

## THE FACE OF MALAY CULTURE IN INDONESIAN CHILDREN'S READINGS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Awareness of national and cultural identity has nowadays become an increasingly popular topic of conversation. As the oldest culture in Indonesia, it is not surprising that Malay cultural values have embodied all aspects of Indonesian nationhood. Such values have been inveterately introduced to the people since their early age. Different media can be utilized to make this effort, one of which is children's readings. Despite the importance of introducing Malay culture to Indonesian society, however, not many children's reading seemingly contains the virtues of Malay culture. As the result, children seem to have lack of knowledge and awareness of their culture of origin. While preliminary studies show that Malay cultural values can be found in Indonesian folklores, many Indonesian children are ironically not familiar with such folklores and instead more familiar with Malaysia-made animated shows such as Upin & Ipin and Pada Zaman Dahulu. With the strong influence of Malay culture in these two shows, it is understandable that Indonesian children learn more about Malay cultures from the shows. This paper aims to describe how Indonesian children recognize and learn about Malay culture from their readings, namely Upin & Ipin and Pada Zaman Dahulu. By observing this process, it is possible to identify any possible challenges to the cultural revitalization attempt, particularly of Malay culture, in Indonesian children's readings. This paper employs a descriptive and qualitative approach, using two Malaysia-made animations namely Upin & Ipin and Pada Zaman Dahulu as its object of research.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Malay, children's reading, children's animation, revitalization

Indonesia is a rich country. This is evident, among others, from its tropical nature and fertile soil that benefit the agriculture sector and its marine biodiversity that helps the marine sector. These natural resources are supported by the existence of various ethnic groups inhabiting thousands of Indonesian islands stretched from Sumatra to Papua, which has created an invaluable linguistic and cultural diversity. On the other hand, its large population also adds the list of its potential resources. All of these assets are spread in the total area of 5,193,250 km<sup>2</sup> that comprises the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (in <https://www.inonesia.com/luas-wilayah-negara-indonesia.html>, accessed on 10 June 2017: 9 pm of Western Indonesian Time). With these assets, Indonesia has long captured the world's attention.

Global rapid developments have made various impacts on the Indonesian society. In addition to the advancement of technology that has helped make life easier, the inevitable global exposures have also brought in new ideas, values, and ideologies. Unfortunately, these influences are often not properly filtered. This condition, if allowed to continue, may lead to a more serious identity and cultural crisis.

Hoed in “Amnesia Budaya Sebagai Gejala Krisis” (in Sarumpaet, 2016) mentions that Indonesia is currently suffering from a cultural amnesia, i.e. a symptom of cultural crisis that arose as an impact of rapid globalization on the social and cultural aspect. This symptom, Hoed explains, is marked by more and more people starting to forget important historic events and local wisdoms that have made Indonesia be internationally recognized and respected. At the same time, new values have arisen and accepted along with the globalization.

Referring to the notion of cultural amnesia, it is now not uncommon to find Indonesian children that speak English more fluently than they speak Indonesian. They idolize foreign fictive characters, enjoy western food more than enjoy

Indonesian cuisines, and learn in environments that are based on western curriculum and educational contents.

This condition has raised an important question about which culture is familiar to Indonesian children. On that account, this paper aims to describe how Malay culture is recognized by Indonesian children through their readings.

## **METHOD OF RESEARCH**

*Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu* have become two popular readings for Indonesian children. This qualitative descriptive study is a preliminary research on Malay cultural values recognized by Indonesian children through their readings. Using structural approach to the content of the text (in this case, two animated shows entitled *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu*), one can describe which values of Malay culture that Indonesian children could recognize. For this purpose, analysis was made on the characterizations, settings, dictions, and the use of language in the story.

## **DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**

### **1. Malay Culture**

The values of Malay culture has rooted in each of basic aspects of the nationhood. Such values have been inveterately introduced to the people since their early age. But what is Malay?

The term *Malay* is defined based on the notion of *Malay* and *Malayness* (Roza, 2016). *Malay* refers to the family of Malay race that speaks the Malay language; and *Malayness* refers to the identity of Malay. Therefore, Malay is understood based on its criteria as a family of race that speaks Malay and various ethnic groups belonging to Indonesian Malay, such as Aceh, Bugis, Bali, Batak, Banjar, Jawa, Kerinci, Lampung, Minangkabau, Makasar, Mandailing, Madura, Menado, Sunda, Toraja, etc. The term Malay is primarily used to refer to the ethnic group inhabiting Riau Islands and Sumatra east coast that speaks Riau

Malay language. This claim is supported by Yusoff Hasyim and Farouk (in Roza, 2016), that defines the context of Malay based on the geographic and linguistic aspects.

