



MORE THAN JUST ENTERTAINMENT: "UPIN IPIN" ANIMATION OFFERS MALAYSIA'S INTERETHNIC MULTICULTURAL SPIRIT TO INDONESIAN AUDIENCES

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Abstract

The animation "Upin Ipin" is a popular children's movie series in Indonesian audiences, including Denpasar, from 2010-2023. In the story, interethnic harmony and peace are reflected through the characters who play a role. This article analyzes how the animated series "Upin Ipin" represents the multicultural spirit in interethnic relations in Malaysia for Indonesian audiences. The effort to show interethnic harmony in Upin Ipin's animation is evident, although, in reality, multicultural problems still occur in society. This research uses a qualitative method; the data is studied using discourse analysis theory and ideology theory. The results show that Upin Ipin animation is one of the media that can be used as a means to shape, educate and neutralize issues related to ethnic stereotypes that exist in Malaysia. This article contributes to the understanding that Upin Ipin animation is not just entertainment but a medium to introduce multicultural life in Malaysia and encourage the spirit of interethnic multicultural.

Keywords: *animation, Upin Ipin, entertainment, interethnic, multicultural*

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2010 and 2023, the Malaysian-produced Upin Ipin animation captured the attention of Indonesian audiences through its series on MNCTV television station. Previously, there had never been an animated series from Malaysia that gained widespread popularity in Indonesia, including among children in Denpasar. By using the Malay language as a medium, Upin Ipin animation is easily understood by Indonesian audiences. However, it has yet to be realized that this animation is not just entertainment but also a means of promoting interethnic multicultural life in Malaysia. The Upin Ipin series is a three-dimensional animation by Les' Copaque Production. The Upin Ipin animation was initially created to educate children about the holy month of Ramadan. The duration was made short, only four minutes. Unexpectedly, it received an enthusiastic response from the audience. As its success was accepted by the public in Malaysia and in other countries such as Indonesia, starting in the fourth season, the story was developed. It showed more of the reality of life from the level of children and adults to seniors in Malaysia. The daily stories are shown by Upin Ipin, his family, and friends from a traditional Malaysian village background. Ghani (2015: 242-243) argues that the Upin Ipin animated series illustrates the identity of Malaysian characters and lifestyles, referred to as "Truly Asia."

The Upin Ipin animation in each episode's story reflects Malaysia's peaceful multicultural life and interethnic harmony. Living in harmony and peace between ethnicities, in Upin Ipin, the animation is represented through the animated characters involved in it. A study by Zahara et al. (2007) found that the tolerance level of the multicultural society in Malaysia is still moderate. Ethnic unity scores among Chinese and Indians were declining, while the level of unity among Malays did not depict an increasing trend. Economic and political factors are considered the main

contributors to the fragility of social relations among diverse ethnicities. According to Sharif et al. (2021: 430), the rigid foundation of ethnic identity in Malaysia, especially involving racial and religious diversity, is a significant factor affecting the efficacy of tolerance values in a multicultural society. Racially and religiously oriented norms and cultural differences previously thought to enhance harmony are instead manipulated as propaganda that fuels discrimination and tension.

There is a high prevalence among Chinese and Malays of rejecting people of different races and religions as neighbors. This situation is driven by race-based policies such as race-based vernacular schools and quotas for higher education entry. These policies are considered protectionist towards the Malays and increasing skepticism among the Chinese (Lee, 2016). The multicultural society in Malaysia needs to be highlighted to the public until they realize and welcome it. According to Kanas et al. (2015), it is crucial to foster a solid unity as a unified society can only be established when members are willing to internalize diversity as a whole. The public must be constantly exposed to and encouraged to interact harmoniously with others from different groups. The goal is to increase the value of tolerance while eradicating negative sentiments and stereotypes among themselves. Non-Malays' discontent and racialized politics led Malaysians to elect a fantastic and arguably historic number of opposition legislators in Malaysia's 2008 elections. One of the goals was to fight for an equal society between Malays and non-Malays. The diversity in Malaysia results from migration during the colonial and pre-colonial periods. According to Embong (2007: 106), the diversity or creation of modern pluralism in Malaysia is due to transnational migration in the colonial era, which lasted until the last decade. The pluralism in question includes cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic dimensions. Pluralism in Malaysia also has strong roots in the pre-colonial period.

