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Of Golden Dreams and Metropolitan Lifestyles: How Local Television Programs Articulate and Represent the Concept of a National Identity

Introduction

The question of national integration and the construction of a national identity have been "sites of struggles and contestations" in multi-ethnic, post-colonial societies, where various ethnic groups compete to "fix" their own definitions and interpretations of the terms. Discussions on the process of nation-building and the creation of a national identity in Malaysia are mostly couched in the discourse of a dominant "nation-state paradigm", thereby suppressing the "voices" of "equally influential alternative "nation-state paradigms" being worked out at various levels informing the *realpolitik* in Malaysia" (Shamsul Amri, 1994). The purpose of this article is to analyse the articulation and representation of the conception of a national cultural identity and the promotion of the inter-ethnic environment by local television programs. Is the television narrative a "contested terrain" where alternative "voices" are allowed to challenge or subvert the official definition of those terms? Or does television discourse instead withdraw from the "arena" by resorting to Western cultural hegemony?

It is important to note, however, that a textual analysis reveals only a partial view of the discourse on the meanings of a national identity since it precludes investigation of other public discourses on the issue and examination of audience interpretations of the meanings of the television text. Hence, the findings from an analysis of the television text should be complemented by research on other mass-mediated and non-mass

mediated discourses and ethnographic study on the audience's readings of the meanings presented by the text.

The Conception of a National Identity

In this section, I will present a review of the possible definitions and descriptions of national identity based on cursory readings of the literature. Benedict Anderson defines nation as "an imagined community" (1983: 15) which suggests that a national identity exists in the people's imagination as a concept that represents their sense of belonging to a nation, a region or a local community. For Anderson, this "national imagining" is a phenomenon of modernity, a form of experiencing which is only possible within the context of the technological and economic changes that produced modern capitalist societies. The "style" of imagining nation-ness is essentially a mass-mediated style, one achieved in literate societies with well-developed communication structures. In short, Anderson argues that national identity is a particular style of "imagining the community" made possible by and also required by the processes of social modernity which encompass secular rationalism, a calendrical perception of time, capitalist-driven technological development, mass literacy and mass communications, political democratisation and the modern nation-state. All these features combine in complex ways to promote identification with the nation as the dominant form of cultural identity (Tomlinson, 1991: 82). However, there is no reason to assume that national imaginings always exclude other forms of identification, nor that they are always at the forefront of people's minds. It is possible to argue that some of those elements of modernity that Anderson discusses in relation to national identity may also be relevant to an explanation of modern regional identity.

The appeal of Anderson's description, then, is its linking of national identity with the processes of social modernity. National identity is a highly mediated imaginary belonging which replaces earlier forms of cultural belonging. There is thus a connection between the phenomenon of national identity and the general breakdown of existential certainties that characterises modern social life. National identities, then, can be recognised not as cultural belongings rooted in deep quasi-natural attachments to a homeland, but, rather, complex cultural

constructions that emerged in specific historical conditions. There is a "lived reality" of national identity, but it is a reality lived in representations - not in direct communal solidarity (Tomlinson, 1991: 84).

Anthony Giddens, on the other hand, asserts that the sense of national belonging represents an attenuated form of Clifford Geertz's "primordial sentiments" in tribal societies and village communities (1981: 193). For Giddens (1985), nationalism is a "distant imagining" that includes the essentially mediated understanding of belonging to a spatially spread "community", and it is generally "distant" from routine everyday life. Both Anderson and Giddens, therefore, emphasise the "imagined", essentially mediated, nature of national belonging, and its peculiarity to the broader social conditions of modernity, in particular the "convergence of social space and time" brought about by technological advances in communications and so on. Both argue that national identification replaces cultural identification with the cultural "givens" that provided the certainties and security to pre-modern societies. The media, then, are potentially the primary source of strong national identification in modern societies. However, the "depth", the endurance and the political significance of such mediated identification will probably depend on factors external to the media itself, for example the general state of social and political stability in the country.

The literature and discussions on the construction of a national identity in Malaysia are mainly couched in the discourse of the process of nation-building. The dominant discourse, however, subscribes to a particular "nation-state paradigm" and focuses on "Malay dominance" or "Malay hegemony" thereby ignoring alternative "nation-state paradigms" and suppresses "minority voices" among the Malays, the larger Bumiputera community or amongst the Chinese and Indians (Shamsul Amri, 1994).

In this article, I will explore the alternative approach to the construction of a national identity as one that evolves out of the contestation of the meanings desired by each contending group from the same political structure of the nation-state (Muhammad Ikmal Said, forthcoming).

