

## In-Depth Interview Transcript

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Researcher: Hi. My name is Mohd Amir. I am a PhD candidate at the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Malaya. I'm currently conducting a study on the future of Malaysian animation content and identity. Can you share your thoughts with regards to the current state of Malaysian animation in general?

Hassan: Right now we have gone global and this was through the hard work of the Multimedia Development Corporation where I would point to one person who has been at the forefront, which is Kamil Othman, who is the Vice President of Creative Content, I think. So, he and I are very good friends. We go back a long time. What he does is, he goes to the ground. So he will meet us outside of office hours to find out what actually is happening. Unlike FINAS, who sit in their air-conditioned offices and then have meetings and try to imagine things. Because Kamil Othman did all of this from about 1999, the Multimedia Development Corporation has been in the forefront promoting our local digital content and animation, so they have broken into the international market. And then only FINAS came into the picture giving free booths to our people who want to market their products and so on. So Multimedia Development Corporation, MdeC, so what they have done is they have even come out with books about creative content and distributed it at their decibels, to the extent now that our animation are on Disney Asia, they are on Nickelodeon, they are on Cartoon Network, they have been core productions, they have even been commissioned to make productions. And I can say that since 1998, when the first film came out, Silat Legenda, which I directed, until today, we already have eight feature films and I think more than 150 TV series, which is a record for ASEAN countries. So even though ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, they have big studios doing outsourcing work for Hanna Barbera and Disney, but they did not have their own on-going feature films or TV series because it costs a lot of money to make. Even TV stations are not willing to give more than USD500. I think because of very strong government support for digital content, so we have gone by leaps and bounds. This is also very important to us because there are so many universities teaching animation, and so, once these graduates come out, at least they have a place to go where they can work. Otherwise everybody would be sitting around doing nothing. So I

think the government has been very wise having a proper vision for animation and for digital content.

Researcher: Which organization are you currently attached with, again?

Hassan: I was with UiTM for five years on a year-to-year contract as a resident artist. This year, I'm on my own. I have my own company where I do writing for animation, I also write articles for international publications and I'm also being consulted upon and right now I'm writing a script for an animation feature film.

Researcher: So how does your organization contribute in developing animation content?

Hassan: All these years, I have been on the panel for MDeC, I've been on the panel for FINAS, I've also been on the panel for curriculum development for a couple of universities and colleges like the community colleges, polytechnics and so on. So I have been actively involved in the industry for 50 years and I'm still being called by MDeC and FINAS and so on, as far as animation is concerned, but not only animation but also film.

Researcher: So recently what is the trend in terms of demand for Malaysian animation for the past five years?

Hassan: I'm not sure whether it was Cartoon Network or Nickelodeon, but one of those commissioned a local company named Inspedia to make a Johnny Bravo Goes to Hollywood. So they already have a punch arm. It's 2D animation, and many of my former students were working in this company so it was quite easy for them because they learned cel animation. Whereas other companies are doing 3D, once they market it at festivals and trade shows, if people like what they see, they want to buy it immediately. We'd better have 13 episodes or 26 episodes of these. Now previously, they only had a promo. And then it would take, of course, about 18 months to get the series out. But today the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, plus the Cradle Investment Program and also FINAS are providing funds to create one episode of international standard and based on that, they can come up with 13 episodes or 26 episodes but other companies have gone ahead and did their own library. I can say there is one company at least called Makmur Megah who has a big library of animation films which they have sold to a French producer and they are also working with Italian producers to create our own IP like Pinnocchio and so on. So a lot of things are happening on the ground now and this is because of the strong support of the government and very aggressive marketing strategy by MDeC and FINAS.

Researcher: So in your view, currently what are the challenges faced by the industry in delivering entertaining and diversified animation content?

Hassan: Upon the feedback I get from my friends from the industry, they are having the problem of they cannot depend on the staff. So a lot of negative things have happened. There have been cases where MDeC funded something, and then there was some kind of disagreement in the company, and when some people left, they deleted all the files. So now they have to have troubleshooters coming in to repair the damage. Other places, they either don't come to work or they delay, so that's another problem. So this is the reason why some of the record producers are going into India, into Indonesia, into Philippines because there, they are hungry for outsourcing. So this has got a very negative effect and many of our animators are now in Singapore working with Lucas Films and so on. So that's another, I can say, brain drain.

