) sources that are readily available today consist of oral history records and memoirs by personalities who witnessed and experienced the ravages of Japanese rule and its subsequent impact. Nonetheless, in his recently published memoir, the ex-Minister of Social Affairs in Singapore Parliament, Mr Othman Wok, recounted how the Malay villages were left largely unscathed by continuous Japanese bombings until late January 1942. Due to this, there grew a sense of complacency amongst those who felt that only British military installations would be targeted. But after witnessing the devastation caused by

such bombs, which resulted in the deaths of neighbours and relatives, reality began to sink in and the Malays then realized that they were in a war zone.<sup>25</sup> Such fears and memories haunted the Malay psyche for many years thereafter.

Another effect of the war that was highlighted through the film was the interruption of education amongst the Malays. During the interview by Kemat Hassan, the Manager of the Malay Film Productions, Ramlee mentioned he had attended Malay school up to Standard Five and English school up to Standard Four and half! When asked why there is a “half”, Ramlee explained that he was in school when the Japanese attacked Malaya. The rest of the *Bujang Lapok* series also reflected low levels of educational achievements. Indeed, the Japanese Occupation had not only disrupted the education of the Malays, but it had also worsened the already low levels of participation of the Malays in mainstream schools.<sup>26</sup> In their efforts to gain the support of the Malay community, the Japanese made it compulsory for all students to learn the Japanese language as well as culture and negated the curriculum that was implemented by the British colonialists. According to Said Zahari who later became a renowned Malay journalist in *Utusan Melayu* during the post-war years, Malays perceived these new linguistic and cultural policies as acceptable for they provided employment opportunities within the Japanese administration. Yet such idealism was doomed from the outset. Towards the end of the war, school attendance was on a decline as many began to realize that such education merely served the motives of the Japanese conquerors.<sup>27</sup> Upon the end of the Occupation, most Malays had to rely on their mediocre qualifications attained prior to the Second World War. The low level of education amongst the Malays manifested itself in occupational patterns. In the late 1950s, two-thirds of the Malay population was engaged in menial occupations such as gardeners, office boys and labourers.<sup>28</sup> To stress upon his criticisms of the slumber and foolishness of the Malays in realm of education, P. Ramlee even resorted to the usage of derogatory words such as “stupid” (*bodoh*) and “idiot” (*bahalol*) in many instances of the film. Wittingly, he had highlighted such serious educational problems in a jokingly manner for his audiences to discern.

## Malays and the Challenge of Modernity

Yet another major theme that is worth highlighting is the challenge of modernity that Malay society was grappling with in the 1950s and 1960s. P. Ramlee intended to highlight that there was a need to find a balance between the maintenance of Malay cultural values and the onslaught of modernity. This, as said earlier, was in harmony with the mood of facing up to the challenge of modernisation amongst the Malay literary elites. The Malay literary elites had engaged in the writing of novels and plays that had centred on the theme that Malays had abandoned their traditional values and thus brought about moral and spiritual decay from within.<sup>29</sup>

On the preservation of Malay values, P. Ramlee uses the character of a Singh who works as a *Jaga* (watchman). The Singh gave sharp criticisms to Sudin for his lacking in *adab* (ethics) and for not behaving in the ways of an *orang Melayu* (Malay). Ramlee then echoes the slogan of ASAS 50 by saying that Sudin was sorely lacking of Malay ethics as reflected in his speech. “*Bahasa menunjukkan bangsa tau!* (Language reflects the conditions of a community!)”, Ramlee exclaimed.

The Singh went on to chide another man for not reflecting the spirit of *gotong royong* (cohesiveness) in response to the latter’s comments that the three men (Ramlee, Sudin and Aziz) were not befitting to be film stars. The Singh remarked that Malays could not progress if cohesiveness, which was part of Malay culture, was absent. Such emphasis on the spirit of *gotong royong* was continuously illustrated



in the events that had taken place in the long house that the Bujang Lapok resided. Communal spirit was highlighted in the film as a social control mechanism that could solve family disputes and for the community to inform each other of any catastrophe that had befallen the occupants in the long house. In the conclusive part of the film, the spirit *gotong royong* was reiterated yet again in a clearer way when the villagers mustered each other's courage to collectively arrest Sharif, the notorious neighbourhood hooligan.

