

# Ethno-Religious Nationalism and the Crisis of Malay Identity in *Mat Kilau*

Sarata Balaya

*Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia*

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the celebrated 2022 Malaysian film *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (*Mat Kilau: The Rise of a Warrior*), directed by Syamsul Yusof. Framed as a narrative of Malay heroism through the lens of ethno-religious nationalism, the film functions as ideological propaganda. It reinforces Malay-Muslim supremacy rather than as a unifying nationalistic narrative. By critically analysing the film's themes and representations, this study determines how it resonates with ongoing political discourses about the perceived decline of Malays, often linked to internal corruption, betrayal, greed, and power struggles. The study employs qualitative methods, including textual analysis of the film's narrative, visuals, dialogue and an audience reception study conducted through semi-structured interviews with twenty Malaysian moviegoers aged 20 to 55. The interview sample comprises Malays and non-Malays from diverse backgrounds, all of whom watched the film in a cinema or on an online platform. Using Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model and Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, the findings reveal polarized audience perceptions of the film. Some interpret it as a celebration of Malay heroism and Islamic values. In contrast, others view it as a manipulative narrative that reinforces divisive ideologies and diverts attention from real socio-political issues. These findings also raise questions about the role of national cinema in nation-building and its contribution to national unity in Malaysia. By incorporating audience reception analysis, the research adds an empirical dimension often missing in film studies, providing a more comprehensive approach to the film analysis at hand.

**Keywords:** imagined communities, Malay-Muslim identity, Malaysian cinema, national cinema

## INTRODUCTION

*Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (transl.: *Mat Kilau: The Rise of a Warrior*), directed by Syamsul Yusof in 2022, achieved remarkable commercial success in Malaysia. The film provoked strong reactions from both audiences and critics, making headlines for its alleged racial insensitivity, fascist elements, and historical inaccuracies (Cheng 2022). Grossing over RM 90 million (approximately USD 19 million), it ranks among the highest-grossing domestic films in Malaysian history (Shackleton 2022). The film presents itself as a historical epic depicting the Malay resistance against British colonial rule, characterized by an ethnocentric perspective, Islamic rhetoric, and a hero-centric portrayal of Malay warriors. Beyond its commercial success, many see it as a symbol of ethno-religious nationalism rather than a collective effort to promote racial unity.

The film depicts the history of Mat Kilau, the Malay warrior, who fought fiercely for Independence, inspiring nationalism and patriotism among Malays. The film highlights the Malays' acts of defending the nation's sovereignty from colonial rule and its potential to uphold the dignity of Islam (Krishnan 2022). Furthermore, the narrative of the film acknowledges the sacrifices made by Malay warriors during the colonial period. However, the film received significant negative criticism as many commentators argued that it romanticized history because it did not follow the historical sequence of events (Krishnan 2022). Criticisms also centred on the narrative, script, and dialogue being artificial and lacking authenticity. Political ideologies are expressed throughout nearly every scene of the film. 'Malays and Islam must unite' is a frequently repeated line, to the point where even British characters express similar sentiments to Malays.

Cheng (2022) states that the film perpetuates colonial-era racial attitudes. She argues that the film overlooks the complexity and shared trauma of the colonized, unintentionally endorsing unequal narratives. Some character portrayals generated discomfort related to national unity, with the Chinese depicted as associates of the colonizers. Simultaneously, Sikh soldiers, referred to as *Sipahi*, are portrayed as brutal, inhumane, and loyal to the British (Noorshahrizam 2022). While presenting Malays as pure heroes, Cheng (2022) contends that colonial racial ideas influence the film, repeating stereotypes historically used by the British, particularly towards other ethnic groups. Cheng (2022) further claims the film neglects representing the trauma and racism experienced by different ethnic communities, which was also a collective experience under colonial rule.

The political crisis that unfolded in late February 2020, commonly known as the *Langkah Sheraton* (Sheraton Move), marked a significant turning point in Malaysia's political landscape. This event resulted in the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) government when Mahathir Mohamad resigned from office (Ong 2020). During this period, many Malaysians, who had supported the PH coalition, felt betrayed and disillusioned, as Pakatan Harapan struggled tirelessly. Yet votes appeared to have little impact on the country's democratic process (Koh 2022). Meanwhile, Muhyiddin Yassin led Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN), which lacked an explicit majority and comprised Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, BERSATU), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (The Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS), Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (The United Malays National Organization, UMNO), and other political parties. Throughout the crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated economic and social conditions,

heightening anxiety among Malay-Muslims and prompting efforts to safeguard Malay and Islamic rights.

Conversely, politicians played pivotal roles in disseminating racial and religious narratives through social media, as exemplified by scenes from *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*. Sharing such scenes with Malays adorned in traditional attire during the film's release were a visual embodiment reinforcing racial sentiments (Chandran 2022). Malay politicians frequently used slogans such as *Bangsa Melayu* (Malay Nation) and *Jagalah Bangsa, Jagalah Agama* (care for your race, care for your religion), during the lead up to the 15th General Election (GE15), held in 2022. Leading up to GE15, pressures from UMNO to dissolve Parliament and expedite the election process intensified (Rabbani 2021). This environment contributed to the resurgence of Malay conservatism, which was already manifest and broadly leveraged as an electoral strategy to secure Malay votes, thereby challenging unity and heightening racial tensions. Consequently, the film's narrative emphasizes Malay-Islamic dominance, nationalism against colonial intruders, and similar themes (Shahrudin 2023). It appears deliberately crafted to rekindle Malay conservative ideals in anticipation of GE15.