As in other new nation-states, the creation of a national culture is now considered an essential part of nation-building. A national cultural policy was formulated by the state in 1971

with the objective of forging a Malaysian cultural identity which would encompass the indigenous culture of the region, the cultures of the non-indigenous communities and Islam. In practice, however, the relationship between the promotion of a national culture and the preservation and cultivation of the cultural heritage of various ethnic groups has been one of tension, as the state tend to sponsor Malay cultural values and forms and to neglect other minority cultures and languages. It is not surprising then that debates on national cultural identity revolved around the legitimacy of Malay culture as the basis of Malaysia's national culture and the relevance of minorities' rights within the modern nation-state (M. Ikmal, forthcoming).

Considering that the national cultural policy was conceived soon after the state of emergency had ceased, open polemic on the issues pertaining to the policy did not take place until the early 1980s when the state undertook an evaluation of its implementation. A joint memoranda was submitted by several influential Chinese and Indian groups to the government in 1983 and 1984, urging for meaningful participation from their respective communities in the construction of the national culture (Kua Kia Soong, 1985). They unequivocally demand for cultural equality - that no one culture should be superordinate over or subordinate to another. Their arguments that cultural diversity, cultural identity and cultural democracy be recognised as the proper basis for national integration and intercommunal understanding and that the national culture be constituted of all the respective cultures that comprise the cultural heritage of the nation are reminiscent of the current notion of multiculturalism in the USA.

The non-Malay, non-Muslim indigenous communities of the states of Sabah and Sarawak have also voiced their grievances of being subsumed into the Malay-Muslim hegemony (Francis Loh, 1992). Unlike the non-indigenous groups, their claim to history and legal position as the definitive people, numerical majority and constitutional guarantees provide them with more political clout.

The minorities' and the other indigenous groups' critique centers on the issue of language and the right to vernacular education. The Chinese feel that they are not free to develop their own language as a symbol of their identity since the public vernacular education is restricted to the primary level

and development funds for Chinese and Tamil schools are normally lower than those obtained by national schools. The Kadazans and the Ibans of Sabah and Sarawak also feel uneasy about (i) the relegation of their vernacular languages to a subordinate position, (ii) the status of Islam as the official religion of the state, (iii) the government's effort to incorporate all indigenous people into a singular category of bumiputeras and (iv) the peninsular Malays' monopoly of federal government offices (M. Ikmal, forthcoming). The commodification of culture, that is the "showcasing" of cultural activities and symbols of the various ethnic groups as tourist attractions, however, has depoliticised the issue of a national cultural identity. In its attempt to promote and organize culture for the tourism industry, the state produces a cultural package which incorporates not only the cultures of the main ethnic groups but also the cultures of the "exotic" minorities. The spread of a consumerist-based middle class culture also contributes to the "de-centering" of Malay hegemony in the conception of a national culture. The wide usage of English, the appreciation of Western "high" culture and the choice of cosmopolitan suburban residence among the urban middle and upper class Malays have definitely shaped their identities in the same mould as that of the other middle class ethnic groups.

The Role of the Mass Media in National Development

At least four benefits could be claimed on the role of the media in relation to development. These were that the mass media could, first, break down traditional values thought to be inimical to the process of industrialization and modernization; second, help promote the attainment of an autonomous and integrated national identity; third, assist in the dissemination of specific technical skills; fourth, they could be harnessed to the task of rapid expansion of formal education and improvement of educational attainment in schools.

In the early promotion of these benefits, two important general obstacles to success were often overlooked. The first of these were the culturally-bound model of development which characterized much of the thinking about the role of the media. Rogers (1976) argued that economic growth did not necessarily have to come about through industrialization.

Development was not adequately measured by such questionable devices as GNP, nor was it to be equated with such features as capital-intensive technology or international loans. The western model had failed to bring about the expected levels of development in many countries, and even in the west, the process of industrialization had brought about serious problems (for example, environmental pollution) as well as benefits.

A second obstacle that was overlooked was the wide range of factors that limited actual levels of government or private commitment to development-related objectives. It was assumed that either the mass media, of themselves, would bring about attitude changes conducive to the requirements of a developing society, or that the formal objectives of development were so obvious and so compelling that any right-minded media organization or its government would not hesitate to harness the media organization to these objectives. But left to themselves, privately-owned media systems had no motive to engage in development-type programming if profit was to be made in other ways, and if production costs could be cut by reliance on cheap imports of popular programming from western countries. Exposure to such material might enhance empathy, which was a major prerequisite for the acceptance of other aspects of what constituted the modern society (Lerner, 1958). But, on the other hand, it could also give rise to a consumer-oriented attitude inimical to the requirements of a developing society (Wells, 1972).