Researcher: But then why is this happening?

Hassan: Well, once they are offered more, that's why they go. On top of that, some of them are also looking for glamor, looking for feature films and so on that goes worldwide. So at least they can proudly point to their work even though their names do not appear. So we cannot stop that unless of course studios are set up. I head that FINAS is trying to do this but they have never called me to do a presentation or whatever when I should be the person who should be called. But of course, I don't go and promote myself. But I strongly believe and I have been saying this for many, many years that we are in the position to create a major training and production academy or training institute that can provide the resources, the training and so on for the ASEAN countries. And it has to be a government-to-government basis so that the films that are produced can be dubbed and can be sold to all the various countries. Now, nobody is looking into this. So it has to be a political solution.

Researcher: So how far are you aware of the audience reception of Malaysian animation?

Hassan: Based on the ratings in RTM. You know, RTM started the TV series in 1995. I was in the panel in 1994. We had a look at two pilot episodes. We saw Usop Sontorian and Sang Wira. So I told them we have to begin somewhere even if the quality is not good. So based on that, in 1995, Usop Sontorian was shown. And then, other producers got into the picture. So I can say that from 1995 till now, we have about 150 TV series with many, many seasons. So, I can say that Usop Sontorian was a big hit. So were Keluang Man and Yokies, among the lower range. And now, there are quite a lot more episodes, which I have not seen myself, but there is a market. So the only reason why RTM was willing to give RM45,000 per episode which no channel in the world would give, it's only USD500. So we need to also sell overseas. So, if you can spend RM150,000 per episode, you will have something of international quality. But of course, the producers cannot afford that. So they are only making it around RM20,000 to

RM25,000 and RTM gives only about RM30,000 to RM35,000 depending on the quality. So therefore, if the quality is good, advertisers will come in. So it all depends on the advertisers. So all childrens' products will come in because it aims at kids. But we don't have any teen shows yet. Mostly aimed at the lower group.

Researcher: Roughly, when you mention that there are more than 150 animation TV series, would you have any idea of where I can get the list?

Hassan: RTM. You will have to send a letter to the Public Relations Officer. I actually have the list until 2010. But if you can get hold of the data for 2011 to 2013, you can also pass it to me. I can pass you the one earlier. So what you do is you request for 2011 to 2013. I have the other list.

Researcher: So what do you think should be done to improve the reception of the audience on Malaysian animation among local audiences?

Hassan: The thing is the media plays a very important role. So every time a new series comes on, there needs to be some kind of write-up in the papers so that people are aware. Who made it? What is it about? Who's the target audience? What are the themes? The subjects? And so on. Now this is not happening. And there also should be interviews with the people involved on shows like Selamat Pagi Malaysia, Malaysia Hari Ini and so on so that there is some awareness. So right now, we actually do not know what are the shows on now. If you look at the newspapers, there are titles but you do not know whether they are animation films or TV programs. So there has to be this. Even on the social media which is very important now, they should spread it out on Facebook and so on so that people keep in touch or like people like you who are trying to research. So at least there is somewhere people can go. All you have to do is type in to the internet and you'll get a link.

Researcher: There is also an issue that I would like to ask. The media would normally put in news or materials that would attract people to read. Is it because animation content at the current time is not as interesting as it can be?

Hassan: No. It is the editors. Anything that sells gets priority, rape cases or whatever. So that is their priority. Not this one. So which is why the ministry of information has to have got some kind of a standard or maybe Bernama itself should be sending it out. But now, of course, it's not good enough and it won't get published also.

Researcher: In your views, where does the Malaysian identity lie in local animation?