Going further, to highlight and promote the merits of modernity, P. Ramlee had used the example of the Post Office in safeguarding money and property. At the end of the film, Salmah, the wife-to-be of Ramlee, assured him that her money had not been burnt to ashes as a result of the destruction of their long house. Instead, she mentioned it was "*diselamatkan*" (saved/unscathed) because her mother had deposited the money in the Post Office. P. Ramlee was indirectly appealing his Malay audiences to capitalise on the advanced instruments of modernity and to remove their 'bad' habits of keeping money under their beds and pillows in the *attap*-roofed (palm-roofed) houses that were prone to fire! This was also a deliberate re-enactment of a devastating fire that broke out in Singapore at a village called Bukit Ho Swee on 25th May 1961, some few months before *Seniman Bujang Lapok* was screened in cinemas. Four people died, eighty-five were injured and 2,200 *attap* houses were destroyed. Sixteen thousand people became penniless partly due to the practice of keeping money in their homes.<sup>30</sup>

## On the Understanding of Islam

Other than that, P. Ramlee also brought to light the flawed understanding of Islam amongst Malays, of which he was critical. First was the issue of polygamy. In one of the scenes, a man was caught by his wife dancing with another woman. After a heated verbal argument, the man then pleaded innocence in the context of Islam by stating that the woman was his second wife. The first wife commented profoundly that, "*Ooh! pasal nak berbini, ikut undang-undang Islam ye! Pasal sembahyang, puasa kenapa tak nak ikut undang-undang Islam!*(Ooh, with regards to marriage, you follow teachings of Islam!, [but] when it comes to prayers and fasting, why do you not follow Islam?)". P. Ramlee, who was married for multiple times, did not however nullify polygamy, which he acknowledged as an accepted element of the Islamic law. He uses the character Aziz who admonished the man by saying that the problem was not with the law but with implementation of that law. Justice and fairness must be upheld if a man so decides on a polygamous marriage.

In her monograph on *The Muslim Matrimonial Court in Singapore* based on her fieldwork carried out in 1963, Judith Djamour observed that *kathis* (Muslim judges) were particularly lax in determining the marriage status of intended couples. There thus arose a high prevalence of unreported polygamous marriages. In addition to that, divorce rates amongst Malays peaked to more than 50 per cent in 1957. Djamour also noted that there were occasions where Malay men were found to have "quietly kept another wife in town or in some other part of the Colony."<sup>31</sup> In 1958, the *Shariah* Court had been established and it was effective in reducing divorce rates and solving marital disputes. Yet, cases of unreported marriages were still prevalent at the time when *Seniman Bujang Lapok* was filmed.<sup>32</sup>

The next issue pertains to the belief in magical rocks and ornaments to attain certain worldly objectives. Sudin had bought a magical stone from an Indian man, which he had been assured could make their manager lend Ramlee three hundred and fifty dollars for the latter's wedding arrangements. Yet, Sudin was only given five dollars whilst the stone that he had bought cost him ten dollars! In

frustration, Sudin mentioned that the stone was *sial* (an omen) rather than a source of goodness and luck. He threw it into a drain.

Such were the satires directed by P. Ramlee towards the Malay society at that time. Hussein Alatas concurred with this viewpoint by arguing that the Malays during the 1960s were steeped in their beliefs of magic and mysticism in order to solve their daily trials and tribulations.<sup>33</sup> In an influential academic treatise, Syed Husin Ali further highlighted that the version of Islam amongst the Malays during this period was still steeped in animistic beliefs. Malays were more concerned with wasteful and pompous ceremonies, which were far from the teachings of Islam. Moreover, Islam amongst Malays was essentially devoid of rational and philosophical underpinnings. Malays were also found to be particularly lax in their observances of essential precepts such as prayers and fasting.<sup>34</sup>

## Poverty (Kemiskinan)

Last but not least, another recurring theme in P. Ramlee's film is poverty. Malays were portrayed as an economically depressed and marginal community who were deprived of the basic essentials of life such as food, health and lodging. Paradoxically, in the midst of such predicament, Malays were, at the same time, a close-knitted community whose values of brotherhood and kinship were still intact and continuously propagated. The *Bujang Lapok* were, in a sense, representations of Malay poverty. In an earlier part of the film, Ramlee had tried to sell his "prized possession", which was a torn undergarment to a Chinese rag-and-bone man. The man responded that such undesirable item could make him faint, what more to be sold. The film went on to images of Ramlee having placed two bricks on a pillow in order to iron his pants. Being an integral part amongst those who lived below the poverty line then, the *Bujang Lapok* could not even dream of owning an iron. In another setting, Sudin complained of the need for him to stand in a long queue every morning due to the lack of toilets in the villages. In a comical way he remarked, "*Heh apalah kita ni? Mau berak pun mau kena beratur! Berapa lama mau tungguhlah!* (Heh what [life] are we in? One has to queue in order to relieve one's bowels! How long must we wait?)