As for the roles of governments, many studies suggested that these were more likely to intervene in media programming on matters that concerned their political security than on development-related issues, and that rhetoric rarely corresponded with the reality (for example, Barghouti, 1974 and Hachten, 1975). Other factors that were overlooked included the low salary and status of journalists in many countries, the vulnerability of media systems to the bribery and corruption of political machines and the widespread intolerance of media independence and initiative (see Cole, 1975; Jones, 1979; Lent, 1978).

The prevailing perceptions of the role of the mass media in relation to national development in Malaysia are influenced by the works of Daniel Lerner (1958) and Wilbur Schramm (1964). Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* and

Schramm's *Mass Media and National Development* epitomized the ideas of the Dominant Paradigm which promoted the belief that the poor and supposedly *backward* countries of the Third World *should* develop and "modernize" according to the patterns and structures of the industrialized countries, with the United States as its model. According to this school of thought, the attitudes of individuals in the Third World which are outdated and counterproductive attributed to the problem of underdevelopment. Hence, modernization is achievable primarily through changing the attitudes of individuals. Both Lerner and Schramm saw the mass media's role as central to this process of behavioral change. The media are termed as the "mobility multiplier" (Lerner, 1958: 52) and seen as performing "watchmen" functions and creating "a climate for development" (Schramm, 1964: 131-132). Media growth in developing countries were encouraged and believed to trigger economic growth and accelerate the modernization process. It seemed more important to establish the basic media infrastructure, first, than to worry unduly about content.

The modernists' belief in the crucial role of the media in terms of attitude change is reflected in the official discourse on the role of the media in relation to national development in Malaysia. Mohd. Kaus Salleh, the former Director-General of the Department of Information, asserted that:

"Communication is important in providing the climate for development ... In the Malaysian context, efforts are also made to change the society from that of traditional agrarian to a structured modern society which is industrialized. This process of change involves values, human interaction, life structure and the structure of understanding."
(1983: 86)

However, the dominant perspective has been criticised for its failure to situate the mass media within and as part of wider social, economic and cultural contexts (Elliot and Golding, 1974). On the contrary, it succeeds in sidestepping the issue of the history of the mass media in developing countries, for example broadcasting in Malaysia which began as

“ ... part of the power structure built and transferred to the new government and designed to provide the same service that it provided for the colonial government, namely to safeguard and strengthen the authority of government (with a) built-in partiality towards people and parties in power.” (Karthigesu, 1988: 767)

State control in Malaysia is more evident with broadcasting than with the press. This is especially true of Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), the government broadcasting network which was set up in 1963. Two of its reasons for existence are to “explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage the policies and programme of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public” and “to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirement of the government”. Apart from direct State control of the two government channels - TV1 and TV2 - through RTM, political control of the only local commercial television station - TV3 - is also obvious (Gomez, 1994: 116-138). Furthermore, the Broadcasting Act (1988) provides the Minister of Information with wide-ranging powers to determine who is given the opportunity to broadcast and what may or may not be broadcast.

Even so, some western scholars considered state control in the “developing” countries to be the necessary price to be paid for political integration and national prosperity, given the conditions of tribalism or ethnicism that were said to threaten the security of new nations.

The Role of the Media in the Creation of National Identity

The second major claim for a positive role of the media in relation to national development concerns its potential for the establishment of a widely accepted meaning of national identity. This potential has been generally recognized by new Third-World elites more than the media’s potentials for more specific economic or educational objectives. There is little doubt that state-owned media systems, which disseminate news and information of government activities, have not

achieved some degree of national consolidation. But the simple claim that mass media contribute to national integration and hence to development requires modification.

Even where the mass media have been nationalized, there is still an important conflict between the exploitation of mass media in order to achieve national integration and the exploitation of mass media in order to bring about changes in attitudes that would accelerate the process of modernization (Katz and Wedell, 1978). The importance of the mass media in relation to national unity is evident in all three stages in the development process: the stage of political integration in the early phase of independence, the onset of "modernization", and the reaction to it. The initial concern for political integration is seen to require an emphasis on common traditional symbols, or the creation of symbols that are then made to seem commonly traditional. But this use of media is found to be inadequate in the face of competition with western-style programming, which is seen either as economically inevitable or as positively related to modernization. Efforts in preserving the "traditional" may not survive the transfer of traditional arts to the new technology of mass media while resources for local production may be scarce to allow real competition with imports. Unlike its use for national integration, the use of media for modernization may be essentially divisive and may neutralize any impact that is attributed to integrative goals. Modernization sets generation against generation, old elites against new; it may indeed be associated with the newly achieved dominance of a particular ethnic or social grouping and can become an anti-integrative symbol against which the disadvantaged, the minority groups and the dispossessed may be mobilized. A concern for national integration to overcome such conflicts will then re-surfaces and this may involve an identification of the agents of "neo-imperialism" as the common enemy. This may well expose the illusory character of the original claim for a positive relationship between mass media and national integration, in the sense that the mass media may have been sponsored by western corporations, based on western technology, carried western programming and illustrated the general socio-economic process of dependency in other ways.