Considering the increasing racial and religious polarization in Malaysia, this article posits that *Mat Kilau* primarily serves as an ideological instrument of ethno-religious nationalism rather than national unity. Furthermore, the film mirrors issues within Malay leadership, including internal betrayal, corruption, and greed. The article analyses the ideological functions of the film through its messaging and its reception by Malaysian audiences. Scholars such as Abu Bakar and Shahrizif Tajul (2025), Bailey (2024), Fathin and Syukri (2023), Madon et al. (2023), and Safra and Vanitha (2023) have offered historical, cultural, spiritual, religious, martial arts, and masculinity analyses. However, little attention has been given to how the film perpetuates Malay-Muslim hegemony and other political tensions, thereby reflecting Malaysia's socio-political landscape. These studies have overlooked the film's role as ethno-religious propaganda and the perceptions of Malaysian audiences from diverse backgrounds.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Malaysian Cinema

Historically, Malaysian cinema has oscillated between artistic expression and political influence. Films such as *Tanda Putera* (*Mark of Prince* 2013) and *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (*The Malay Chronicles: Bloodlines* 2011) have historically ignited debates concerning ethnic representation and the revision of historical narratives (Barnard 2006; Van der Heide 2002). Ethno-religious nationalism, characterized by an emphasis on a singular ethnic and religious identity, has gained increased prominence in Malaysian media, particularly during periods of political unrest (Zaharom 2005a; Rajendran 2023). Rather than depicting the country in its authentic form, such films tend to portray the nation as a cohesive entity, often marginalizing minority voices and the pursuit of an inclusive national identity.

Malaysian cinema attained international recognition during their Golden Era (1950s–1960s) of black and white films, produced by studios such as Malay Film Production (also known as the Shaw Brothers' Studio) and Cathay-Keris Film Productions (Van der Heide 2002, 134–137). Such films

have consistently focused on Malay culture, utilizing the Malay language, featuring Malay actors and directors, and targeting the predominantly Malay audience (Van der Heide 2002, 134–137). In turn, audiences from Indian and Chinese communities often viewed Bollywood (Hindi cinema), Kollywood (Tamil-language cinema from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu), Hollywood, and Hong Kong films, which better aligned with their preferences (Latif 2001, 175–176). This pattern has endured since the independence era in the 1970s, when filmmaking transitioned from the now-defunct Shaw Brothers' control to Malay filmmakers. Malay actors and filmmakers such as P. Ramlee, Aziz Satar, and Jins Shamsuddin commenced their careers with Shaw Brothers, continuing melodramatic and comedic traditions established during the Golden Era (Barnard 2006, 169). Even in the present day, most Malaysian films predominantly portray a monolithic Malay community, thereby neglecting Malaysia's multiethnic composition and cultural diversity. Marginalized ethnic groups and minorities, including Indigenous communities, Chinese, and Indians, are systematically underrepresented in cinematic representations or lack sufficient avenues for cultural expression (Van der Heide 2002, 21; Hanan 2001, 163).

The logic of the capitalist system has dominated the studio system in Malaysia, with capitalism defined as an economic system in which the means of production are privately owned, operated for profit through investment, and compete in markets (Mahyuddin Ahmad 2008, 156). For capitalists and property owners, this means power and rights guaranteed by the State. Therefore, the interaction between capitalism and its forces, the role of the State, and the legacy of the dominant ideology are significant. The film industry in Malaysia is part of the larger capitalist system (Mahyuddin Ahmad 2008). As a result, films and industry products can be understood in relation to capitalism, which may not foreground cinema's role in nation-building.

The 1980s marked the beginning of a new era of government support with the establishment of *Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia* (National Film Development Corporation Malaysia, FINAS), tasked with regulating and promoting the film industry. Prominent films from that period included both serious movies and commercial comedies, both of which remained popular throughout the 1990s. During this time, Malaysian filmmakers also produced blockbuster hits that earned millions of dollars. Many filmmakers relied on reusing old formulas from the past, producing hit films with predictable plots, love tragedies, motorcycle-themed films (referred to as *big bikes*), and popular singers as actors (Muthalib 2013, 87–92; Latif 2001, 25–27). This period also focused on Malay films as the main representation of Malaysian cinema, known as *filem kita, wajah kita* (our films, our faces) (Barnard 2006, 168–170; Van der Heide 2002, 14–16).

Therefore, a film with a proper story, featuring Malay actors speaking Malay, would fulfil the criteria of a Malaysian film, also known as a "*Filem Melayu*" (Malay film). This term is used widely in contrast to Malaysian film or Malaysian cinema. However, in the context of Malaysia as a multicultural country, using this term seems to imply a sense of territorial claim and ownership, which is rooted in the mindset of the Malays, the dominant ethnic group. Therefore, the existence of the term *Filem Melayu* could represent other cultures (Indian, Chinese, and Indigenous groups) and serve as a form of national cinema in nation-building. However, its contribution to national unity remains uncertain.

### **Film and Nation-Building**

Malaysia cinema played a pivotal role in shaping national identity, though not always national building (Anderson 1991; Higson 1989). In Malaysia, film has long served as a reflection of national ideals and a platform for ideological discourse. Malaysian cinema, following Independence in 1957, was regarded as a tool to foster unity among the country's diverse ethnic and religious communities. However, this objective increasingly faces challenges due to the politicization of film narratives, especially those that favour the majority Malay-Muslim identity (Khoo, 2006; Van der Heide 2002). This development has led to the categorization of films as ethnic films, further intertwining national and ethnic identities (Higson 1989; Barnard 2006).