It cannot be denied that differences in religion, ethnicity, and race have become latent issues that can trigger conflict in a plural society. Therefore, it needs to be anticipated by instilling values that can place differences in inequality. One solution that can be done is through education. According to Adhani (2014: 118), multicultural education can be an alternative means of solving socio-cultural conflicts. Cultivating multiculturalism values in each individual is not only through formal and informal education but can also be done through animation media. The presence of Upin Ipin animation can provide education about differences in equality and mutual respect between ethnicities with one. This study aims to critically analyze the multicultural spirit in the Upin Ipin animation through its overall visualization and the characters that play a role in it. This article observes that although multiculturalism has been discussed or promoted constantly, most Malaysians are still more proud of their ethnicity. The multicultural discussion is less beautiful than it seems from the outside. In it, there is still often a problem. For this reason, the presence of Upin Ipin animation through its characters that represent the ethnic diversity in Malaysia strongly seems to be an educational medium aimed at children and adults about the beauty and peace of togetherness in diversity. This article explains how animation, considered entertainment, can provide an understanding of togetherness in diversity. By studying multiculturalism through Upin Ipin animation, this article can contribute to developing media to help build a solid and positive multicultural spirit in Indonesian audiences.

2. IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

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



studies. The Upin Ipin animated videos sampled in the context of multiculturalism include all series from season 1 to season 13. The selection of all series from all seasons was made because each series visualizes interethnic multiculturalism in Malaysia. By depicting diverse characters and stories, the animation can showcase the diversity of cultures, traditions, and values of different ethnicities in Malaysia and present a message of unity and harmony between various groups of people with different backgrounds. Including all series in this study will gain a deeper understanding of how Upin Ipin has become a powerful symbol of multiculturalism in Malaysia. The analysis stage begins with the data collection step and is analyzed descriptively, describing all the data findings obtained and then interpreting them. The object of Upin Ipin animation analyzed is symbolic interaction and all types of communication expressions in the form of speech or conversation, writing, pictures, images, sound effects, or music.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Upin Ipin Animation is a famous Malaysian animation series. The series follows the adventures of two twin brothers, Upin and Ipin, along with their friends. The characters include Upin, 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. The story in this animation focuses on children's daily life and contains educational values, friendship, and kindness. Upin and Ipin are portrayed as cheerful, energetic, and curious twins. The stories in the series often highlight the minor problems and conflicts faced by Upin, Ipin, and their friends, such as finding solutions to overcome problems, resolving disputes, or learning from experiences.

The Upin Ipin animation also features very thick visualizations with a multicultural spirit. Multicultural discourse is represented through the characters who play a role in it. Malay ethnicity is represented by the characters Upin Ipin, Kak Ros, Opah, Atuk Dalang, and others. The non-Malay ethnicities are Jarjit, Mutu (India); Memei, Ah Tong (China); and Susanti (Indonesia). The thick multicultural atmosphere in Malaysian society inspired the team of animators who are members of Les' Copaque Production Sdn Bhd. This multicultural spirit is nurtured from an early age to children by using children's characters according to the target audience.



Figure 1. Characters who play a role in the Upin Ipin animation
Source: Animasi Upin Ipin-Bing images, 2023

Previously, there were story characters with three dominant ethnic backgrounds: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. However, since 2007 one more ethnicity has been added, namely Indonesian ethnicity. The multicultural society represented through characters of several ethnicities is engaging. It is interesting because, in animation, characters have a significant role. In general,

audiences will more easily remember or recognize a comic film, game, and others because of the presence of characters or characters who play a role.

Malaysia is known as one of the countries that consist of various tribes or ethnicities. Firdaus et al. (2015: 1756) argue that a country built by various tribes or ethnicities has the potential to face cross-cultural issues between one ethnicity and another. Disputes are straightforward to arise if inter-ethnic relations are based on something other than the spirit of mutual respect for differences. Moreover, ethnic issues are also drawn into politics and economics. Multicultural discourse is often raised to reduce interethnic disputes. This opinion explains that in a country consisting of various tribes or ethnicities, cultural conflicts may arise between one tribe and another. Disputes often occur if inter-ethnic relations are not based on mutual respect for differences. Especially when ethnic issues are politicized or related to economic issues. The concept of multiculturalism is often used to defuse inter-ethnic conflicts. Multiculturalism is a concept that describes the situation of cultural diversity, customs, laws, race, religion, and so on in a nation-state. According to Barker (2014: 181), the basic premise of multiculturalism is about how to show tolerance for the diversity of cultural practices in the context of the nation-state. As a policy approach, multiculturalism is quite influential in education and culture because the concept implies a desire to introduce people to different beliefs, values, customs, and cultural practices. Multiculturalism aims to express respect for and celebration of differences.

