

In-Depth Interview Transcript

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Researcher: Hi. My name is Amir. I am a PhD candidate at the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Malaya. My intention of conducting this interview is to identify the future of Malaysian animation content and identity. I would like to have your thoughts with regards to a few issues here. My first question, can you share your thoughts with regards to Malaysian animation in general?

Kamn: Well, Malaysian animation at this moment is growing in development. As per other countries, we are at the same path in developing and producing animation healthily.

Researcher: So is the current state in a good state? Is it making a lot of money for the industry?

Kamn: Not yet. It is still in the growing process. Some companies make it, but some companies are still surviving. Yes, even though we have done animation since 20 or 30 years ago, we are still at this ground. Animation has been produced a lot especially for television series. Your question is probably for the quality and the effectiveness towards the audience. My opinion is that Malaysia is still at the score of 50% compared to other parts of the world. It is not fully developed yet.

Researcher: How do you think your organization, both Quest Animation and Animas contributes to the development of animation content?

Kamn: Animas is an organization that is no different from other organizations. Our part is not that huge, but it does play an important role in indentifying the industry players and people in the industry. Our purpose is just to recognize those interested in the industry. We do find how people in the industry conduct their training and what productions have they produce. It is only a part of what Animas does. Animas do not take care of the overall well being of animation in Malaysia.

Researcher: How about the role of Quest Animation?

Kamn: At this moment, we only conduct animation awareness, training, gathering and exchange of ideas in the meetings that we had and of course the most important part is the training. We do give trainings all over Malaysia.

Researcher: Alright. What type of trend do you see for the recent past five years? Are there any changes in trends?

Kamn: For Malaysia, when we talk about trends, we're talking about style of animation, isn't it?

Researcher: Yes.

Kamn: In Malaysia, there hasn't been much change except for the development from 2D to 3D animation. That is what we see with the trend now that everybody wants to do 3D animation and we have a lot of untrained people working for companies. Unless we find a solution for more people to work in that area, we may have a problem of getting better people and better 3D companies in the country.

Researcher: In your views, what are the challenges faced by the Malaysian animation industry in delivering entertaining and diversified animation content.

Kamn: Alright, I used to accept this type of question. It depends. As right now, our animation is not considered the best ever produced. But we do produce animation that is not that high-level animation or content, but that is because we do not have good storytellers, scriptwriters and of course if you look into other parts especially the production and the world production standard should be taken into consideration. So what I see is that Malaysia is still in the development to go towards what you asked me just now.

Researcher: Why do you think there are lack of good storytellers and scriptwriters?

Kamn: Yes, have you seen the universities? We don't have many universities that offer proper scriptwriting and storytelling programs. That is because we don't have any industrial or proper trainers, teachers to go around. That is why I said that when we studied which is the best animation production, we still have the black hole that there are none who can attain world standard. That is why we need more of the industry players to be trained by proper people.

Researcher: How far are you aware of the reception of Malaysian animation? How are people receiving it?

Kamn: Locally, what we found out a few years ago is that people like to see local animation. What I mean is in terms of local content, local culture and so on. That is what we see. There is no doubt about it that Malaysians like to see other animation but compared to every time we show locally produced animation and local content, there is high potential audience or viewers and the ratings are still high for local animation.

Researcher: How about foreign audience? Are you aware of any?

Kamn: No. Because about a few years ago, when we sent our series overseas, what we found out is that there was just international slots but there were no reports on whether they were the best. What we feel is that they just watch our animation as part of their daily programs.

Researcher: You mean to say that it's just part of the programs available rather than something that they really want to see? Is that what you mean?

Kamn: You see, it is really something difficult for me to say because anything shown on their television means that there is a rating. But then that is one of the things we don't know. For instance, any television station will now show any programs that lack the world standard, the story type and so on. But we do have some Malaysian animation programs that receive that type of audience.

Researcher: Is there anything that you think can improve audience reception?

Kamn: Yes. I would say one thing, it's the world standard in production. When we say world standard production, what we mean is the standard form that every production house in the world follows. The audience all over the world are used to good stories, fast methods of telling the story and certain elements on how the characters are being developed and created. They have these standards. So we should follow that. A few years ago, I talked to certain directors in Cannes they said that there is a lot of animation produced overseas, especially in the Asian region. They still find that the audience does not accept ineffective characters. That is why Malaysia has to think on both sides (the producers and the audience).