The claim of many early researchers that the media had an important role to play in the establishment of a national

consciousness endorsed a model of development in which an urban political elite, often advised by international agencies or western governments, determined the goals of society and manipulated the masses toward these goals. The models of broadcasting imported from the west confirmed the notion of heavily concentrated media systems, located close to the centers of political and military power, employing technologies equipped for one-way communication as in the west. In this way, the claim entailed a basically conservative view of the role of the media. This was further enhanced by the particular contents that governments frequently used to promote national integration, namely conservative national symbols such as the presidency, the state religion, an urban and elitist version of "national news", a particular language or group of favored languages, etc. (J.O. Boyd-Barrett in Gurevitch et. al., 1988).

Television Content and Viewing Habits

Tripat Kaur Santokh (1979) found that the structure of RTM's programming encourages the type of viewing habits that are communal rather than national in nature. According to her: "This situation originates from the language difficulties arising out of the individual demands of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and English language groups each of which is significant in terms of proportionate size and economic and political demands" (1979:142).

Hence, in order to inject national identity consciousness within the context of Malaysian society, the national media system should provide a channel that will allow cross-cultural communication among the audience.

" ... the continued maintenance of such basic communal structures throughout the entire period of Malaysianization of program content and the national unity objectives is contrary to national aspirations. There appears to be a basic and inherent discrepancy between the theory of professed aims and objectives of broadcast policy and the practice of maintaining such divisions in network structures." (1979: 142)

To resolve the problem of ethnicity, Tripat proposed several recommendations to rectify the structure of broadcast media that includes changing the programming criteria to factors that are non-ethnic in nature (usually based on geographical location, socio-economic status and age). But what exactly are the criteria that determine the selection and scheduling of programs on television stations?

To quote Gilbert Seldes, "In the absence of other criteria, the style, idiom and values of radio and television entertainment are set, in practice, in part by the unstated values of the communicators, in part by the working logic of the media as a whole, in particular by the pursuit of universal appeal and what that is taken to mean" (in Denys Thompson, 1973).

Since television stations are part of an industry in the capitalist system of economy, the logic of profit maximization and the marketability of programs underlie their selection and scheduling. Sponsors and advertisers in turn are influenced by factors such as audience size or volume as well as their demographic and psychographic profiles. Thus, programs that are purchased or produced are not only determined by program ratings but the purchasing power or consumption habits of the target audience.

Apart from the logic of capitalism and the approach to marketing, the political economic structure also has significant implications on the programming pattern of local television stations. Mainstream media organisations, including the private television station (TV3), are owned, controlled and managed by companies or individuals closely aligned to the ruling parties (Gomez, 1990). Thus, media professionals are restricted by the imperatives of their paymasters. In the case of television, the ideology of the proprietors and managers would set the parameter for discussion of issues and selection of speakers. The communal nature of the ruling parties is also reflected in the concept and content of programs broadcasted by local television stations which tend to appeal to particular ethnic groups.

Recent studies on media habits show that ethnicity remains a persistent problem in the structure of the nation's mass media (Samsudin A. Rahim, 1991; Md. Nor Othman, 1993). Md. Nor put forward several suggestions for television stations to implement to draw Chinese and Indian viewers to watch Malay drama series, namely by encouraging themes on

the lifestyles of the plural society, by increasing the number of non-Malay actors and by encouraging non-Malay producers or production houses to produce dramas in the Malay language (for example, *Jangan Ketawa* and *Kisah Benar*). He thinks the problem with the dramas that are produced today is their preoccupation with themes that concern the Malay community and rarely deals with inter-ethnic interaction.

This next section will proceed to present the findings of a study on the types of local television programs produced in the last 10 years and to what extent the programs' contents deal with the issue of national identity and national integration. The analysis focuses on programs produced by the private television station, TV3.¹

TV3 was established in 1984 to counteract the growing VCR phenomenon, and to provide an alternative to the two government channels, TV1 and TV2. It was also intended to provide competition to RTM, which had been highly criticized for allegedly showing low quality, uninteresting, and out-moded programs (Rahmah Hashim, 1994: 236).