Malay language has become a *lingua franca* that tie together different ethnic groups, especially those belonging to the Malay family. It is through this language that cultural values are exchanged.

Malay culture values manners so highly; these include the traits like forbearing, being subtle, being diplomatic, upholding any applicable principles, and having the ability to utilize language and rhetorics (Koster, 2011). Consequently, smart uses of language in the form of proverbs (sayings), figures of speech, or allusions, are seen in many occasions to express certain intention and, at the same time, entertain all the hearers.

## **2. Children's Reading**

Children's reading, in the context of literature, refers to the reading that is intended for child readers. David, in Sarumpaet (1976), defines children's literature as literary works written by adults but read by children under the supervision of adults. In its development, however, child authors also started to write them. In the end, when it comes to whether or not a reading is decent for children, the quality of the writing is what matters. Of course, this is not to diminish the role of adult's supervision in the reading process.

A children's reading should consider its readers, i.e. children; hence, a special treatment is required in writing it so as to achieve the desired *dulce-et-utile* quality. It is because children need guidance, advise, and counseling about themselves and the world around them.

A special attention is required to the rules on writing children's readings. The conventions on characterizations, plot, setting, and theme should be adjusted to

the interest of children, which, of course, would be different from those for adults (Sutherland, 1997). Various genres can also be found in children's literature, such as early-age readings, traditional stories (proverbs, animal stories, fables, folklores, myths, legends), fantasy stories, realistic fictions, biographies, historical fictions, nonfictions, poems, and dramas (Sarumpaet, 2010).

Along with the advancement of technology and the flow of globalization, however, children's readings nowadays no longer only refer to printed readings (published using a print press). Instead, in this paper, the term "reading" refers to all things read by children. Aside from books in their literal sense, children also enjoy readings through electronic and digital media. These include video, gadget application, television, etc. In fact, a tendency occurs that the increase in technological literacy has been decreasing children's interest in reading books. That being so, children prefer to read through television and gadget than books.

### **3. Animation for Children**

Animation is a moving picture created from a set of objects (images) that are arranged in a certain order following the flow of movement that has been determined for each time increment. An animation may feature pictures of living thing, inanimate object, or writing (in <https://idseducation.com/articles/apa-itu-animasi/>, accessed on 5 March 2018: 12.03 pm of Western Indonesian Time).

Animations are often identified by the commoners as cartoons that are intended especially for children. Contrary to this assumption, there are also animations intended for adults, such as *The Simpson* and *Sinchan*. *The Simpson*, once aired on an Indonesian TV station, is intended for adults despite it featuring several young-age characters. Meanwhile, *Sinchan* series once raised a controversy in Indonesia, as many considered it inappropriate for child viewers.

It was not until 1980s that Indonesian animations started to bloom. This was marked by the production of several children's animations such as animated

movie *Rimba Si Anak Angkasa* and animated TV series *Si Huma* (in [http://harifilmnasional.id/artikel-20-Mendorong\\_Animasi\\_Indonesia.html](http://harifilmnasional.id/artikel-20-Mendorong_Animasi_Indonesia.html), accessed on 5 March 2018: 12.43 pm of Western Indonesian Time). As the time went, more animations were aired by Indonesian TV stations. Some animations were created and produced by local animators, such as *Timun Mas*, *Syamil dan Dodo*, *Adit Sopo Jarwo*, and even animated folklores and animated stories of prophets. Some other animations, on the other hand, were purchased from overseas, such as *Casper*, *Scooby Doo*, *Doraemon*, *Dora The Explorer*, *Spongebob*, even *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu*.

Despite the dominance of America-made and Japan-made animations aired by Indonesian TV stations, *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu* have interestingly thrived as Malaysia-made animations using the Malay language. The use of a cognate language to Indonesian has made it easier for Indonesian children to understand these shows. Another advantage of these two shows is the cultural values that dominate their contents. As the production house, Les Copaque's success in integrating local cultural values into two animations that children would enjoy watching is worth an appreciation.

### **Malay Culture in Indonesian Children's Reading**

What do Indonesian children really read? Can the existing children's reading help answer children's questions on their identity, their family, the values their family have been upholding, and what ethnic group or nation they belong to? Ironically, preliminary searches show that there are not many pictorial readings that promote cultural and national values to children. Among the few is Iwok Abqary's *Sepatu Dahlan* series consisting of *Sepatu Dahlan*, *Mencuri Tebu*, and *Gembala Riang* published by Noura Books (2014), which tell the honesty and persistence of an elementary student named Dahlan. Although this series does not explicitly identify a specific culture or nation, from the way Dahlan is depicted

with his red-and-white elementary school and from the clues found in the setting, one can draw a conclusion that the main character is an Indonesian kid. Honesty and persistence are definitely two qualities that Indonesian children need to develop.