In reference to Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" (1991, 4), films produced in Malaysia have historically served as tools for storytelling that facilitate the conceptualization of the nation as a cohesive entity. Nevertheless, the actual societal landscape stands divided. Unlike societies with greater cultural homogeneity, Malaysian filmmakers must navigate a complex tapestry of cultural practices, religious boundaries, ethnic sensitivities, and political ideologies, all of which significantly influence the development of media content. It also relies on how audiences interpret and perceive the content. Films that promote national unity and nation-building may intentionally or unintentionally marginalize or erase minority histories and voices in favour of a single ethno-religious story. At such, Anderson (1991) holds that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people [minority] who see themselves as part of that group, the majority one. Anderson states that the notions of 'nationality,' 'nation-ness,' and 'nationalism' are cultural artifacts of a particular kind, created through a complex crossing of distinct historical forces. She asserted that once established, these ideas become 'modular'. In other words, this imaginary construct is a secured and shared identity and sense of belonging to a carefully demarcated geo-political space (Mahyuddin Ahmad 2011, 76).

Films with an epic-historical or biographical background frequently serve to portray an idealized version of the past. In Malaysian narratives, the focus is on Malay warriors, Malay heroism, and Islamic values as fundamental to the nation's identity. While these stories resonate with the Malay populace, they may alienate non-Muslim and non-Malay audiences who do not see their experiences reflected in these depictions. This tension becomes more apparent during periods of political instability, media interference, and general elections. One approach to address this issue is by utilizing film as a soft power instrument to disseminate predominant political ideas under the pretext of national storytelling.

### **Ethno-religious Nationalism and Leadership Crisis in Malaysia**

Ethno-religious nationalism involves the coordinated integration of ethnic and religious identities to shape national ideology. In Malaysia, the emphasis on the Malay-Muslim identity is through the foundational element of the Malaysian nation-state (Shamsul 2001). The Federal Constitution, while protecting certain rights for minority groups, also recognizes the privileged status of Malays and Islam, thereby creating a constitutional framework that establishes a hierarchy of identities. Within this constitutional structure, the majority-minority dynamic is notably accentuated, with the interests of the majority given precedence.

Local media has historically been instrumental in reinforcing this ethno-religious narrative. From the 1970s to contemporary blockbuster films such as *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*, Malaysian cinema consistently underscores themes of Malay heroism, Islamic faith, and resistance against colonial powers (Abu Bakar and Majidi 2025, 3584–6). These narratives serve to bolster the political perspective that Malay-Muslim dominance is integral to national unity and sovereignty. In this context, political figures leverage cultural production to maintain comprehensive control over content and populations where such ideological frameworks are often endorsed. Furthermore, these films have functioned as platforms to garner support from the majority Malay electorate. During periods of political crisis and instability, such as general elections or shifts in ruling coalitions, movies are used to reignite ethno-religious pride and the fear of marginalization among Malay audiences (Noorshahrizam 2022; Samachar 2022). In practice, particularly during electoral campaigns, politicians regularly incite racial conflicts through the manipulation of religion and evoke fears regarding Malay rights, often positioning these concerns against minority communities (Noorshahrizam 2022). This sentiment is explicitly evident in the film *Mat Kilau*, where recurring lines such as 'Malay and Islam must unite' are articulated by multiple characters. Such expressions can be interpreted as part of a broader political strategy aimed at strengthening Malay-Muslim support by invoking perceived internal and external threats, whether from foreign influences, minority groups, or liberal ideologies.

Nevertheless, this model of nation-building is inherently exclusionary. It disregards and marginalizes the contributions and identities of Malaysia's other ethnic groups, ultimately fostering a fragmented sense of belonging. Although the State promotes multiculturalism and unity through political constructs such as *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian nation), *Satu Malaysia* (One Malaysia), and *Malaysia Madani* (Civilised Malaysia) in official declarations, the cultural representations accessible to the public frequently depict a contrasting narrative. This narrative tends to idealize Malay-Muslim dominance while neglecting the experiences of minority groups, thereby reinforcing a limited and exclusive vision of nationhood that does not accurately reflect Malaysia's multicultural reality. The nation has been envisioned through a narrow, conservative Malay-Muslim perspective since its Independence in 1957 (Zaharom 2005b, 112). It is painfully evident that during each election cycle, slogans change to align with the prevailing political ideologies; however, these efforts fall short in the broader process of nation-building.

The crisis of Malay leadership intensifies these issues. Historically esteemed for their integrity, wisdom, religious devotion, and morality, Malay political leaders have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Scandals, such as the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) corruption case involving senior Malay figures, including former Prime Minister Najib Razak, alongside the political betrayals during the '*Sheraton Move*,' have engendered widespread disillusionment among the Malay electorate (Weiss 2021; Wright and Hope 2018). These incidents have uncovered discrepancies within the dominance of Malay political authority. This situation is compounded by the fact that, while leaders promote unity and moral integrity, they are often implicated in actions that undermine these very principles.

Some scholars describe Malay leadership as a 'crisis of legitimacy.' The cases of betrayal and corruption are perceived not merely as political issues but also as community and moral concerns

(Funston 2020). Since Independence, Malay leaders, once esteemed as protectors of race and religion, are now viewed as self-serving elites who manipulate public sentiment for personal advantage (Case 2022). Consequently, there is an increasing sense of concern and debate among Malaysians, including within the Malay community itself, that the genuine threat to Malay society is internal rather than external. External threats are identified as Western liberalism and Chinese political influence, while internal challenges stem from cronyism, corruption, betrayal, and the decline of ethical leadership (Pepinsky 2019).

