

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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Volume 32

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## Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

## Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		أَ، آَ، إِيَّ	an
أُ	u		أُوَّ	un
إِ	i		إِيَّ	in
آَ، آِ، إِيَّ،	ā		أُوَّ	aw
أُوَّ	ū		إِيَّ	ay
إِيَّ	ī		أُوَّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			إِيَّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

*Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>*





# **Da'wah through Documentary Films Produced by Malayan Film Unit (MFU) and *Filem Negara Malaysia* (FNM), 1957-1970**

**Chellitda Farhana Gunaish\***  
**Mohd Firdaus Abdullah\*\***  
**Saifulazry Mokhtar\*\*\***  
**Norazilawati Abd Wahab\*\*\*\***  
**Azian Tahir\*\*\*\*\***

**Abstract:** This research aims to find out the role of documentary films produced by the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) and *Filem Negara Malaysia* (FNM) as a da'wah medium in Malaysia and abroad from 1957 to 1970. The Department of Information Service and the Federation of Malaya Government collaborated with the Islamic Department of Malaya and the Islamic Department of Brunei to use MFU and FNM documentary films to develop an Islamic Malay community, which adhered to the actual teachings of Islam, during that time. Findings indicated that these documentary films by MFU and FNM were the early medium of da'wah in the Federation of Malaya after the independent. It

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also indicates that the Federal Government, together with the relevant agencies, is responsible for Islamic religious affairs in the country during the specified period.

**Keywords:** Malayan Film Unit (MFU), Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM), Malaysia, Documentary Films, Da'wah

**Abstrak:** Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peranan filem dokumentari yang dihasilkan oleh Malayan Film Unit (MFU) dan Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM) sebagai medium dakwah di Malaysia dan luar negara dari tahun 1957 hingga 1970. Jabatan Penerangan dan Kerajaan Persekutuan Tanah Melayu bekerjasama dengan Jabatan Islam Persekutuan Tanah Melayu serta Jabatan Islam Brunei dalam menggunakan filem dokumentari MFU dan FNM untuk mendidik masyarakat Melayu Islam bagi mengamalkan ajaran Islam sebenar pada masa itu. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa filem dokumentari oleh MFU dan FNM merupakan antara medium terawal dakwah di Persekutuan Tanah Melayu selepas kemerdekaan tanah air. Malah ia menunjukkan Kerajaan Persekutuan bersama-sama agensi yang terlibat bertanggungjawab dalam hal ehwal agama Islam di tanah air dalam tempoh yang dinyatakan.

**Kata kunci:** Malayan Film Unit (MFU), Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM), Malaysia, Filem Dokumentari, Dakwah

## Introduction

In Malaysia, the post-independence years presented a new phase to its history and development as it envisioned forming an independent and sovereign country according to its own rules (Parmer, 1966: Mohd Yakoob, 2007). In addition, after independence, Islam went through its transitional phase since the Muslims at that time faced the dilemma of choosing the correct values which were suitable to Islamic ethics and, at the same time, ensuring that these values would help them to grow (Othman, 2005). At that time, most Malays still held on to their cultural practices and conservative views of religion (Hamayotsu, 2017: Mohd Sharif et al., 2024). Their belief in these traditional values was deeply rooted to the extent that the Malays needed help to accept changes, leaving them needing clarification with the rapid development and modernisation that took place around them (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2020). Among the Malay community, many harboured pessimistic views on development and modernisation (Abdullah et al., 2024).

There was a strong connection between the Malay tradition and Islam (Abdul Wahab et al., 2022; Abdul Wahab et al., 2023). Islam greatly influenced the values in the Malay way of life, such as the way they think and behave, as well as their faith and belief system (Mohd Sharif et al., 2021). Nevertheless, some of the daily practices were against the teachings of Islam and caused the Malays to be backward. At the same time, the Malay community's way of thinking was still steeped in various supernatural beliefs and traditions that deviated from Islamic teachings (Mat Salleh, 2021).