Regarding the meaning and message contained in the Upin Ipin animation, Muhdaliha and Arlena (2017: 25) argue: "The Upin Ipin show provides messages and meanings that explain ethnic differences in multicultural Malaysia by describing details of knowledge, morals, arts, customs, laws and any abilities or habits of the people." While Essy Syamm et al (2019: 2.71.4) argue: Multicultural Malay society is depicted in the story of Upin and Ipin. Multicultural Malay society has several ethnicities in this story representing their respective ethnicities. Malay people are represented as people who are diligent, intelligent, entrepreneurial, and relaxed. While other ethnicities, such as Chinese and Indians. The Chinese are represented as diligent, intelligent, and hardworking, while the Indians are represented as diligent and like to sing.

Based on the two opinions above, the multicultural spirit in Upin Ipin animation is represented through the knowledge formed in the storytelling, the moral messages conveyed by the characters, the art activities that appear, the customs displayed, the laws that apply in society and the habits carried out by Malaysian society in general. It is also represented through the differences in the characters of each ethnicity. The emergence of Upin Ipin animation, which contains the spirit of unity in diversity, is inseparable from the multicultural problems in Malaysia. Globalization also impacts the rise of identity awareness, raising an urgent need for people in the Southeast Asian region, including Malaysia. This need is to have an appropriate handling mechanism for social problems arising from cultural pluralism in this region. One of the alternatives is the policy of multiculturalism, and its discourse has been developing since the early 1970s (Sundrijo, 2008: 183).

Historically, the multicultural movement first emerged in Canada and was later followed by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia. The emergence of multiculturalism in Canada was motivated by the condition of the Canadian state, which was plagued by conflicts caused by relations between citizens. The problem includes relations between ethnic groups, religions, races, and political streams trapped in dominant and non-dominant. According to Wahyu (in Firdaus, 2006:4), a conflict can be resolved by initiating the concept of a



multicultural society whose essence is equality, respect for community cultural rights, and democracy. This opinion shows that conflicts can be resolved by introducing the concept of a multicultural society based on the principles of equality, respect for community cultural rights, and democracy. In this context, the concept of multicultural society emphasizes the values of equality, where every individual and community has the same right to maintain and respect their own culture. In addition, the concept also emphasizes the importance of democracy in managing differences and ensuring that all voices are heard and respected in decision-making related to community life.

Malaysia has a long-standing multicultural problem. These problems are related to the existence of ethnic Malays (indigenous) with Chinese-dominated migrants. As an effort to protect and accommodate Malay interests, an ethnic Malay organization was formed in the early 20th century. Malaysian government policies that prioritize Malay penetrated politics and government institutions. So many government policies considered discriminatory by some non-Malay communities result in hatred towards the Malays. Multiculturalism in Malaysia encourages practical communication skills from Malaysia's indigenous ethnic Malays, who are based on Malay culture and based on Islam. The attitude of inter-ethnic tolerance is seen in various religious holidays used as state moments. These holidays include holidays such as Chinese New Year, Thaipusam, Christmas, Gawai, And so on are critical celebratory days for each ethnicity in Malaysia. Related to the very high inter-ethnic and religious tolerance in Upin Ipin animation, Arlena and Kurniasari (2013) argued:

"Upin Ipin described impressions on the values of solidarity and tolerance between ethnic groups as high. The existence of cultural diversity that existed then brought a very positive impact due to new things and cultural diversity. Upin Ipin's impressions also described that religion not only Islam but there is a Christian religion, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism" (Arlena et al., 2013, p. 637). Arlena and Kurniasari (2013) argued that the Upin Ipin animation depicts positive values such as solidarity, tolerance, and cultural diversity in Malaysian society. Cultural diversity provides a significant favorable influence on social life and interaction between ethnic groups. They also noted that the religion practiced by the characters in Upin Ipin is not only limited to Islam, the majority religion in Malaysia, but also includes other religions such as Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This phenomenon shows the recognition of religious diversity and respect for religious freedom in Malaysian society, depicted in the Upin Ipin animation.

Although Malaysia has always promoted its country as multicultural, there still needs to be more comfort in Malaysia towards multiculturalism. This conditions is stated by Yusof (2017: 104), who argues as follows: "Malaysia has always been promoting itself as a multicultural country, yet it is still uncomfortable with multiculturalism. Since its independence, Malaysia has introduced different plans and concepts to promote national unity and 'unity in diversity.' Ethnic conflict is inevitable in Malaysia, where the population has a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multicultural, and multi-religious composition. However, visual culture can shape and shift peoples' perceptions towards certain issues in engineering change for Malaysia. In this case, it can educate acceptance of each other's ethnicity and reconstruct a multicultural society".