In this crisis, films like *Mat Kilau* can be seen as collective efforts to channel public dissatisfaction, particularly among the Malay community. The film, which neglects contemporary multicultural realities, shifts attention away from present political shortcomings toward a romanticized historical past, emphasizing racial conflicts (Rajendran 2023). The primary catalysts and triggers in Malaysia often relate to issues concerning Islam and Malay rights and identity. By portraying Malay unity and heroism, the film aims to reinforce confidence in the cultural foundations of Malay identity, despite ongoing political struggles. However, this approach encounters certain limitations. While emotionally compelling, symbolic victories in cinema merely reflect the structural challenges faced by Malay society today. These challenges include income inequality, limited access to education, systemic corruption, and a growing wave of religious conservatism (Zaharom 2005; Rajendran 2023).

Nonetheless, on a positive note, audiences are no longer passive recipients of State-sanctioned narratives. When consuming media, audiences are conscious of their needs and wants. With the emergence of alternative media voices and independent critiques, numerous viewers, particularly younger generations, are critically engaging with these films, scrutinizing their historical accuracy, ideological intentions, and social consequences (Weiss 2021). It denotes a transformation in the way Malaysians interpret cultural texts and marks a shift from viewing them as unquestioned truths to perceiving them as contested terrains of meaning and power in line with the current political landscape.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article draws upon Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model (1980) and Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities (1983). Hall's framework posits that audiences actively interpret media texts within their socio-cultural contexts, facilitating negotiated or oppositional readings. This model, a significant contribution to cultural studies, challenges the notion that media audiences are passive recipients of meaning. Instead, Hall elucidates that media messages are encoded by producers with specific ideological objectives, influenced by institutional, political, and cultural determinants. Nonetheless, these messages are not received in isolation. Audiences, according to their social roles, cultural backgrounds, and experiences, decode these messages in ways that may either align with, oppose, or reject the intended interpretation.

Applied to *Mat Kilau*, Hall's model provides an insightful framework to elucidate how the film potentially conveys narratives of Malay heroism, Islamic valour, and resistance to colonial oppression, all of which underpin a nationalist, ethno-religious agenda. These components are crafted not solely for entertainment but also as part of a broader ideological initiative aimed at

fostering national pride and reaffirming Malay-Muslim dominance. Nonetheless, the interpretation of these messages varies considerably among audiences. Malay-Muslim viewers may perceive the film as a proud affirmation of their cultural identity. In contrast, other groups, such as minority communities, liberal spectators, or critics with historical expertise, may interpret the film differently. While recognizing its visual style, this group also criticizes racial stereotypes, historical inaccuracies, and political implications.

Meanwhile, Anderson's theory contextualizes nationalism within shared cultural artifacts, such as cinema, which contribute to shaping perceptions of national identity. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson asserts that nations are not inherently existing entities but are socio-culturally constructed through collective practices and media. Cinema, as a powerful cultural medium, plays a crucial role in shaping collective self-perception. Through the collective viewing of films depicting national histories, struggles, and triumphs, audiences begin to perceive themselves as part of a broader national narrative, despite most members of the community being strangers to one another. Essentially, the Malaysian nation, particularly the notion of a Malay-led nationhood, is conceptualized as an imagined community, constructed through symbols, stories, and rituals disseminated via media.

Utilizing these theoretical frameworks enables an in-depth analysis of how *Mat Kilau* is imbued with ideological messages and interpreted differently by various audiences. It is particularly evident in Malaysia, where audience segments are divided along lines of ethnicity, culture, religion, and politics. For instance, Malay-Muslim nationalists view the film as a long-overdue tribute to Indigenous resistance and Islamic unity. In contrast, non-Malay viewers and critical commentators perceive it as State propaganda romanticizing history. These theories facilitate an examination of both the material production and reception, revealing how filmmakers and political leaders embed specific visions of nationhood, and how audiences actively engage with these narratives. Audience responses range from acceptance and criticism to reinterpretation based on their perspectives.

In this context, *Mat Kilau* functions as an ideological instrument. It promotes a particular conception of the Malaysian nation, a framework in which Malay-Muslim identity is prioritized as both the historical foundation and moral compass of the nation. The film's dramatization of colonial resistance, emphasis on unity through Islam, and depiction of outsiders (e.g., British colonizers, non-Malay collaborators) contribute to an exclusive portrayal of Malaysian identity. This cinematic representation influences the construction of a national identity emphasizing specific histories; however, it marginalizes others, aligning closely with State narratives during politically sensitive periods such as the 15th General Election (PRU-15), held in November 2022.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology, integrating textual analysis and audience reception analysis. The textual analysis examines the film *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*, with particular emphasis on its narrative structure, visual symbolism, and dialogic content to reveal underlying ideological messages and themes. This methodology enables the researcher to analyse how the film constructs meaning through cinematic techniques and storytelling choices, particularly in relation to issues of nationalism, ethnicity, and religion (Bordwell et al. 2016, 22–24; Staiger 2005,



45–47). Furthermore, the audience reception analysis aims to investigate how viewers interpret and respond to the film, thereby offering valuable insights into the diverse interpretations shaped by individual socio-cultural backgrounds (Hall 1980, 159–162; Morley 1980, 31–34).