Understanding the significance of upholding Islam, enriching the people's knowledge of Islam, and correcting the behaviours of some Malays who had deviated from the religion, the Department of Information Service, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Federal Government collaborated with the Islamic Department in the Federation of Malaya and Brunei Islamic Department. However, there is only one preaching documentary film involving the cooperation of Brunei and MFU, which used the Malayan Film Unit (MFU). Later, in 1963, MFU, known as *Filem Negara Malaysia* (FNM), produced documentary films for Da'wah. This situation is not surprising because MFU is mindful of its task to promote understanding among communities, combat illiteracy and assist in public education and information through the mass media of films. In fact, after independence, the Department of Information's scope and activities have increased. It took part in every national agenda and event, cultural festival and campaign organised by the government, including for Islamic purposes (MFU 164/1959).

It has to be emphasised here that this da'wah was unlike the common understanding of calling and asking individuals to embrace Islam (Radzi & Harun, 2021). It was apparent that the effort was aimed at inviting Muslims to observe Islamic teachings, which included issues such as theology, shari'ah, akhlāq, and institutions (Hakim, 2021). In another aspect, the Federal Government wanted to use MFU and FNM as mediums in bringing the Malay Muslims together, which was the strength of the ummah. This study has its significance since, until today, there is a shortage of research pertaining to the government's role in using films as da'wah medium in this country. Hence, the researcher would like to find out the extent to which Malayan Film Unit (MFU) and *Filem Negara Malaysia* (FNM) films became the medium of da'wah in Malaysia from 1957 to 1970.

## Literature Review

Studies on the role of MFU and FNM as mediums of da'wah from 1957 to 1970 did not get much attention among researchers. There were a few previous studies that generally discussed MFU and FNM, and they provide an initial outlook on the gap that exists in this issue. Abdul Muthalib (2010) summarised that films produced by MFU were the tools for propaganda aimed at ending the British Empire in Malaya. In addition, the author stated that the organisational structure of MFU had nurtured the spirit of unity since the beginning of its establishment, and local experts also ran it. Meanwhile, Hee (2017) concluded that MFU could not be acknowledged as a national film since many of them were produced during the British colonial period and had elements of racism. He also added that MFU was the propaganda tool of the ruling government to convey imperialist ideology in Southeast Asia that was propelled by Anglo-American imperialism during the Cold War. Next, Gunaish et al. (2022) stated that initially, MFU establishment was part of the British plan to improve their image and position in Malay as colonials after the Second World War. This was seconded by Abdullah et al. (2021), who reported that the British had utilised the printed, electronic, and mass media in disseminating its ideology, propaganda, and cultural values, such as the culture of imperialism and others, to strengthen their power after the Second World War.

Aitken (2016), on the other hand, stated that films produced by MFU contained influences from the Griersonian (John Grierson, a pioneering documentary maker who used motion pictures for education) and British Civil Service traditions in their production. He discussed the existence of foreign art theories in the production of MFU films from the perspective of art. As Alauddin (2004) stated, the historical development in documentary films, especially those from MFU, proved that these quality documentaries were produced when the technology was not fully acquired on their part. Shamsudin (2014) also concluded that MFU was a significant development in recording growth in society. According to the author, these recordings could be used to create awareness among the community to be actively involved in the country's development and agricultural sector, to be part of restructuring society, and to build political institutions. Barnard (2009) mentioned that the impact of MFU propaganda was minimal to the society in Malaya. On the other hand, the power to keep spreading messages through films remained in the

hands of the Shaw Brothers and Cathay Keris through their network of cinemas. Mohmad Rafik et al. (2020) believed that Malaysian animated films by FNM have lost their identity due to the influence of imperialist culture, especially American animated films.

### **Technical Features in MFU and FNM Documentary Films, 1957-1970**

Overall, almost all MFU and FNM documentary films that became da'wah mediums had their narrators as the main voice-overs that would explain the story in each scene. In these films, several aspects of everyday realities were featured, and most of them were centred on an event or incident. For instance, a film would begin with a visual representation of one of the mistakes in an action. After that, the visual would elaborate on finding the solution or the right way to act. From the aspect of technological development in documentary film technology produced by MFU and FNM, it was apparent that Malaya depended on expertise and technology from Western films, especially those from the United States. Indirectly, Western influence was absorbed in the process of producing the documentary film. In addition, during the said period, several officers were sent to the United States, Canada, Britain, and New Zealand to learn and gain more knowledge in the process of documentary film production. Being abroad exposed them to experiences and skills related to filming, and this knowledge was applied in the MFU film production after that (The Straits Times, January 31, 1963).