Hassan: So, let's take a look at the cartoonists. Lat has made it. So we have Kampung Boy which has gone into the collective memory of the public, isn't it? His comic strips and a lot of other things and then it was animated. But the animation was done in the Philippines, the planning was done in Los Angeles. So it's not actually a Malaysian product even though it was produced by Malaysians. And then it costed RM800,000 per episode. That's because they had to pay in American currency based on the gear and audio. Hikayat Sang Kancil was first shown in 1978 is very common in so many cultures. In the Philippines, among the Kadazandusun in Sabah, in Indonesia and also among the Orang Asli in Malaysia, not just the Malays. So you can read about it in my book. Now, this character has become very iconic. You mention Sang Kancil, everybody knows. The first one, it's too long. It did not make use of the animation medium. But when I did Sang Kancil dan Monyet and Sang Kancil dan Buaya, it caught the imagination of the public. But then, nobody followed it up until my friend Najat Affendi from Aniotek, he's an MMU graduate, he did in 3D. He won an award. And then he made a series. But then I'm not sure whether it was screened or not. Now Les Copaque has also come up with Cerita Zaman Dulu, I think. It's a series where you have stories of Sang Kancil and so on. But somehow or rather, you haven't heard of it. So again, you see, somebody needs to do a write-up. Actually, I should probably be writing from time to time explaining what is going on but I was more into film. You can read about this in some of my journal articles that have come out and also some of the papers I've presented overseas like in Singapore, in Tokyo and so on.

Researcher: I noticed there are certain promos on Youtube, on social media on certain animation like Budak Besi. I think it was also by Najat. But then, I don't know what happened to it now. Is it on TV? Where is it, currently?

Hassan: I don't know.

Researcher: My next question is roughly about identity because if we look at certain animation, the way it's designed, the appearance of the characters, we would know immediately that this is either US or we see the big eyes, the green hair and we know it's Japanese. So how can the audience around the world differentiate between other animation and animation from Malaysia?

Hassan: So right now, that is the question everybody is asking and MDeC started a program where companies are asked to pitch and they are trying to get something that is very, very Malaysian. So Cerita Rakyat Malaysia was proposed but it was abandoned. But I think if you looked at Lat's Kampung Boy and Imuda's Mat Gelap, there is some sense of identity. Something very different that does not look like Japanese or American. Now, I did the animation for Mat Gelap and of course logically people will assume that it's good enough for a TV

series. Same thing with Silat Lagenda, every time Dr. Mahathir went to RTM, it was to speak about Silat Lagenda. Why? Because it's based on our heroes. But even though the characters were very 'anime', because the character designer was an anime fan, but we modified a bit. Now that one could have easily been transferred into a TV series. But there is another problem associated. You have to have something under the counter to make certain people happy so that they will accept your product. Now, if we did not have corruption, it's very easy for many-many kinds of production to come out where we can discover our identity. But it's not happening. So I've seen some really good work like Anak-anak Sidek, which is very original, done by my friend Sidi Hamdan. But it didn't continue. And the heroes are real live heroes who can inspire the young people in sports. How come nothing is moving? So it's the same story. They have to grease the palms.

Researcher: Are you aware of any of the current efforts being done to differentiate Malaysian animation from the rest of the world?

Hassan: Current efforts? I'm not aware. But I can tell you at least, there are two done by students. One is by Tan Jin Ho. A short film called A Malaysian Friday made in the year 2000 and in the same year, there was a film called Singapura Dilanggar Todak done by a student, Alan Aziz Shamsudin who studied in Poland. He based it on Singapura Dilanggar Todak. His character designs were based on wayang kulit, background designs were based on batik, and he had gamelan music. And if you show this film anywhere, even though people didn't know about Malaysia, they would say, "Ah! Indonesia," at least. Tan Jin Ho did a film called A Malaysian Friday. It was all in 3D. It was about a Malay man who was living alone in the paddy field. You see him returning home with a bunch of bananas, then there's the azan, and then he went home to take a bath. So, it's very Malaysian. Nobody will say that it's American and so on. But many students, and I blame the lecturers for this, their final year projects use robots and the characters are very western. So if you send those films to international film festivals, nobody will say that it's made in Malaysia. So this is the problem all the universities in Malaysia are facing now. I think one of the reasons is that the universities and colleges do not have books on all the *hikayats*, all the folktales, the legends and so on. Maybe that's it. I have mentioned this in my book.

Researcher: Probably the books are available but more towards children's books?

Hassan: Oh no. They should acquire these books for their libraries. So in the places that I am teaching, I have given them the list.

Researcher: What do you think of the animation industry efforts in supporting the promotion of Malaysian culture and values in animation?