National identity and cultural values are also shown in books published by Litara Books (in <http://litara.or.id/our-books/bianglala-nusantara/>, accessed on 15 June 2016: 11.00 am of Western Indonesian Time). Some stories do feature unique characteristics of a certain region or culture in Indonesia, such as *Misteri di Pasar Apung*, *Cap Go Meh*, *Jangan Bersedih Bujang*, and *Di Mana Songket Kakak? Misteri Pasar Apung*, for example, features the activities in a floating market in Kalimantan. Meanwhile, *Cap Go Meh* portrays how the foods served on Eid al-Fitr celebration and those served during Cap Go Meh (the fifteenth day of Lunar New Year) celebration are not so different.

Although these books do not elaborate in detail a certain culture or ethnic group existing in Indonesia, these books can be used to preliminarily introduce Indonesian children to their nation. This effort deserves an appreciation, considering the lack of quality readings for children nowadays.

With a considerable portion of Malay ethnic group in Indonesia, is Malay culture represented in Indonesian children's readings? How is Malay culture depicted in Indonesian children's readings?

It is not easy task to find traces of Malay culture in children's readings published during the last 5–10 years, let alone finding ones that clearly portray Malay's unique characteristics. It is because publishing companies tend to choose to publish what the world likes to see. Unsurprisingly, children stories produced by or adapted from Walt Disney have been dominating the market. To mention a few examples, there are *Tangled*, *Cinderella*, *Frozen*, *Finding Dori*—the sequel to *Finding Nemo*—and *Coco* that has just been aired in Indonesia. These

animations come in various stories; some are originally written, and some others are translations and even adaptations. Even the characters come in various merchandises that the manufacturers think will attract their potential buyers, i.e. children.

Traces of Malay identity can perhaps only be found in traditional stories, such as *Bujang Awang Tabuang* (Bengkulu), *Kisah Tan Talanai* (Jambi), *Punai Anai* (Riau), *Si Pahit Lidah dan Kutukannya* (South Sumatra), *Lebai Nan Malang* (West Sumatra), and *Legenda Batu Menangis* (West Kalimantan) that are all included in the folklore anthology *Koleksi Terbaik 100 Plus Dongeng Rakyat Nusantara* (2013). Values of culture Malay could also be find in fables, such as the adventure of Kancil, the mouse-deer character that still dominates the themes of fable stories in Indonesian children's readings.

As previously mentioned, children readings are nowadays refer to all kinds of things read by children through processes of reading, seeing, listening, and even sensing. In terms of cultural content, Malaysia-made animated serials *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu*, whose airing rights in Indonesia have been purchased by MNC TV, are considered as culturally-loaded readings enjoyed by Indonesian children. With a particular mission to promote the values of Malay Cultures, Les Copaque Production has deliberately created these two animations using a unique approach.

*Upin & Ipin* was first aired in August 2007 by TV9, Malaysia (in <http://lescopaque.com/v11/our-works/upin-ipin/>, accessed on 2 Feb 2018: 10.20 pm of Western Indonesian Time). It tells about a pair of 5-year-old twins—namely Upin and Ipin—that live together with Opa, their grandmother, and Kak Ros, their older sister, with all of their daily interactions with their schoolmates and neighbors in a realistic childhood environment. Both Upin and Ipin are characterized like common children who are a little mischievous, like to have



some fun, have a great curiosity to something, and tend to be rebellious, but can be nice and sweet at the same time. Opa and Kak Ros, on the other hand, are two characters that control the narrative of the story. They are also the key to delivering the moral messages of the story. The stories of Upin and Ipin portrays such a very realistic world of children that these two characters are chosen to be the UNICEF ambassadors for Malaysia.

The animated series *Pada Zaman Dahulu* was first aired by TV Al-Hijrah Malaysia on August 2007 (in <http://lescopaque.com/v11/our-works/pada-zaman-dahulu/>, accessed on 2 March 2018: 10.25 pm of Western Indonesian Time). It mainly tells fables, but wrapped up in a story of Aris and Ara, two siblings that are visiting their grandfather, Aki, for vacation. Aki, being a great storyteller, always tells the children fable stories about a mouse-deer named Kancil and its animal friends in their village. Kancil is a very popular mouse-deer character that is featured in many Malaysian fables. Aki uses these stories—whatever happens or whatever Kancil does in them—as instruments to deliver moral messages to Aris and Ara. *Pada Zaman Dahulu*, following the didactic nature of fables, is intended to instill moral values in life.

Both of these two serials, interestingly, feature stories that are largely dominated by the local culture—in this case, Malay. This is evident not only from the attributes used in the characterizations and the settings, but also from the language. A language represents the uniqueness of a culture; therefore, the use of Malay language is clearly intended to promote Malay culture. This is important, considering that Malaysia has integrated all of its race and ethnic groups into one, united nation called Malay (Roza, 2016).