MFU and FNM also depended on existing technology, and this caused limited film production. Moreover, the filmmaking quality relied on the expertise of the director and the cameraman to record spontaneous scenes among the public. Using a heavy Mitchell BNC Camera (1946) reduced shots in motion. As a result, the cinematic film documentary produced was static, and each actor did not have dialogues based on the themes given in the film. From the aspect of language and communication, MFU and FNM movies were produced in several languages to ensure adequate understanding for the audience. Among the languages commonly used were Bahasa Melayu, English, Chinese, Tamil, and others. Through this approach, the process of sharing information with the illiterate and less-educated members went on smoothly.

Some strategies were used to represent reality in each scene produced since the media was a highly credible channel that provided an easy path for the dominant groups to spread their ideology to the target audience (Liu & Horsley, 2007). Most film documentaries were produced through docu-drama techniques. Docu-drama presentations used semi-real images by featuring professional and non-professionals to portray the situation as close to reality as possible. Such a strategy developed the audience's trust since the visual shown was related to the truth in their lives. Moreover, the docu-drama exposed films to a new form in the country's film documentaries, which explored different perspectives to match them with a bigger picture.

In addition, there were documentary films produced using the narrative strategy, such as classic Malay films that fused musical and dance elements in a life story. For instance, *Şafar* (1962), directed by Mohd Zain Hussain, featured the latest issue which gripped the Muslim community in Malaya at that time. In the past, the Muslims perceived that the Şafar month in the Islamic calendar was the month of bad luck or misfortune, and hence engaged in dubious practices to ward them off. In *Şafar*, the celebration of this event that was featured in the film was shot in Malacca. Mohd Zain tried to construct an image where men and women mingled freely during the event. Elements of classical Malay films, such as love stories, dance scenes and music between two main characters, appeared in the movie (*Şafar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).

Other than these elements, the film also contains information, which could influence the public's mind and behaviour. Nevertheless, not all documentary films were made without dialogues between two characters: if these dialogues are needed, they would be used to support the information that is required to be conveyed. MFU and FNM used the narrative presentation strategy through voiceovers to explain every dialogue and behaviour acted out by the characters who were trapped in a dilemma. The dialogue's effectiveness was impactful to the public as they were influenced by the convincing vocal projection and acting performances of the actors who successfully portrayed the character given to them (*Şafar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).

### **MFU and FNM Film Documentary Da'wah Mission 1957-1970**

Various documentary films such as *Mari Kita Sembahyang (Come Let's Pray)*, *Pertandingan Membacha al-Quran (Quranic Recitation*

*Competition*), *Seruan Suci* (*Holy Call*), *Lawatan Di-Raja Ka-Timor Tengah* (*Royal Visit to the Middle East*), *Maulud dan Berzanji* (*Birth and Praises of Prophet Muhammad PBUH*), *Gema dari Menara* (*Echoes from the Minaret*) dan *Şafar* were produced as part of the government's efforts to develop the Muslim community to adhere to the actual teaching of Islam in Malaysia. However, this paper discusses only some of the documentary films listed.



Figure 1.1: Narration technique in *Şafar* (*Safar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).

Going through the list of films produced by MFU, it was found that a documentary entitled *Mari Kita Sembahyang*, created in 1962, was the first produced after the independence (*Mari Kita Sembahyang*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962). Just by reading the title, one could imagine the content of the whole film. The film featured natural scenes of the five prayers, and the voice-over provided more understanding of the ibadah. This film was produced based on the request from Islamic departments around the country. It was perceived that films like this must be made to ease da'wah efforts, especially on matters pertaining to the best way to perform *şalāt* to the public (*Mari Kita Sembahyang*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962). The researcher believes that the film was produced on the

basis of responsibility since *ṣalāt* is the highest level of ibadah. In fact, *ṣalāt* is the pillar of the religion (Hanafiah, 2019). If the pillar is absent, it is not possible to be a Muslim. If the pillar is not strong, everything could collapse (Morgan, 2009). Hence, ‘the pillars’ are crucial for the Muslims. This notion was supported by Mu’az bin Jabal RA, who stated that the Prophet (PBUH) said:

رَأْسُ الْأَمْرِ الْإِسْلَامُ، وَعَمُودُهُ الصَّلَاةُ، وَذِرْوَةٌ سَنَامِهِ الْجِهَادُ

Meaning: “The head of the matter is Islam, its pillar is prayer, and jihad is its peak”, by al-Tirmizi (2616) (Bal Ikhwan Khairulanwar et al., 2022). Therefore, it is not surprising that the first film produced covered the issue of faith as it upheld and increased knowledge among the public. The film, which ran for 15 minutes, was translated into three languages, namely English, Tamil and Mandarin. It also received requests from foreign countries such as Egypt, Ceylon and Farnosa (*Mari Kita Sembahyang*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).