For the audience reception component, the study employed snowball sampling to recruit twenty Malaysian moviegoers aged 20 to 55 years. The initial participants were contacted through social media platforms and university networks, who then referred others within their circles. The decision to conduct twenty interviews was based on the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights, ensuring both depth and diversity of perspectives. The sample intentionally includes a diverse group, comprising both Malay and non-Malay respondents from various socioeconomic backgrounds: eight Malays (Interviewees 1–8), five Chinese (Interviewees 9–13), four Indians (Interviewees 14–17), and three Sikhs (Interviewees 18–20). This demographic variety ensures a broader understanding of how different communities engage with the film's ideological content, especially considering Malaysia's multicultural society and the film's ethnocentric themes.

Data collection encompassed twenty semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. The responses were systematically categorized into principal themes, including nationalism, minority portrayal, propaganda, technical aspects, religious overtones, historical significance, political reflections, and emotional responses. Through this methodological approach, the study aimed to explore the complex interaction between cinematic texts and audience interpretation within the socio-political landscape of Malaysia.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### ***Mat Kilau: Between History and Ideology***

*Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* is celebrated for reigniting interest in Malaysian historical cinema (Shamshiri 2022). The film portrays Mat Kilau, played by Dato Adi Putra, a revered warrior from Pahang, who fought against British colonial forces in the late 19th century. Known for his wisdom, courage, and expertise in Silat, Mat Kilau embodies ideals of masculinity, leadership, and sacrifice, standing as a symbol of resistance (Ramle et al. 2025). While the film highlights these qualities, it takes an ideologically-driven approach rather than focusing solely on his personal historical role.

The story follows Mat Kilau and his allies—including his father, Tok Gajah—as they resist British colonization in 1892. The British occupation of Pahang, including their encroachment on Malay lands and religious practices, sparked widespread brutality, motivating Mat Kilau and his group to actively resist. Their strategic leadership put significant pressure on British forces, culminating in a decisive confrontation. The narrative emphasizes the tension between defending the homeland and upholding family and national duty.

Furthermore, the film portrays the complex conflicts among the heroes, illustrating betrayal driven by personal gain, power, and leadership ambitions. In Hall's (1980) terminology, this portrayal of betrayal functions as an ideological message reflecting contemporary political tensions among Malay leaders, offering audiences a negotiated or oppositional interpretation depending on

their political stance. Figure 1 depicts a scene where a British captain named Syers comments that the Malays are selfish, betray their own people, and are incapable of unity. This moment, both visually and narratively, encodes the concept of disunity as a significant barrier to Malay progress, paralleling the ongoing leadership crisis discussed earlier. Similarly, Figure 2 visualizes this theme of internal discord, reinforcing the ideological contrast between unity through Islam and betrayal through greed.



Figure 1. Captain Syers describes Malays as selfish, claiming it benefits them. Source: Screenshot.



Figure 2. Captain Syers accuses Malays of betraying their own people, causing national division. Source: Screenshot.

In the concluding scene of the film, Mat Kilau looks directly into the camera and states that by prioritizing Islam over cultural customs, the strength of the "*ummah*" can be realized. The term *ummah* herein typically denotes the collective community of Muslim individuals, encompassing

Muslim identity, nation, and society. Mat Kilau asserted that the *ummah* epitomizes the dignity of authentic Malays.

Although the film features commendable cinematography, stylized action sequences, and emotionally intense scenes, a detailed analysis reveals its transition from a historical narrative to a form of ideological propaganda. The use of rapid editing, shaky camera work, and excessively loud sound effects tends to diminish the narrative's clarity. Didactic patriotic dialogues frequently appear, employing ornate language akin to inspirational speeches rather than cinematic storytelling. Instead of presenting a nuanced historical account, the film reinterprets history as a symbol of Malay resurgence, thereby reinforcing what Anderson (1983) describes as the construction of an imagined community, united by shared religious and ethnic identities.

Traditional Malay iconography, Islamic rituals, and nationalist slogans dominate the mise-en-scène, reinforcing an identity centred on race and religion. Malay warriors clad in *samping* and *tanjak* (a traditional Malay garment), while religious sermons and Quranic references serve as aesthetic cues. Through this cinematic encoding, the film constructs an image of a homogeneous Malay-Muslim nation (Anderson 1983), where unity and purity are emphasized while diversity is downplayed.

Contributions of non-Malay groups to anti-colonial struggles are notably absent. Within Hall's (1980) decoding framework, such omissions influence how non-Malay audiences interpret the text, often through oppositional readings that reject the dominant ideology. Sikh characters, for example, are villainized, leading to public criticism (Noorshahrizam 2022; Krishnan 2022). The United Sikhs Malaysia emphasized that these portrayals violate Sikh ethical codes, which prohibit harm to innocents (Noorshahrizam 2022). Such representations reinforce ethno-religious nationalism at the expense of a collective Malaysian history.

### An Analysis of Audience Reception

Table 1 presents the compilation of responses from twenty Malaysian moviegoers aged between 20 and 55 years.

Theme	Findings
Viewer expectations	Expected historical depth; received ideological narrative
Ethno-religious nationalism	Strong focus on Malay-Muslim supremacy; minority exclusion
Technical critique	Good acting; chaotic camerawork; repetitive, preachy dialogue
Historical value	Lacks educational merit on Mat Kilau's actual contributions
Audience emotional response	Stirring Malay pride; alienating non-Malay audiences
Link to the political landscape	Strong parallels to current Malay political dynamics
Minority portrayal	Missing and/or misinformed Sikh, Chinese, and Indian representations
Cinema as influence	Recognized as a medium of ideological messaging during elections

**Table 1. Themes and Findings of the Audience Reception. Source: author.**

The participants comprise Malay-Muslim individuals as well as non-Malay individuals (including Chinese, Sikh, and Indian communities) from diverse backgrounds, who were engaged through

online meetings and face-to-face interviews. Most participants could relate to the film through various connections, including historical context, technical aspects, emotional resonance, the Malaysian political landscape, minority representation, and the influence of cinema on its narrative, which was further explored through recurring themes as outlined below.