In spite of its status as a private network, TV3 is still subject to government pressures on media policy. According to the guidelines drawn out by the Ministry of Information, TV3 has to allocate 30 per cent of its air time for local programs. To achieve this objective, its management has established several sections, such as News and Current Affairs, Magazine and Entertainment as well as Sports to produce the necessary programs. The production of dramas and comedies is commissioned to independent production houses. Of the total budget for its program acquisition and production, 75 per cent is allocated for the purchase of local and syndicated foreign programs, whereas 25 per cent is for in-house production (Manager of Magazine and Entertainment, TV3).

In 1984, TV3 imported almost 80 percent of its programs from the West (mainly from the USA) and over 12 percent from other parts of Asia (mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan); by the end of its first year of operations (June 1985), local programs constituted 24 per cent of the total weekly airtime. By 1987, however, TV3 had reduced overall foreign import to about 70 percent.

The total airtime was also increased to 70.5 hours per week (June 1987) from 56 hours, followed by a slight increase in the time allocated for local programs - 18.5 hours or 26 per

cent of the total airtime. Although this figure met the objective of increasing the broadcast hours of local programs, the actual number of local programs was still insufficient since the television station repeated the broadcast of several of its in-house productions every week. Of the 62 hours of program time, only 10 hours were slotted for local programs (including 2.5 hours of repeat broadcasts). The total weekly airtime for June 1989 was 75.25 hours, of which 23.5 hours or 31 per cent was made up of local programs. Moreover, TV3 had ceased to broadcast 'reruns' of their local programs. The schedule for June 1991 showed the percentage of local program content increased to 33 per cent of the total 78.5 hours of total air time. Of 68.5 hours of program time, 23 per cent constituted local programs. (Please refer to Table 1)

Year	1985	1987	1989	1991	1993
Total Weekly Airtime	56 hrs.	70.5 hrs.	75.25 hrs.	78.5 hrs.	85.5 hrs
Local	13.5 hrs (24 %)	18.5 hrs (26%)	23.5 hrs (31%)	26 hrs (33%)	30.5 hrs (36%)
Content * total Program Time	49 hrs	62 hrs	65.25 hrs	68.5 hrs	75 hrs
*Local Program Time	6.5 hrs (13%)	10 hrs (16%)	13.5 hrs (20%)	16 hrs (23%)	20 hrs (27%)

(* Total program time does not include news broadcasts and announcements.)

To operate a television station is a very demanding and costly affair. Apart from the expenses incurred, television networks also have to cater to audience demands, program ratings, consumer interests, advertising interests, national interests, corporate image as well as network financial investments. As a commercial television station that operates within a capitalist economic system, TV3 produces programs based on

TABLE 1:
A
Comparison
of TV 3's
Total Airtime
from 1985-
1993

the logic of profit maximisation. This means prioritizing the demands of those segments of audience that are considered to have strong purchasing power. The purchasing power of the Malaysian audience is found to be based on ethnic and class divisions (Mohd. Nor Othman, 1993). Middle and upper class Chinese and Malays, who formed the dominant consumer groups, are the advertisers' target. Indians and other minority groups are usually ignored. For "effective reach", the marketers need to match the characteristics of media tools with the profile of the media habits of the product's consumers. Hence, Values and Lifestyles (VALS) of media audience is an important index in determining the target market and ensuring effective media reach.

The nature of marketing in Malaysia encourages advertisers to adopt the strategy of market segmentation, an approach used to help advertisers identify their respective potential markets or target audience (for example gender, ethnic and/or culture-based) and fully utilise their use of advertisement on television. This strategy informs the selection and scheduling of TV3 programs based on the interests and preferences of certain ethnic groups. A quantitative study of the schedule of TV3 programs from 1985-1993 shows that most of the prime-time slots are allocated for foreign or imported programs that appeal to Malay and Chinese audiences. Although RTM and TV3 have been criticized for this heavily foreign program content, it would be difficult for both networks to argue that these programs usually attract viewers and generate much revenue for the stations. (As an initiative to increase the total airtime for locally produced programs during primetime, various new slots such as Citrawara, Teater Kenangan, Teater Nusantara, Pendekar and other Malay drama series were introduced in 1991.)