Next, *Ṣafar*, which was published in 1962, contains narration on the *Mandi Safar* celebration, which was practised by the Malay Muslims in the past, especially in Malacca, Kelantan, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan, Sabah and Sarawak. The film was produced to provide exposure to and create awareness of this ancient practice among the people. This is because, before this film, there was widespread movement and opposition by the Islamic department and scholars from the Federation of Malaya and Indonesia regarding the practice of *Mandi Safar* that Muslims had followed for a long time. These scholars stated that *Mandi Safar* is a superstitious practice and is not found in Islamic teachings. For example, The Perak Religious Affairs Department stated: “there is no religious basis in Islam for such an observance.” “It is not incumbent on Muslims to observe *Mandi Safar*, and so we do not advise them to follow this tradition” (The Straits Times, 15 July 1961). Even the famous Indonesian ulama, Hamka, stated in the same tone that the practice of *Mandi Safar* is not found in Islamic teachings (Berita Harian, 28 August 1960). The Deputy Mufti of Johor, Abd. Jalil Hassan also stated that these types of celebrations were part of superstition and utterly ridiculous (*‘bidaah dan tak masuk akal’*). The Mufti of Singapore also produced a fatwa that *Mandi Safar* is haram since it is blasphemous (Berita Harian, 9 July 1963).



For that purpose, MFU took the initiative to publish the film, *Şafar*, to make the Muslim population aware that this practice is against the teachings of Islam. Shooting for this film was done in Malacca. The producer utilised a semi-reality technique to present the authentic atmosphere of the Şafar celebration with additional characters to portray the behaviour of men and women during the event. It took place on the last Wednesday in Şafar, which is the second month in the Islamic calendar (*Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia*, 1966). Basically, this traditional celebration was practised for many years by the Malay community based on the belief that they needed to avoid bad omens during the Şafar month. It was the norm in the past that Şafar (a month in Islam) was considered a month of misfortune by Muslims (Nagata, 1986). They would write verses from the Quran, soak them in water, and use the water to bathe to prevent bad omens in their lives. In fact, the same water would be drunk, and it was called Şafar Water (Mohd Hanipah, 2021). Mohd Zain Hussain, who was the film director, also showed images of men and women mingling freely during the event (*Şafar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962). The film used elements of classical Malay film, featuring a love story, dance scenes, and music between the two main characters. The researcher also believes that the film was produced to save the *'aqīdah* of the Muslim Malay community from being affected by superstitious traditions, which were practised for generations. This is because film production could be a reference for improvement in Islamic laws and development.



Figure 1.2: Scene in *Şafar*, 1962 (*Şafar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).



Figure 1.3: Scene in *Şafar*, 1962 (*Safar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).



Figure 1.4: Scene in *Şafar*, 1962 (*Safar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).



Figure 1.5: Scene in *Şafar*, 1962 (*Safar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).



Figure 1.6: Scene in *Şafar*, 1962 (*Safar*, Malayan Film Unit, 1962).

On January 31, 1964, the first *Muktamar Islam Asia Tenggara dan Timur Jauh (Islam in Southeast Asia and Far East)* conference was held in Kuala Lumpur, and YAB Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the Prime Minister, officiated it. The conference, which Muktamar Islam Sedunia (World Muslim Congress) organised, was attended by one hundred participants from twelve countries, namely New Zealand, The Philippines, Taiwan, Cambodia, South Vietnam, Ceylon, Maldives, Fiji, Thailand, Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia. Some of the issues discussed in the conference were matters pertaining to challenges faced by the communities in the aspect of religion, education, and economy of the Muslims in Southeast Asia and the Far East (Othman, 2010). In addition, the *Muktamar* focused on methods to face and reject atheism and also activities from Christian missionaries. As a result of this conference, *Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam (PERKIM or Islamic Welfare Organisation Malaysia)* was established to spread Islam in this country, while internationally, *Pertubuhan Islam Serantau Asia Tenggara dan Pasifik (Islamic Regional Organisation for Southeast Asia and the Pacific)* was established to protect the welfare and wellbeing of the Muslims in the region (Faiz, 2021). Through the historical event mentioned, the documentary film entitled *Muktamar Islam Sa-dunia* was produced