### **Discrepancy between Expectation and Delivery**

Participants generally anticipated an informative historical drama, particularly concerning Mat Kilau's character, based on the trailer. However, the majority expressed disappointment in the film's inability to educate viewers about his true legacy. One participant remarked that they expected a film rooted in history but found it to be 'more about propaganda than history' (Interviewee 7, Malay, age 32).

Some Malay-Muslim participants, harbouring mixed feelings, admitted that they felt proud, emotional, and positive about being Malay. Nonetheless, the film also rendered them blind to ongoing events and prompted further reflection on its implications for the community. Specifically, non-Malay viewers noted that their expectations of historical accuracy led to disappointment. They observed that the film contains excessive Islamic rhetoric, which is overdone and reminiscent of a sermon rather than a movie, due to repetitive slogans and loud music. It indicates a disconnect between the film's promotional framing and its actual narrative delivery.

### **Ethno-Religious Nationalism as Narrative**

A recurring theme identified was the perception that *Mat Kilau* promotes a Malay-Islamic-centric ideology. Many interpreted this as marginalizing other ethnic groups, especially in scenes showing only Malays as freedom fighters. Participants also noted the frequent use of religious sermons and the overuse of nationalist slogans that explicitly support Malay-Muslim unity.

Twelve participants described the film as "too Islamic" and "too Malay" (Interviewees 9–13, 14–17, and 18–20). Six others appreciated its portrayal of heroism but questioned its historical accuracy (Interviewees 1–6). Non-Malay viewers highlighted that "even the non-Malays were oppressed and fought for independence, but the film failed to illustrate this" (Interviewee 14, Indian, age 41). One participant of Indian ethnicity said, 'Maybe the film instils patriotism among Malays, but certainly not among all Malaysians' (Interviewee 15, Indian, age 35). This comment supports the idea that *Mat Kilau* promotes ethnic-specific nationalism rather than fosters inclusive nation-building.

### **Malays Betraying Malays**

Participants established strong connections between the film's narrative and themes, and Malaysia's contemporary political climate, notably regarding Malay political betrayal, power struggles, and corruption. The timing of the film's release, coinciding with Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022, accentuated its political implications, thereby reinforcing its function as a cultural artefact influenced by and contributing to nationalist discourse. They observed that the film "reflects the current developments within the Malaysian political landscape, particularly concerning how Malays betray one another in pursuit of power" (Interviewees 15 and 18).

### Representation of Minorities

Non-Malay participants, especially Sikhs and Chinese, voiced frustration with misrepresentation. A Sikh participant expressed: "It was painful to watch the film, as the Chinese were depicted as greedy, while we were portrayed solely as British dogs." Although we all fought against colonialism too, the film fails to acknowledge this (Interviewee 20, Sikh, age 46). An Indian viewer added, "it concerns *Bangkit Melayu*, not *Bangkit Malaysia*" (It pertains to the rise of the Malays, not the rise of Malaysia). While this may inspire pride among Malays, it does not resonate with me as a Malaysian Indian" (Interviewee 17, Indian, age 35). Such criticisms highlight how *Mat Kilau* fails to represent an inclusive sense of patriotism adequately.

Despite differences in race and ethnic background, everyone has experienced stereotypes and discrimination from the British era; the colonial trauma remains real and impacts all within Malaysia. These critiques highlight the film's failure to represent an inclusive form of patriotism, instead prioritizing Malay supremacy. Although it portrays colonial-era racial narratives, it falls short in acknowledging the collective trauma and contributions of non-Malay communities to nation-building since Independence. The essential point is that a film functions not merely as entertainment but also plays a vital role in shaping collective memory and identity through storytelling.

### Technical and Cinematic Aspects

Overall, there was a notable appreciation for the film's acting, expression, traditional costume, aesthetic choices, and fight choreography. Participants acknowledged that, although acting and traditional costumes were commendable, editing and sound design proved to be distracting elements. One respondent remarked that "the fighting scenes were choreographed effectively, though the sound effects overshadowed the emotional impact" (Interviewee 4, Malay, age 27). Another individual observed that "rapid cuts and shaky camerawork hindered the viewers' ability to fully appreciate the artistry of *Silat*" (Interviewee 8, Malay, age 31).

### The Role of Cinema

Most participants agreed that *Mat Kilau* influences societal beliefs, either positive or negative, especially during politically charged times. As one participant observed, "films like this can incite racial discussions and influence perceptions of other groups, particularly during election periods" (Interviewee 11, Chinese, aged 40). This observation aligns with Hall's (1980) concept that media messages, once encoded, circulate ideologically within society, and with Anderson's (1983) perspective that film serves as a medium reinforcing collective national imagination.

It indicates that the utilization of cinema as a tool for political and ideological manipulation becomes apparent when films are employed to promote racial or religious agendas. This notion is reflected in John Hill's (1986) research on British cinema, which suggests that the global nature of cinema extends beyond mere entertainment and economic industries. Hill contends that films are manifestations of the societies in which they are produced. Living within a diverse culture in terms of sex, race, and class generates various forms of communication and symbolism within film texts, which serve functions beyond simple reflection.