In the middle of the lack of Indonesian children readings that represent values of Malay culture, both *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu* have come to carry out the mission. In an episode of *Upin & Ipin*, for example, it is told how Opa

enjoys chewing betel and even has a traditional betel container. From this story, Indonesian children, especially those who live in urban areas and are not familiar with this habit, can learn about it. Malay language is one of the most dominant aspects of Malay culture featured in these two series. The distinctive Malay dialect, definitely, has come as something unique for the multiethnic Indonesian children. The use of proverbs is another interesting point that enriches the stories delivery. This method of delivery is rarely found in Indonesia-made children's stories.

In *Pada Zaman Dahulu* episode “Belalang dan Semut”, it is told about a Grasshopper that was too lazy to collect food in preparation for the dry season. The grasshopper lived in a fertile tropical forest, but never really tried to provide for himself. He preferred to play music and sing instead. One day, an ant tried to advise him to collect food as soon as possible as the rain season would end soon, but he refused to listen. When the dry season came, the grasshopper did run out of food. He was starving, because the forest had gone dry and there was nothing left to eat.

He soon realized that the ant was right. In the end, the kind ant helped him. The story is then ended with a popular proverb, “Berakit-rakit ke hulu, berenang-renang ke tepian; bersakit-sakit dahulu, bersenang-senang kemudian” (no pain no gain).

Similar story about a grasshopper and an ant can also be in Indonesia. The story, titled *Hoppy Si Merdu Pemas* (2014), was written by Yovita Siswati and published by Tiga Serangkai. However, unlike the Malay version that features a tropical environment, the Indonesian version features snowy winter as the setting instead. It is told that Hoppy the grasshopper does not want to collect food for winter. Besides, the moral messages are not delivered through a proverb, although

proverbs such as ones used in *Pada Zaman Dahulu* are undoubtedly one of our uniqueness as part of Malay community.

“Tali Pinggang Hikmat” is another story from *Pada Zaman Dahulu* that can be found in Indonesian children's literature. In Indonesia, it is called “Sabuk Keramat” and featured in *Petualangan Si Kancil* (2013). The story is about how Kancil successfully escaped danger by tricking a tiger using a snake. The Malay version from *Pada Zaman Dahulu* series, however, is made more interesting and lively with animation, melancholic voice in Malay language, and addition of proverbs to conclude the moral of the story.

From the elaboration, it is clear that both *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu* have made a great contribution to introducing cultural values to Indonesian children. Indonesian children acquire and improve their knowledge through the new words they learn from these shows. They can also learn about proverbs and manners in using language.

Moreover, the realistic portrayal of the world of children through the young-age characters from the shows—namely Upin, Ipin, Aris, and Ara—somehow represents the life of Indonesian children. It is ironic, then, that with all of its cultural diversity and multiethnicity, authors and creative professionals in Indonesia are not too motivated to promote the uniqueness of their cultures through their works.

## CONCLUSION

Children need high-quality readings that can help them develop strong characters as the next generation of the country. For this purpose, children should be introduced to their roots and cultures. By knowing their identity and their culture of origin, they are expected to eventually help build the nation and the country.

Readings are not limited only to printed books, but also include shows and spectacles. Referring to this definition, the animated series *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu* are also considered as Indonesian children's readings. These two shows are produced in Malaysia, but have gained a tremendous popularity in Indonesia since they were aired in Indonesia. Indonesian children especially love them because the shows represent their life as children. *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu* also introduce the values of Malay culture in each of their episodes, as reflected from the portrayal of the characters, settings, and styles of language that make use of proverbs (sayings). Unfortunately, there are not many readings (including shows and spectacles) found in Indonesia that promote the cultural values of a certain ethnic group. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that Les Copaque has made a successful effort in integrating the values of Malay culture into stories that portray children's life full of fun and play.

Finally, combined efforts are certainly required from all relevant parties in order to produce children's readings that can promote local culture in a modern and enjoyable way, such as *Upin & Ipin* and *Pada Zaman Dahulu*. These efforts, as an attempt of cultural revitalization, should involve not only creative professionals, but also the government, educational institutions, and the public.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This paper has been presented at THE 2016 INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON ARCHEOLOGY, HISTORY, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE IN THE MALAY WORLD (ASBAM) at Hotel Condotel Makassar, 26—27 July 2016. Many thanks are due to the event organizer, the Faculty of Cultural Sciences of Universitas Hasanuddin Makassar and the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia that have facilitated the publication of this paper in the INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MALAY-

NUSANTARA STUDIES. For that purpose, a small portion of this paper has been updated.

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