In the first ten months of its existence since mid-1984, TV3 gained 53 percent of the total advertising revenue. As a consequence, RTM revised its programming schedules and reduced its advertising rates. Since the Chinese belt was introduced by TV3, its revenues for the 6 P.M. to 7 P.M. airtime slot has increased to about 60 per cent of total advertising revenue. This brought about some changes in RTM, which also introduced a Chinese belt on TV2 everyday from Monday to Friday at 7 P.M. As a result, RTM's share rose to 55 percent of total advertising revenue in 1987. Meanwhile, programs for

Indians are maintained for two to three hours a week from the early evening or late night since the station's inception.

The practice of program selection and scheduling according to the ethnicity of the target audience clearly has consequences on the efforts of programmers to promote national integration via television. It is evident that the content of local television programs, especially the drama genre, does not reflect the social reality of the Malaysian society in terms of ethnic plurality. Malay dramas tend to deal with the issues of Malay society while the social settings of locally-produced Chinese dramas are equally homogenous. Very few dramas attempt to portray interaction between the ethnic groups, to include non-Malay actors, to encourage non-Malay producers or production houses to produce dramas.

Instead of striving for a program concept that portrays the Malaysian identity and deals with issues that transcend ethnic boundaries, TV3 drama and entertainment production continue to focus on the viewing preferences of the Malay ethnic group. For example, serial dramas such as *Rumah Kedai* (TV3), *Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu* (TV3), *Teater Nusantara* (TV3), *Teater Kenangan* (TV3) and *Citrawara* slots are targeted to the Malay ethnic audience. Meanwhile, serial privatised dramas in the Chinese language, such as *Double Bonus*, appeal mainly to the Chinese audience. The same principle applies for drama and entertainment programs in Tamil.

It is clear that television viewing habits in Malaysia are generally based on ethnicity, for example 27.6 percent of Malays, compared to 5.2 percent of Chinese and 7.3 percent of Indians, view the privatised television dramas (*Drama Swasta*) on RTM1. Malay viewers prefer television programs in Bahasa Malaysia while Chinese and Indians prefer programs in their own languages. When a foreign program is dubbed in the Malay language, it will encounter the same fate, that is the program will attract viewers from the Malay community. Although only 10 per cent of the non-Malay audience views (on a regular basis) programs that generally appeal to the Malay audience, more Malays view programs in Chinese and Tamil than the Indians or the Chinese.

The viewing pattern for programs in the English language depends on the types of programs. However, the percentage of Indian viewers who regularly view programs in English are higher than the Malays or Chinese. On the whole,

the percentage of the Chinese audience who views programs in English is the lowest compared to the Malay or Indian audiences. The study found that the Malays view more television than the Chinese and the Indians. This could be that the Chinese audience prefer Chinese videos to English television programs as demonstrated by a study (Md. Nor and Ong, 1993) that the percentage of the Chinese audience who turns to the VCR is higher than the Malays or Indians. Based on that information, major advertisers prefer to sponsor programs imported from Hong Kong than locally-produced programs in Bahasa Malaysia or imported English programs.

Of Golden Dreams and Metropolitan Lifestyles: A National Cultural Expression?

As alternatives to programs that are characterised by ethnicity, there are several locally-produced programs that attempt to transcend communal divisions. These are situation comedies - *2 + 1* (1991), *Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu* (1991), *Jangan Ketawa* (1992), *Onde-onde* and *Keluarga Nyonya*, gameshows - *Pop Kuiz* (1991) and *Golden Dreams* (1993), and a docudrama, *Kisah Benar* (1993), that received favorable response from the three major ethnic groups.

Golden Dreams is a hybrid of contest-travel promotion package that plays on the symbol of its sponsor, Benson & Hedges, and invites viewers to realize their dreams to perform extraordinary feats (deep sea diving, flying in a fighter plane, trekking in a tropical rainforest) and to travel to faraway places (The Great Wall of China, Hollywood, Disneyland). The show is hosted by entertainment celebrities of mixed origins - Harith Iskandar (subsequently replaced by Jit Murad) and Tiara Jacqueline, who communicated in both Malay and English. Participants are selected from viewers who wrote in by consciously taking into account their ethnic origins/backgrounds (Interview with the Manager of the Magazine and Entertainment Section, TV3). Ideally, the producer has to ensure that the group of participants selected for each episode should represent all ethnic groups. However, the purpose of representing all the various ethnic groups is not motivated by nationalistic aspiration alone but also by economic calculation, that is to attract the maximum number of audience/potential travellers from all segments of the market, as desired by advertis-

ers. Furthermore, the places visited by the presenters and participants are mostly not "off-the-beaten-tracks" of commercial travel packages.