## CONCLUSION

The synthesis of film analysis and audience reception indicates that *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* functions less as a historical narrative and more as a political instrument. The narrative reinterprets history through ideological encoding (Hall 1980) and constructs a selective imagined community (Anderson 1983) that emphasizes Malay-Muslim identity and representation. The film offers a selective reinterpretation of history, highlighting internal Malay betrayal while utilizing religious motifs to promote unity. Conversely, it positions Malays as both victims and saviours of the nation, simultaneously dehumanizing other racial groups. Such a depiction reflects political rhetoric designed to divert attention from issues of corruption and betrayal by focusing on external threats and religious solidarity.

Furthermore, the film's widespread popularity is not attributable to cinematic excellence or educational value; instead, it is primarily driven by its alignment with prevailing ethno-religious and political sentiments. It exploits anxieties concerning Malay disunity and external threats, projecting a dichotomous worldview: Malays versus colonizers, Muslims versus the morally corrupt, and insiders versus outsiders. Audience responses demonstrate an awareness that *Mat Kilau* functions as a form of ideological communication, illustrating the interaction between cultural production and audience decoding within Malaysia's contested political landscape.

In summary, *Mat Kilau* exemplifies the dual nature of patriotic cinema. It venerates a hero while marginalizing others through an ethno-religious perspective. Rather than fostering unity among Malaysians, it engenders division by endorsing a narrow form of nationalism linked to race and religion. Additionally, the film underscores Malaysia's intertwining of cinema and politics, emphasizing Malay-Muslim identity at the expense of other ethnic contributions. Its portrayal of betrayal, greed, and corruption reflects Malaysia's contemporary political issues. The film, therefore, does not promote national cohesion but rather accentuates division, ethnocentric pride, and dominance, particularly among Malay-Muslims. It serves as both a cultural and political artifact, illustrating the evolving landscape of Malaysia's nationalist cinema and political discourse.

## REFERENCES

- Abu Bakar, Ayu Haswida, and Muhammad Shahrazif Tajul Muhd Majidi. 2025. "Historiophoty: Reinterpreting the History in *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (2022)." Paper presented at the International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences, *RePEc IJRISS Journal*: 3584–3589.
- Ahmad, Mahyuddin. 2008. "Theorizing the 'Indies': The Marketplace, Ideology and the New Malaysian Cinema." *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia* 5: 151–168.
- Ahmad, Mahyuddin. 2011. "Between Desire and Hope: Ethnic Relations and the Notion of Bangsa Malaysia in Gadoh." *Kajian Malaysia* 29, no. 1: 75–90.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. London: Verso.

- Bailey, Richard Peter. 2024. "Silat Warriors as Malay Cultural Heroes." *Kemanusiaan: The Asian Journal of Humanities* 31, no. 1: 127–147. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Barnard, Timothy P. 2006. "P. Ramlee, Malay Cinema and History." In *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*, edited by Chou Cynthia and Vincent Houben, 162–180. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. 2016. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 11th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Case, William. 2022. *Political Legitimacy in Malaysia: Islam, Nationalism, and Economic Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Chandran, Sheela. 2022. "Malaysian Tailor Stitches Merdeka Outfits Inspired by Epic 'Mat Kilau' Movie." *The Star*, August 25, 2022.  
<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/people/2022/08/25/malaysian-tailor-stitches-merdeka-outfits-inspired-by-epic-039mat-kilau039-movie>
- Cheng, Dorothy. 2022. "Mat Kilau: Collective Trauma and Racism." *Projek Dialog*, August 9, 2022.  
<https://projekdialog.com/blog/mat-kilau-collective-trauma-racism/>
- Fathin, Najwa, and Mohd Syukri Zainal Abidin. 2023. "Filem 'Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan' Menurut Perspektif Tasawuf." *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 6, no. 4: 165–176.
- Funston, John. 2020. "Malaysia's Political Crisis: The Sheraton Move and Its Aftermath." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 3: 423–435.
- Ghazali, Faridah, and Mohamad Fadzil Che Din. 2020. "Malay Cinema and the Politics of Representation." *Kajian Malaysia* 38, no. 1: 47–67.
- Hall, Stuart. 1980. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall et al., 128–138. London: Hutchinson.
- Hanan, David, ed. 2001. *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region: Essays on Film in Ten South East Asia-Pacific Countries*. Manila: SEAPAVAA/Vietnam Film Institute/NSSAA. Lumpur: Merpati Jingga.
- Higson, Andrew. 1989. "The Concept of National Cinema." *Screen* 30, no. 4: 36–46.
- Hill, John. 1986. *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963*. London: BFI Publishing.
- Khoo, Gaik Cheng. 2006. *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Khoo, Gaik Cheng. 2017. "Postcolonial and Diasporic Narratives in Malaysian Cinema." *Asian Cinema* 28, no. 2: 123–140.
- Koh, Fabian. 2022. "Voters Left Feeling 'Powerless' in Ongoing Political Gridlock Following Malaysia GE15 Results: Experts." *Channel NewsAsia*, November.  
<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-general-election-voters-political-sheraton-move-king-experts-3095866>
- Krishnan, Dhesegaan Bala. 2022. Sikhs raise concerns over scenes in Mat Kilau movie. *New Straits Times*, July 8, 2022. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/07/811737/sikhs-raise-concerns-over-scenes-mat-kilau-movie>