Having completed his fieldwork on the Malays in districts of Geylang and Jalan Eunos, an American academic William Hanna observed that Malays in mid-1960s Singapore were by far the most underdeveloped ethnic grouping in Singapore. The *kampongs* (villages) that most Malays lived were plagued by diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. Infant mortality was high due to poor drainage systems, lack of health services and unclean water. Yet, with the rising pressures by nationalists and politicians towards the government minimalist policies, conditions began to improve towards the second half of the 1960s, albeit, at a very slow rate. According to Hanna, such developments within the Malay community provided the background and impetus for the outbreak of the 1964 racial riots.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the film *Seniman Bujang Lapok* is indeed a useful historical source for the social history of the Malays in 1950s and 1960s Singapore. I have brought to light some major themes that have been propounded by P. Ramlee in this film. The after effects of the Japanese occupation, challenges of modernity, tensions in the understanding of Islam and poverty mirrored P. Ramlee's personal struggle as well as the challenges and anxieties faced by Malays then. It is therefore

not surprising that these themes were oft repeated in most, if not all, of P. Ramlee's productions. Most importantly, this paper has demonstrated that films can be a useful addition alongside other sources of social history such as oral records, memoirs, newspapers, coroner's records and governmental reports. The essential task of a historian (and perhaps anthropologists as well as sociologists) is thus to tease out persuasive evidences from such films, cross-examining it with other sources and providing rational interpretations of varied aspects of Malay society in a given period. Such history, like *all* histories, may not be perfect, but it may help to open doors and provoke questions for future efforts.

In conclusion, it is perhaps pertinent to restate that much has been done to uncover precise details of the life of this extraordinary man who is an intellectual in his own right. Yet, extensive and comprehensive research to demonstrate how the social history of Malays in Singapore could be enriched through the medium of films produced by P. Ramlee remains a neglected topic amongst scholars from varied disciplines. It is hoped that this paper has provided the impetus towards analysing the hundreds of films and songs produced by the *Seniman Agung* (Great Artist)<sup>36</sup> in the light of their historical significance.

**Endnotes**<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the ongoing debates on the definition of 'Malay' amongst scholars of varied fields. Tania Li in her book, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy, and Ideology* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989) had chosen to avoid such debates and get on with analysing the social group that she defined as 'Malays'. Judith Nagata in her essay, "What is A Malay?" highlighted the inherent problem of using 'Malay' as a social category in the context of Malaysia and Singapore due its fluidity in day-to-day practise. In the context of this essay, I have opted the definition given by Malaysian constitution that is; 'Malay' is one who is a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language and follows the Malay custom or adat.

<sup>2</sup> A.C. Milner, "Colonial Records History: British Malaya", *Kajian Malaysia*, 4, 2, pp. 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy P. Barnard, "Chickens, Cakes and Kitchen: Food and Modernity in Malay Films of the 1950s and 1960s", in Anne L. Bower (ed.), *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy P. Barnard & Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "Malays in Singapore: 1300-1959", in Aileen Lau (ed.), *Malay Heritage in Singapore* (Singapore: Suntree Media, 2006), forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Mahirin Hassan, "P. Ramlee - A Son of Penang", *Malaysia in History*, 22, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Tan Sri P. Ramlee, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (Selangor: Common Voyage, 1961). "The Nitwit Movie Stars" is an inaccurate translation of the movie title. The proper Malay translation should be "The Downtrodden Unmarried Artists".

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the film, see Ahmad Sarji, *P. Ramlee : Erti Yang Sakti* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1999), pp. 349-352.

<sup>8</sup> Wan Hamzah Awang, *Manusia P. Ramlee* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1993), p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Yusnor Ef, *P. Ramlee Yang Saya Kenal* (Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 2000), p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Ramlee Ismail, *Kenangan Abadi P. Ramlee* (Kuala Lumpur: Adhicipta, 1988), pp. 41-43.

<sup>12</sup> James Harding and Ahmad Sarji, *P. Ramlee: The Bright Star* (Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 2002), p. 233.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dyer, "Introduction to Film studies", in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Tham, Seong Chee, *Malays and Modernization: A Sociological Interpretation* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983), p.216

<sup>15</sup> Dominions Office to High Commissioners, 21 January 1946, CO 537/1528 For insights into the Malayan Union scheme and subsequent reactions by various groups in Malaya, see A.J. Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay politics during the Malayan Union Experiment 1945-1948* (Singapore: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1979); and Albert Lau, *The Malayan Union Controversy 1942-1948* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> There have debates on the origins of Singapore UMNO. Some of its members asserted that SUMNO was formally established in 1952 yet existed as an informal organization since the late 1940s. See for example, "Interviews with Buang bin Junid on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1987", *Oral History Records: Political Development in Singapore 1945-1965*, National Archives of Singapore.

<sup>17</sup> Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, *Modern Malay Literary Culture: A Historical Perspective* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1987), pp. 33-42.

<sup>18</sup> See ASAS 50, *Memoranda Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1961).