Of the situation comedies (sit-coms) broadcasted on TV3, *2 + 1* (produced by a local independent production house - Cinematic Productions) may be regarded as the first drama program to succeed in representing themes or issues that appeal to various ethnic groups. (Othman Hafsham, who produced *2 + 1* is known for his efforts in projecting a "Malaysian image" on films and made-for-television programs). The sit-com revolves around the lives of three female house mates - Zeila Jalil, Louisa Chong and Susan Lankester - in an apartment setting (an adaptation of sorts of *Three's a Company*). These attractive, professional women are in their late twenties or early thirties - very cosmopolitan, very open-minded and extremely independent (in other words, very "yuppy"). Zeila Jalil plays the character 'Nani', a secretary, Louisa Chong plays 'Meg', a physician, and Susan Lankester plays 'Sara', a Eurasian marketing and advertising executive. Their interaction with each other and their neighbors, also made up of characters from different ethnic backgrounds, provide the main thrust of the plots in each episode.

The portrayal of harmonious relations between the housemates serves as a metaphor for the social life of a multi-ethnic society where different ethnic groups have to exercise a certain degree of tolerance in order to co-exist. With its multi-ethnic cast, its contemporary storylines that deal with issues that transcend ethnic boundaries, the sit-com received favorable response. However, many incidents of race/ethnic stereotyping occur as a consequence of prioritizing humor and this may be seen as a flaw in the effort to promote inter-ethnic understanding. For example, 'Meg' represents the economic dominance of the Malaysian Chinese - particular about how her money is spent but concerned about the welfare of her 'family members' (clan). Ramli or 'Ram', the apartment's janitor, is an Indian Muslim who displays a certain amount of bravado and perceives himself as the 'protector' of the three ladies but is actually a coward when it comes to take action. Selamat or 'Sam', a neighbor who frequently drops in to borrow things, is an effeminate fashion designer. (This 'problem' of effeminate males is usually associated with the Malays in most television programs.) Another regular character is 'Datuk

Majid SMS', also a resident of the apartment building, who represents the Malay *nouveau riche* - obsessed with his new-found status, fond of emulating the Western way of dressing to be 'one-up' from the rest of the crowd and has 'eyes for young women' (a stereotype of Malay 'datuks' newly conferred with the title).

Although the comedy genre portray more inter-ethnic interaction the humor is often derived from stereotyping ethnic characters. Indian male characters are portrayed as usually as tight-fisted money-lenders (chettiar), Indian women as poor, disempowered and dependent, Chinese businessmen (towkays) as preoccupied with wealth accumulation, Chinese women as businessminded and down-to-earth, middle-age Malay men as obsessed with the idea of having young second wives and Malay women as gossips and dispensers of advice. Another popular sit-com, also produced by Hafsham, which was originally titled Syhhh... (but later changed to Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu) falls back on this "formula". Taped in front of a studio audience, Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu has as its setting a cluster of retail shops in a low-cost flat area. The main characters are Pak Busu, who operates the diner (also unofficially recognised as the leader of the residents at the flat), Pak Uda, who represents the illiterate elderly, Budin who is unemployed, Mat Derih, whose highly confidential work inspired the original title of the sit-com (Syhhh...), Suzy who runs the hair saloon and Singam who manages the driving school. The characterisation of Malays as the majority of flat dwellers (which is representative of the government's quota of 3 Malays to 1 non-Malay) and the dominant group who speaks for the flat dwellers' grievances (albeit negatively portrayed as the ethnic group who likes to while their time away at coffee shops) while the non-Malays as business-minded are highly stereotyped. Although the sit-com deals with current issues such as "yuppism" (manifested in the acquisition of a mobile phone), child abuse and building maintenance, the issues are "diluted" since it is an entertainment program.

Jangan Ketawa, a compilation of comic sketches on the antics and idiosyncracies of members of the local urban community, is another entertaining program with high ratings. In a way, this show succeeds in representing various ethnic groups and their interaction in a light-hearted and humorous mode. The cast is comprised of Harith Iskandar, Mon and Bee

(both "Mak Nyah"s, the popular term for transvestites) and Shanti, an Indian comedian. The jokes are hilarious but this show relies excessively on the convention of stereotyping the antics of the main characters that are ethnic-bound and the mannerisms of transvestites. Apart from being allegedly racist, this comedy show may be accused of promoting "unhealthy" moral values by excessive representation of a group with "deviant" sexual orientation. The practice of ethnic and "gender" stereotyping may only serve to reinforce prevailing perceptions and attitudes among the audience.