- Latif, Baharudin. 2001. "A Brief History of Malaysian Film." In *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region*, edited by David Hanan. Brisbane: SEAPAVAA.
- Madon, Dona Lowii, et al. 2023. "Mat Kilau Kebangkitan Pahlawan: A Cognitive Study Through Freytag's Dramatic Structure." *International Journal of Art and Design (IJAD)* 6, no. 2/Sl: 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.24191/ijad.v6i2/Sl.1130>
- Morley, David. 1980. *The Nationwide Project: Audience Reception and Interpretive Strategies*. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.
- Muthalib, Hassan. 2013. *Malaysian Cinema in a Bottle: A Century (and a Bit More) of Wayang*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti.
- Noorshahrizam, Shahrin Aizat. 2022. "Sikh Group Regrets Villainous Portrayal of Non-Muslims in Mat Kilau." *Malay Mail*, July 8, 2022. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/07/08/sikh-group-regretsvillainous-portrayal-of-non-muslims-in-mat-kilau-film-claims-may-create-interracial-interreligious-tensions/16394>
- Ong, Justin. 2020. "Ex-PMO Officer Breaks Down The 'Sheraton Move'." *Malay Mail*, March 2, 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/03/02/ex-pmo-officer-breaksdown-the-sheraton-move/1842542>
- Pepinsky, Thomas. 2019. "Southeast Asia's Enduring Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4: 57–71.
- Rabbani, Amirul. 2021. "Expedited UMNO Election Affects Party Solidarity – Saarani." *AWANI International*, March 31, 2021. <https://international.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/expedited-umno-election-affects-party-solidarity-saarani-291032>
- Rajendran, Anantha. 2023. "Race, Religion and Cinematic Politics in Malaysia: A Content Analysis of Mat Kilau." *International Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 3: 215–233.
- Rajendran, Dinesh. 2023. "Malay Nationalism and the Politics of Representation in *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*." *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies in Asia* 5, no. 2: 101–118.
- Ramle, Muhammad Zaki, Muhammad Adam Danial, and Muhammad Safwan Harun. 2025. *Analisis Semangat Nasionalisme dalam Filem Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan (2022) dari Dimensi Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development.
- Safra, Siti Nur Izra, and Nur Afifah Vanitha Abdullah. 2023. "Fakta Sejarah dan Proses Kreatif Filem Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan (2022)." *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* 39, no. 3: 221–238.
- Samachar, Asia. 2022. "Action Film *Mat Kilau* Can Promote Hatred Towards Minorities, Says Sikh Organisations." *Asia Samachar*, July 9, 2022. [https://asiasamachar.com/2022/07/09/action-film-mat-kilau-can-promote-hatred-towards-minorities-says-sikh-organisations/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://asiasamachar.com/2022/07/09/action-film-mat-kilau-can-promote-hatred-towards-minorities-says-sikh-organisations/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
- Shackleton, Liz. 2022. "*Mat Kilau* Becomes Malaysia's Highest Grossing Local Film." *Deadline*, July 7, 2022. <https://deadline.com/2022/07/mat-kilau-malaysian-action-movie-from-syamsulyusof-highest-grossing-local-film-1235059317/>
- Shahrudin, Mohamad Aqriel Shazwan Md. *Filem Mat Kilau dan Kebangkitan Konservatisme Melayu*. Thesis, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2023.



- Shamshiri, Shahriza. 2022. "Mat Kilau Breathes Some Hope for Local Film Industry." *The Vibes*, June 24, 2022. [https://www.thevibes.com/articles/culture/64162/mat-kilau-breathes-some-hope-for-local-film-industry?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.thevibes.com/articles/culture/64162/mat-kilau-breathes-some-hope-for-local-film-industry?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
- Shamsul Amri Baharuddin. 2001. "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3: 355–366.
- Staiger, Janet. 2005. *Media Reception Studies*. New York: New York University Press.
- Sundaram, Jomo Kwame. 2022. "Corruption, Power Struggles, and Malay Political Decline." *New Straits Times*, August 2022. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/07/811737/sikhs-raise-concerns-over-scenes-mat-kilau-movie>
- Van der Heide, William. 2002. *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Wee, Gregory Lik Hoo. 2007. "The Search for a National Cinema." *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia* 4: 151–161.
- Weiss, Meredith L. 2021. *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wright, Tom, and Bradley Hope. 2018. *Billion Dollar Whale: The Man Who Fooled Wall Street, Hollywood, and the World*. New York: Hachette Books.
- Zaharom, Nain. 2005a. "The Structure of the Media Industry: Implications for Democracy." In *Media, Democracy and Development in Malaysia*, edited by Mustafa K. Anuar and Nain Zaharom, 25–43. Kuala Lumpur: Gerakbudaya.
- Zaharom, Nain. 2005b. "Media and the Politics of Race in Malaysia." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 35, no. 4: 411–431.
- Zaharom, Nain. 2012. "Media and Politics in Malaysia." *Kajian Malaysia* 30, no. 1: 1–15.
- Zaihasra Abdul Rahman. 2023. "The Rise of Malay Nationalism in Malaysian Cinema: A Historical Perspective." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, no. 2: 189–205.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**SARATA BALAYA** is an academic at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) with nearly fifteen years of teaching experience. As both a scholar and media practitioner, she makes noteworthy contributions to the discourse on cinema and media representation through her teaching, research, and documentary projects. She obtained a degree in Broadcasting and a Master's in Screen Studies, with a specialization in documentary filmmaking. Throughout her career, her creative works have received numerous awards, exemplifying her commitment to impactful storytelling and visual narratives. Balaya's academic and creative pursuits are aligned with her research interests, which include Asian cinema, Malaysian cinema, gender studies, the creative industries, ethnography, and film studies. Her work frequently explores how media influences cultural and gender identities, particularly within Southeast Asian contexts.

**Email:** [sarata@utar.edu.my](mailto:sarata@utar.edu.my)