Figure 1.7: Scene in *Muktamar Islam Sa-dunia*, 1964 film (*Muktamar Islam Sa-dunia*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964).

in 1964 to record significant moments in the diplomatic ties between Malaysia and the Arab countries, especially since Malaysia was the first country after the war to be chosen as the host for the World Muslim Congress. The congress was held to discuss theological, educational, social, and economic problems faced by Muslims worldwide, especially in the Far East (*Muktamar Islam Sa-dunia*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964).

This film was produced to highlight Malaysia's involvement in international Islamic associations. It was a participation that carried significance for the members since there would be cooperation in the fields of economy, society, and culture among all. Moreover, there was also collaboration among all the members at attempting to protect and solve Islamic issues. Hence, it was not a surprise that the government had asked FNM to produce a documentary-based film that aimed to provide exposure of Malaysia's involvement and other Islamic countries in these matters. In fact, the nation's participation in the pact and collaboration in this association would convince the Muslim population that the government had made an effort to uphold Islam in the country during that time (*Muktamar Islam Sa-dunia*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964).

The film *Seruan Suchi*, which was produced in 1965, featured a significant episode in the spread of Islam in Malaysia when His Majesty the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong and the Queen were accompanied by the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Senu Abd Rahman and his wife embarked on a journey to Makkah for pilgrimage (*Seruan Suchi*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964). It is common knowledge among Muslims that the hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam. This religious obligation must be completed by the Muslim at least once in their lifetime for those who can afford and are able to physically do it (Maslan, 2014). For Muslims, the journey to Makkah for hajj was not an easy or safe trip (Peters, 1996). Hajj voyages in those years were considered the last journey since the pilgrims had to face numerous perils and difficulties. Some of the challenges that the pilgrims had to deal with were the conditions of the voyage, which were long and arduous, and they were exposed to all sorts of dangers, such as storms and diseases (Maslan, 2018). Before the use of steamships, the pilgrims from Malaya would board sailing vessels to Makkah, and the journey took months since it harnessed the power of the wind (Maslan, 2013).



Figure 1.8: Scenes in *Seruan Suchi*, 1964  
(*Seruan Suchi*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964).



Figure 1.9: Scenes in *Seruan Suchi*, 1964  
(*Seruan Suchi*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964).



Figure 2.0: Scenes in *Seruan Suci*, 1964 (*Seruan Suci*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964).

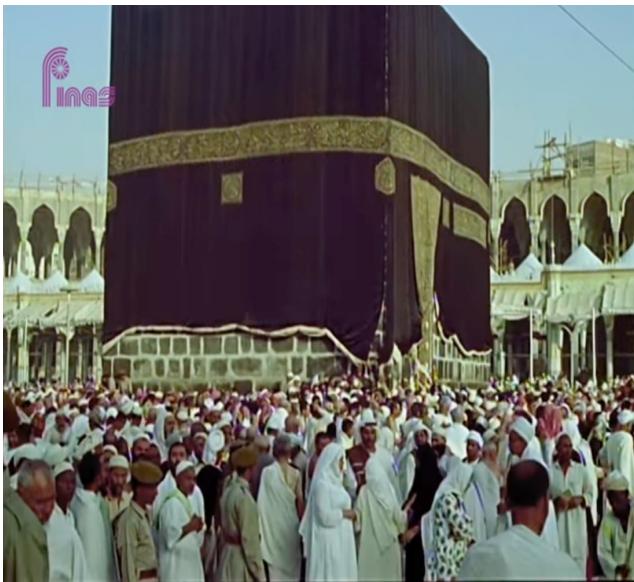


Figure 2.1: Scenes in *Seruan Suci*, 1964 (*Seruan Suci*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1964).