Kisah Benar is a collection of vignettes based on "true" experiences of people from all ethnic groups and all walks of life. Although the weekly series offer some valuable lessons and sensitises its audience to the plight of the less fortunate, the themes of the episodes are also stereotypical of the possible experiences of the different ethnic groups. Youths who are often led astray to lead lives in crime and vice are Chinese, abused (be it physically or sexually) children are Indians and naive consumers who are easily conned are Malays.

Although the programs mentioned above are laudable for their efforts in incorporating presentors, audience-participants and actors/characters from the three major ethnic groups, the decision to portray a multi-ethnic society is tied more to economic considerations, such as the promotion of travel or leisure activities among a broad spectrum of the society, rather than nationalistic obligation to promote genuine national integration. The programs pander to the advertisers' need to reach mostly middle-class, upmarket audience/consumers and, thus, fail to provide spaces for alternative and minority voices (be they representative of the Malays, the non-Malays or the larger Bumiputera community) to articulate counter-hegemonic discourses on the concept of a national cultural identity.

The Articulation and Representation of a National Identity as Contradictions in Terms?

It has been discussed earlier in this paper that the construction of a national identity is a "site of struggle" whereby different forces contend to "fix" their own meanings and definitions of the concept. The framework for the evolution of national culture was prescribed by the ruling political party which assumed power at Independence in 1957 but the official con-

ception of a national cultural identity has been challenged by minority groups representing moderate (the "cultural pluralists") and radical (the "cultural purists") perspectives. As E.P. Thompson (1978) asserts, "culture is a struggle between *ways of life*", constituted by the friction between competing interests and forces, mostly located in social class. So, do television programs provide a "space" for competing minority interests and forces to "voice" their definitions and meanings of the concept of a national cultural identity? Or are they mere vehicles for dominant political definitions? Or worse, a 'non-arena' for advertisers and station operators to promote materialist-consumerist culture as a solution to the problem?

Based on the analysis of TV3 programs which attempt to transcend ethnicism, it is evident that the commercial tv station panders to the interests of the advertisers and its own pocketbooks rather than risking profit margins for noble ideas such as national identity, national integration and nation-building. TV station operators (and program buyers) have to contend with the day-to-day reality of achieving high program ratings in order to get sponsorship for their programs. Sponsors or advertisers, in turn, have to justify "effective media reach" (optimum returns for each advertising ringgit spent) for the program spots they buy. Thus, market segmentation is the approach to marketing of programs adopted by advertisers in Malaysia which influences the decisions of television programmers in selecting and scheduling television programs (based on the viewing preferences and viewing habits of the various ethnic groups). This practice of marketing programs results in the prevalence of "ethnic belts" on the local television screens which hinders initiatives to inject themes and issues that transcend particular ethnic concerns and raise the audience's consciousness on inter-ethnic understanding, tolerance and interaction. But then again, consumer sovereignty ("giving the audience what they want") is invoked possibly because advertisers are unable to shed old prejudices and perceptions (about certain ethnic groups' purchasing power and consumption pattern) and television programmers are unwilling to take financial risks.

Given the political and economic structure of the media industry, it is indeed problematic for cultural workers - producers, scriptwriters, directors, actors - to articulate and represent alternative definitions and interpretations of a national

cultural identity. The political and economic structures of the Malaysian society have been cited as the locus where the roots of ethnicism are firmly entrenched (Tan Chee Beng in Kua, 1985: 132). Given the racial basis of power in Malaysian politics, it is difficult to promote a truly national culture based on genuine cross-fertilisation of various cultures. Other scholars (Maznah Mohamad and Johan Savaranamuthu, also in Kua, 1985: 136) concurred that the prevailing practice of inter and intra party bargaining influenced the nature of cultural aspirations in an inherently divisive and delicate balance of ethnic forces. They felt that serious inequalities, inequities or social malpractice in the society need to be addressed before national integration can be achieved.

The commodification of culture and the insertion of the media industry into the capitalist economic system gives primacy to the commercial logic of profit maximization and further suppresses alternative definitions of a national cultural identity and promotion of an inter-ethnic environment within the television text. Rather than stick its neck out and risk financial losses or political repercussions, the private tv station prefers to play safe by presenting a materialist-consumerist ("Western bourgeois") culture and cosmopolitan lifestyle which will ensure advertising revenue and wide audience appeal.

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¹ The findings cited in this paper is based on a study by Lim Fang Say in her thesis, "Integrasi Antara Etnik: Satu Kajian Analisis Rancangan Televisyen Tempatan (Tumpuan Kepada TV 3)", Department of Media Studies, University Malaya (UM), 1994.

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