Researcher: I was just wondering if the industry actually carries out market studies to see what people actually want to watch.

Kamn: I hope so. I hope that somebody is doing it. You see, in our country, MDeC and Finas, they do tell us the types of scope we should cover. But still, storytelling and type of animation varies from year to year. Of course the potential of

marketing plays a part in the game. So if you've got a good story and a good marketing strategy, it can still go to waste or the other way around. So we must work together with the government or any of the marketing strategies to be applied. They will tell us what would be the best for animation and what are the world standard requirements to be applied. That should be awareness for the production houses.

Researcher: Are you aware of any market studies done in the past on what the audience want in animation?

Kamn: You see, people have gone overseas for market studies and they come back telling this and that. But never to any of my experience that they call us that this is the best story that is marketable. Not even one. So we just assume ourselves what the audience want. We just forecast and thought buy looking at things we think might sell. After that we produce, hoping to sell overseas but then we fail again.

Researcher: In your views, where do you think Malaysian identity lies in local animation?

Kamn: Well, it's very simple to answer because when we talk about identity, we talk about origins. When we talk about origins, of course it's the culture. So, when we talk about culture, we talk about lifestyle and our life values. So if that's the question, then that is the answer to the content that should be applied. We should study even more. Is it true that our culture, or portrayal of our culture can or will be marketable towards overseas market? You must understand that films like Brave and Kungfu Panda, those are just conceptual art. Sometimes, the story probably would be something else. But they choose what culture to include. So, it's the same thing with us. When we make something a story, we must know what our culture is. Now, then or from a long ago? That is already an interpretation of conceptual art. If we portray things like the costume during Hang Tuah's time and say 'that is our culture', it means that we have made up our minds that it is our culture just like Mulan and Kungfu Panda. Then we should impose it. Disregard other things with regards to the dialogues and the storyline and everything. We should impose so that the new generation can see. In other words, what I'm trying to say is that the cultural only plays a part in the conceptual art. It does not portray a lot in pulling people. So where do you want to start? Hang Tuah's time, Parameswara's time, or Leftenan Adnan's time? You choose which part of the modern times to use as culture. So you must clear your mind first. But don't say how are we going to portray our total Malaysian culture. What are the values? Which one? I asked a lot of Malaysian people about global content. They say let's do it. I can't be doing just the Hang Tuah and Mat Kilau stories.

Researcher: American and Japanese animation are easily identifiable. You see an animation, you know it's from the US. You see an animation, you know that it's Japanese. How can people see that this animation is from Malaysia.

Kamn: You see, those recognitions are just talking about origins. Not every Japanese movie that we recognize is a good story. Sorry, Hayao Miyazaki, sometimes you can't identify as being Japanese. Unless the story portrays Japan. But Hayao Miyazaki does not follow the Japanese style of cartoons. The big eyes, the small mouth, Hayao Mizayaki does not do. That means, he's failed. I remember those days, the Japanese got together and created animation and everybody recognizes it. But back to your question, it's good. You can do a lot, but just because of the identity, you are restricting the art. I do not agree with that part. I believe Malaysia should be like Europe. You can do all styles of art, freedom in art.

Rsearcher: So far, as what you have seen in Malaysian animation, how far has the Malaysian identity been reflected?

Kamn: I think what I've seen like Upin Ipin, Geng, War of the Worlds: Goliath, they do portray Malaysian content by saying, in the storyline, this is Malaysia, this is the character of Malaysia. That's the only way. Then we can say that it belongs to Malaysia. But if you don't say the words, people might say that it is not Malaysia. But you ask yourself, is it important? To us, yes, it is important. We want the world to know this is Malaysia. Yes, it's a good sign because people can relate that this is Malaysian animation. But if somebody did something bad, then people will criticize and say that Malaysian animation sucks. That would be interesting.

Researcher: So it's like a double-edged sword?

Kamn: Yes, like a double-edged sword. You have to remember those days when people really enjoyed Japanese movies. But now, it's different.