To the researchers of this paper, this film was produced to provide visual exposure and education to the public on the way the Hajj is performed. Previously, people would only be able to hear the narration of the pilgrims in relation to their experiences once they returned. Now, with the use of film, they could watch the pilgrims performing the challenging ritual. Even though the film is in the form of a documentary, the researchers believe the exposure would encourage others who could afford it to also perform the ibadah.

Next, the film *Gema dari Menara* was produced in 1968 by FNM through collaboration with *Jabatan Ugama Islam Brunei* (Brunei Islamic Department). The film was created as a result of diplomatic ties between Malaysia and Brunei, and it was mentioned that the Brunei Government contributed \$200,000 to complete the film. The main actors and actresses were chosen from both countries (*Gema Dari Menara*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1968). For this film, the theme was that of Western influence in the life of the Muslim communities. The film clearly featured the way Western culture influenced the younger generation in the aspect of socialisation, fashion, and belief systems. In addition, there was a scene, which featured a family from that unit nurturing the teaching of Islam, emphasising it as a responsibility of the parents. It was also the period in which popular culture became the preferred trend among Malaysian youth (*Gema Dari Menara*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1968). In fact, the influence also came from cultural agents of imperialism, who were primarily artists local and abroad.

Next came xenocentrism, which refers to the belief that items, designs, ideas, values, and beliefs in one's community were far inferior or backward as compared to other cultures. This concept looks down at one's own culture (Cucato, 2022). From the situation mentioned, the development of Islam and the government's effort to create a community that observed the actual teaching of Islam were met with some challenges. Hence, due to the factors mentioned above, FNM had a solid foundation to produce such films. The researchers also viewed the film as the most significant da'wah medium when the initiative also involved other neighbouring countries such as Brunei. In fact, the film received positive feedback from Arab countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others (*Gema Dari Menara*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1968). The situation shows that Muslim countries were challenged by the spread of Western culture in their daily life. The invasion of foreign culture



did have an impact on the socio-cultural aspect of the people in that era (Ramadan, 2009). Malaysia and Brunei's involvement in producing this documentary film was an exemplary initiative in upholding Islam during that period (*Gema Dari Menara*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1968).



Figure 2.2: Scenes in *Gema Dari Menara* (*Gema Dari Menara*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1968).



Figure 2.2: Scenes in *Gema Dari Menara* (*Gema Dari Menara*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1968).



Figure 2.2: Scenes in *Gema Dari Menara*  
(*Gema Dari Menara*, Filem Negara Malaysia, 1968).

### **Announcement, Distribution and Screening of MFU and FNM Films, 1957-1970**

MFU and later FNM were unlike commercial films, which were driven by monetary gain through the screening of films at movie theatres. Their revenue came from film buyers from abroad as well as the services they offered in producing films for the use of the industry or foreign agencies. This unit worked with others when it came to disseminating documentary films in Malaya. Since MFU and, later, FNM were established, mobile vans and commercial movie theatres were utilised as platforms to reach the targeted audience. The form of the film screening was sustained even after independence. The Information Department manned mobile vans, and sometimes, they were handled by the Health Department, Social Welfare Department, and other government agencies. As for movie theatres, they were run by local film entrepreneurs such as Rex, Capitol, Lido, and Cathay. This unit worked together with the movie theatre operator to screen its film at the premise before any commercial film was shown (Gunaish et al., 2021).

In 1957, 123 mobile vans were mobilised to screen MFU films in *kampung* areas such as Kampung Baru Cina. This screening was intensified, and it reached other *kampungs* through the mobile van service from the Information Department (Hodge, 1957). The Information Department often made visits to the *kampung* areas, and they aimed to visit once every eight weeks (Annual Report of Malayan Film Unit 1957-1960). It was a program that was run seriously by the government since 1959 when Syed Ja'afar Albar stated that MFU played a significant role in the country's development process. Moreover, students, public servants, enforcement officers and others also became the target audience at this time. Officers from the Information Department were tasked to live in the rural areas to provide information through film screening (*wayang pacak*) from those produced by MFU while giving speeches to the locals (MFU 164/1959).