Yusof explained that Malaysia has always promoted itself as a multicultural country but still feels uncomfortable with multiculturalism. Therefore, Malaysia has introduced various plans and concepts since its independence to promote national unity and "unity in diversity." Inter-ethnic conflicts are inevitable in a country like Malaysia, with a population composed of diverse

ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions. However, visual culture can shape and change people's perceptions of specific issues in building change for Malaysia. In this case, it can educate acceptance of each other's ethnicity and reconstruct a multicultural society. In other words, what Yusof said implies that Malaysia faces a challenge in maintaining a balance between its multiculturalism and the discomfort felt towards multiculturalism. However, through visual culture, such as media and vibrant visual arts, Malaysia has the potential to change perceptions and educate the public on the importance of accepting ethnic diversity and building a multicultural society.

For some, Malaysia's multicultural discourse allegedly protects the interests of the Bumiputera (Malays) over others. Likewise, multiculturalism will only appear 'sweet' around the tourism industry that serves to attract tourists. Not as something to be truly understood or lived. In an article written by Endrawan (2015), it is mentioned: "Ethnically, Malaysia consists of Bumiputera Malays (dominating), Chinese, and Indians. There are also some other ethnicities, such as Arabs. However, the most visible are Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Multicultural advertisements that are promoted are not as beautiful as their true colors. Most residents (not all) tend to have discriminatory traits that may have been nurtured from an early age. Not only because of pride in their ethnicity but often it even leads to something that tends to be negative. Ethnic blending does occur. However, the inter-ethnic grouping is more likely to be seen. Ethnic Malays gather with each other. Ethnic Indians still use their 'mother tongue' rather than Malay, which is the glue of unity. Ethnic Chinese? They prefer to send their children only to ethnic Chinese schools".

Regarding the structure of Malaysian society, Hefner revealed that Malaysian society was encouraged to compete between the aristocratic, Islamic, and popular nationalist groups by the colonial government. The three groups could only show their cultural dominance after the end of the colonial period. While still running and controlling important leadership and political organizations in Malay is, the nobility and royal family. The developed citizenship was asymmetrically differentiated between Chinese, Indians, and Malays regarding political, legal, and economic rights. Islam was therefore declared the state religion, and Malay was declared the national language (Hefner, 2007, p. 56).

The issue of pluralism in Malaysia has an impact on government policy. Officials, market players, and scholars are often involved in policy debates or bargaining. It is even done openly, and some are done covertly. The same goes for the discourse built at the political elite level when contesting elections. These conditions can trigger inter-ethnic tensions, as tragically happened in 1969 (Embong, 2007, p. 107). Prolonged multicultural problems may result from a need for more in-depth management of diverse cultures. According to Parekh (2001), multiculturalism has three components: culture, cultural plurality, and a sure way to respond to that plurality. He states that multiculturalism is not a pragmatic political doctrine but a way of looking at human life. According to Parekh (2001), multiculturalism recognizes the importance of cultural diversity in society and proposes a specific approach to deal with it in this context. This multiculturalism involves recognizing the cultural rights of each individual and group and attempting to respond to and address such differences constructively and inclusively.

If we look at the countries in the world, they are all formed from diverse cultures. Based on this condition, it cannot be denied that the main principle is difference. Therefore, the multicultural spirit movement must be balanced with political policies that can manage cultural differences in every color of the country. Upin Ipin animation, as one of the visual cultures, can be used to shape, educate and shift people's perceptions of ethnic issues. Upin Ipin's animation can educate



acceptance between one ethnicity and another and can deconstruct the multicultural Malaysian society.

4. CONCLUSION

More than just entertainment that captivates children, the Upin Ipin animation has a message of an inter-ethnic multicultural spirit. Upin Ipin's animation visually depicts the peaceful and harmonious life between ethnicities in Malaysia's multicultural society. Through its characters, Upin Ipin's animation conveys messages about multiculturalism. The Upin Ipin show provides information and meanings that explain racial differences in Malaysia, a multicultural country, including knowledge, morals, arts, customs, laws, and details about people's abilities or habits. The Upin Ipin animation production emphasizes the spirit of multiculturalism and reflects the conditions of Malaysia's diverse society. Malaysia has long faced the challenges of multiculturalism, especially with the presence of a majority Chinese population. This diversity encourages tolerance between cultures and religions in Malaysia. The attitude of inter-ethnic tolerance can be seen in various religious festivals that become national moments, such as Chinese New Year, Thaipusam, Christmas, Gawai, and other holidays, which various ethnic groups in Malaysia celebrate. Upin Ipin animation is a media that promotes and develops inter-ethnic multiculturalism in Malaysia.

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