Rsearcher: How do you think the audience around the world can differentiate animation from other countries from animation from Malaysia?

Kamn: I think like I said just now, much like you compare the Japanese. They have a code of conduct that says that this is a Japanese animation. But I hope that Malaysia does not have that. It is not that it is so important to have identity. The best thing is to make people watch the animation. It can have the identity but people may not watch it. Why have animation with identity when it's better to have a good animation and then people ask, where does this animation come from? We still go for quality animation.

Researcher: So quality comes first, then identity comes later?

Kamn: Yes, quality comes first. Identity comes later. What's the point of having identity but your work of animation sucks?

Rsearcher: What do you think about the animation industry effort in promoting Malaysian culture and values.

Kamn: Like I said just now. It doesn't go far. We practice ourselves that whatever story we make, we try to show that it's Malaysia. We use content that shows Malaysia is a multi-racial country, lots of characters, and lots of culture. Use all the content. But quality should be imposed. Then use the element of culture. Before we do it, we have to understand what the culture is all about. Like Usop Sontorian, we show the well being of the country, the nature. It also plays a good part in portraying our country. Without mentioning, we can tell visually and people can understand. We don't have to say that Malaysia is a good country. Pictures tell a thousand words.

Researcher: Are there any efforts in promoting culture outside of Malay culture.

Kamn: I've never seen yet. At one time, I've seen one Cantonese. This was Baba Chia. That guy portrayed the Chinese in the country. I was so impressed. I think animators should also think of that. It's a story of other races in Malaysia besides Malays. Sometimes, we don't say that Malaysia is a multi-racial and people only like to watch their race. I don't think so. When you see other cultures like Indian stories, you just say this is an Indian story is in Malaysia. There is a different entity all together. We've got variety and that shows we have lots of stories to tell.

Rsearcher: What do you think of the support from the Malaysian government towards animation in Malaysia?

Kamn: The government has help a lot. I still remember from my days. Of course, during the earlier days, the government was not ready yet. But after that, there is a lot of support especially in helping the industry to develop. And of course the television stations accepted all the content. Then later on, these people will have ideas to produce good animation and of course some have already gone overseas. That shows that we are on the verge of having that world standard class. The government helps a lot.

Rsearcher: But is the government support enough?

Kamn: What more do you want to ask? I think it's good enough. What's important now is that if the government starts giving, I feel sure that the people outside are taking the opportunity to make the industry better or just take opportunities.

We would like to see that with government help, the industry grows just like Korea and other Asian countries. If the government does help the industry, then it grows. And I think, Malaysia, compared to 20 years ago, there are no animation companies. But now you see. Everyone wants to do animation. Of course there are some who achieve and some who fail. Probably 80% fail and 20% achieve. But that's good enough. Year by year they keep on increasing and one day, Malaysia can produce for the world market.

Researcher: When the government gives support, what are their expectations?

Kamn: Of course it's simple. You see the government's intention, through the Prime Minister, is to help the industry grow. Once the government supports, the people starting the business can go for grants. Of course some of these companies start from zero. The government can give them the grant staggardly and the government will look into it. Of course there are news of certain companies being successful in producing animation like what they promise but of course some also fail because lack of experience or something like that. But we hope that the government is aware of all the situation.

Rsearcher: Where do you think the future of animation is heading in terms of technical abilities and Malaysian identity?

Kamn: Of course there is a topic between production and tools. Because we are still new, we have not yet produced millions of animation in Malaysia. As things come by, with experience, Malaysia can compete and settle the situation. Because we must remember, Malaysia began animation only 20 years back. Compare to what we see visual in Japan, it's about 100 years already. Malaysia is just 20 years and it's becoming better and better.

Rsearcher: So I think these covers all the questions. Is there anything that you would like to add.

Kamn: I'm not sure what your thesis is all about, but if it's for the industry, what I said just now is just a report of what my experience and what I went through the animation industry in Malaysia. What I hope is that this will be a guideline for people in the production to be aware of the situation in Malaysia. Probably my reports are not that perfect. Do not just take my report, but renew the reports that you have.

Researcher: Mr. Kamn, thank you very much. I would like to really thank you for providing input for my studies.

Kamn: You're welcome.