Film screening from the mobile van usually focuses on rural areas and communities. Sometimes, boats were also used by the Information Department to screen films in rural areas close to the riverbanks. Mobile vans were sent to each village at least once a month, and documentary films were brought to be screened by the villagers. The excitement began the minute the mobile van reached the *kampung*. The mobile van team worked hard in announcing their activities at night to attract community members to come and watch the show (Gunaish et al., 2021).



Figure 2.2: Mobile van announcing news about the outdoor movie screening.

An hour before dusk, the mobile van would circle the kampung area to announce the screening of the film, which would take place at night. Right before sunset, the mobile van would stop at a vacant plot, such as a football field or a significant junction in the middle of a town. Next, the team would begin the task of setting up the white screen and assembling the projector. Mobile van operators were asked to hasten the preparation for screening, and music would be played if there was a gap in the program to prevent the viewers from being bored (1978/00513, DOI (K/P) No.640/53).



Figure 2.3: Preparation by Information Department officer before the screening

The officers would put the projector on a table and erect wooden fences for the safety of the projector to prevent disruptions by the mischievous kampung children. Film screening would begin right after the operator made a short announcement through a loud hailer. Each program usually screened two MFU films, and then the last would be the screening of commercial films such as Malay movies, animated movies, Cowboy movies or Hindi movies. Before the process of executing this screening program, the team would discuss choosing suitable films to be shown with the local district officer. In fact, the screening and distribution situation is similar to the situation in Brunei. *Pelita Brunei*, which is the official newspaper of the Government of Brunei, also acted to publicise the release of this MFU film in the news. The people of Brunei gave great support in screenings held in selected schools and public locations (Zainal et al., 2023).



Figure 2.4: Outdoor Film Screening by the Information Department



Figure 2.5: The use of a boat as a medium to screen MFU film to those who stayed on the riverside.

In addition, MFU and FNM also used local newspapers to invite the public to attend all these outdoor film screenings, which were carried out all around the country. Newspapers from 1963 to 1970 promoted various activities that involved film screening in collaboration with other local agencies such as the Johor Islamic Department (*Jabatan Agama Islam Johor*), Saudi Arabia Consulate (*Konsul Arab Saudi*) and others. To illustrate, on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1966, the newspaper, *Berita Harian*, invited the public to attend a free movie screening in Kuala Lumpur in conjunction with Film Week from 24<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> May at the Information Department cinema. One of the films screened was *Seruan Suchi*. Advertisements in the newspapers were evidence that FNM documentary films, which acted as da'wah medium, were also shown at cinemas for the urban

dwellers in the capital city. The film advertisements were usually done together with local commercial film and imported film advertisements. As stated before, in Brunei, the promotion and screening of MFU films used Pelita Brunei newspaper for promotion (Zainal et al., 2023).



Figure 2.6: Newspaper advertisement regarding FNM film, which was shown at cinemas.



Figure 2.7: Newspaper advertisement regarding FNM film, which was shown at cinemas.

### **The Effectiveness of MFU and FNM Documentary Films, 1957-1970**

The researchers found it challenging to measure the success of MFU documentary film as well as the role of FNM as a da'wah medium in the period stated. It is also difficult to determine the effectiveness of this approach as the duration studied on the government's effort to produce documentary films as da'wah medium only lasted around thirteen years. However, the government's approach to using MFU and later FNM for da'wah strengthened the relationship with the public through the introduction of policies. From the role mentioned, the government believed in the effectiveness of MFU and FNM as a communication medium. This was true as, at that time, the government was still struggling with the early phase of national development, which focused on public facilities such as electrical supply, water supply, health, education, and others, which were still at an unsatisfying level (Rudner, 1977: Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2019: Porok, 2022). Each MFU and FNM film that was shown had a complete explanation, and it contributed to adequate comprehension of the situation provided.

In 1957, it was reported that seventeen cinemas screened MFU films every night. A 35 mm film print was usually used for commercial cinema screenings, which took place in urban and rural areas. As for 16 mm film produced by MFU, it was employed by the mobile van to show to rural areas through outdoor film screening (*wayang pacak*). Statistics reported that in 1957, 6,088 films were loaned to commercial cinemas around the country for one year. In the same year, 37,357 films were loaned to mobile vans and foreign agencies to be shown to the audience that the government targeted. One hundred twenty-three mobile vans were mobilised to kampung areas (Hodge, 1957).

In 1958, 7,111 films were shown to the audience at the cinema, and the number increased compared to the year before. In fact, loaned films for outdoor film screening all around Peninsular Malaysia increased to 47,413 films. Such consistency was observed until 1959 when as many as 7,807 films were screened at cinemas. Nevertheless, comparatively, there was a decrease in the number of movies loaned from the previous amount to 7,751 films for outdoor film screening. This was because the Information Department successfully deployed 98 mobile vans to the kampungs. Two years before, 123 Information Department mobile vans

were sent to the rural areas to disseminate information to the people (Annual Report of Malayan Film Unit 1959).

Here, the momentum mentioned influenced the record of film borrowing in 1960, when only 6,546 films were successfully screened at cinemas as MFU started to focus on the rural areas in 1960. The ruling government at that time suggested that rural development must be shown to the people from the *kampungs* (villages) to encourage them to participate in the government's effort. As a result, the number of loaned films by the mobile van and foreign agencies increased when 40,516 films were successfully screened to the targeted audiences. Syed Ja'afar Albar, the Minister of Information then, called all mobile vans to intensify their efforts in the rural areas. He believed that the effort would lead to more films being shown to promote rural development to gain support of the community in the development program (Annual Report of Malayan Film Unit 1957-1970).

The *kampung* communities gave a warm welcome to the mobile van teams every time they came to show new MFU and FNM movies. For instance, at Pekan Ayer Mawang, Johol, Negeri Sembilan, it was reported that the program was well received by the public. Almost 500 Malays and Chinese came to watch the outdoor film screening (*Berita Harian*, 11 July 1959). Even though Barnard (2009) believed that MFU had not succeeded in making an impact among the communities in Malaya, the MFU film screening during the time mentioned had given beautiful memories and experiences to the people who had limited access to entertainment, especially film screenings since many cinemas were located in towns that were far from their places. However, the researchers believe that if these films were screened at mosques all over the country as an effort to convey *da'wah*, as mentioned in this study, their effectiveness might be measured. The screening would be one of the main activities at the mosque for *da'wah* to the Malay Muslim community. However, the researchers also realised that the Information Department did not use the mosque or other religious institutions as their film screening location since there was limited equipment available on the premises. The outdoor film screening had to also be conducted in spacious places to ensure that many viewers would come and watch.



## Conclusion

The MFU film documentary and later FNM were approved as the early medium that the government used for da'wah before the rise of Islam in Malaysia, which started in the 1970s. At the same time, the Federal Government was responsible for improving the image and position of Islam in the country during this period. The government's awareness of the ability of films to stimulate thinking and influence behaviours of the community members through the process of conveying information via audio-visual material resulted in MFU being sustained and rebranded as FNM in Malaysia. As part of the Federal Government's effort to use MFU and FNM as da'wah medium, many initiatives were carried out, including improvement in filmmaking, film screenings all around the country, structural changes in MFU, production of movies based on the latest Islamic scenario and many others. As a result, a compelling momentum was created, and MFU and FNM experienced an increase in documentary film screenings in Malaysia and abroad.

The increased visibility of documentary film screenings across Malaysia and abroad highlighted the international impact of MFU and FNM in disseminating Islamic teachings and fostering a sense of unity in the Muslim community. The government's multifaceted approach, including educational initiatives, public screenings, and innovative storytelling techniques, created an environment where these films became not just a source of information but also a catalyst for positive social and cultural change. As FNM continued its role as a da'wah medium beyond the 1970s, it became a dynamic tool for addressing evolving challenges and opportunities within Malaysian society. The ongoing production of documentary films enabled FNM to adapt to contemporary issues, making it a relevant and influential force in shaping public perceptions of Islam. The sustained commitment to da'wah's efforts through film demonstrates the enduring impact of visual storytelling in fostering a deeper understanding of Islamic principles and values.

In essence, the journey from MFU to FNM marks a significant chapter in the history of Islamic propagation in Malaysia. The government's strategic use of film as a da'wah medium not only contributed to the proliferation of Islamic teachings but also underscored the importance of adapting traditional methods to contemporary approaches for effective communication. As FNM continues to play a vital role in the ongoing

da'wah efforts today, it stands as a testament to the enduring power of film in shaping cultural narratives and fostering a harmonious and informed society.

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(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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