Hassan: If you look at our Malay films, they are a disgrace. You see *mat rempit*, you see people driving fast cars, dressed like Negros and Mexicans, and their language is so cold. If you take for example, P. Ramlee's *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*, you can see how P. Ramlee is saying, and that film is relevant until today, he's telling the Malays, the Ahmad Nisfu and gang on the ferry on the right side, which is Singapore, to leave this place where the Malays have lost their roots and have become arrogant and uncultured, cross the river sybolically, cross over to Malaya and look for the original Malay, which is personified by Wak Mustar, the wife and daughter. The three *bujang lapok* cannot read or write but Ahmad Nisfu and gang can read and write. So, education did nothing for them. It just made them worst. So what he was saying in *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* in 1959, I think, is relevant until today. You look at the films done even by the academics, you should know better, people like Razak Mohaidin, Faizul Rashid and so on. You should know better because you also do research and so on. Why is it that they are even worst? I just tell you one scene in the film called *Tangkai Jering*. There was a medium shot of an older man wearing Malay costume and his dialogue is so coze. "Aku sepak kau!", "Aku terajang kau" to Piee looking to ask for the hand of his daughter. Now what kind of signal are you giving to the young people? Is it ok for and older Malay man to do that? But you look at how the three bachelors approach the guru. Even though they made fun of the guru, but it was done in such a very nice manner. So we have actually lost our way. But if you look at Dr. Anuar Nor Arai's *Johnny Bikin Filem*, which has never been completed, you can see the Malayness. And if you look at *Bunohan*, you can see what he's saying, and he's saying that if you bring UMNO style development into Kelantan, you are going to destroy everything that is there and you end up with the son killing the father. And then the screen is torn. Which means that the film industry has been damaged and the future generation of filmmakers have nowhere to go. It's very metaphorical.

Researcher: How about in the animation industry? Are the promoting as much?

Hassan: Well, at least I can say that RTM is telling them that there are certain things that they cannot do and so on. So even if you show a traditional Malay house, but you must show that they have TVs and refrigerators rather than showing that they are in the 1950s.

Researcher: So even that is taken into consideration by RTM?

Hassan: Yes. There is some kind of control.

Researcher: Have these efforts been effective?

Hassan: Because they have gatekeepers who ask to change, sometimes it effects the production. Because after they ask to change something, and they come back,

they say something else. So this gives a lot of trouble to the producers, they have to spend more money and more time and they can't get paid quickly.

Researcher: I know that you've mentioned that there is support from the Malaysian government. But what do you think about the support towards local Malaysian animation development.

Hassan: The government provides the support, but down the line the problem is the bureaucrats. I can say that MDeC, even though they have tried their best, but sometimes the producers don't deliver. Some misuse the money, then of course we have the problem of files being deleted, the staff are angry and so on. In FINAS, they have staff sitting on the panel but these people do not know their stuff. So many people in the industry are very angry at these people but of course they can't say anything and they ask silly questions as if they know when they actually don't understand about production. Even RTM themselves are being cheated by a few companies. For instance, when the contract is done, the whole idea is for it to be done in Malaysia so that you develop the industry. But they go to India to get it done, they go to Indonesia, they go to the Philippines.

Researcher: They outsource?

Hassan: Yes, they outsource it. The other problem is RTM looks at 3D animation. Of course they love 3D. But they don't understand that there are two companies. One company does 3D correctly, spending more time, more money and so on. Another company is cheating. For instance, I give you the example of Kacang. Now Kacang, the background is live action. Not 3D. And then the characters of Kacang itself, when they do the squash and stretch, it's not an animated squash and stretch. It's using the post-production tools. Which means that they just pull the lever, it squashes. That's not animation. But a company called EL Video Graphics which does Dianos, that one is true 3D. But they get paid the same. So even RTM people do not understand what's happening. So, I have never been called as an advisor or consultant. It's a problem with government departments. They think they are smart.

Researcher: So where do you think the future of Malaysian animation is heading to in terms of technical abilities and also the promotion of Malaysian identity?

Hassan: As far as technical abilities, there is no problem at all because the young people of today, they are very computer savvy. Even if you don't teach them the software, even in a week or two, they can master it because their brain is wired like that. Unlike me, I have to call my son all the time. So, there is another aspect. This is where I come in. That is why I am still popular with the universities, especially the private sector who call me in for visual storytelling. Visual storytelling begins with story development. So from story development,



we go to visual development. In visual development, we start to go on the storyboard. And the storyboard is about visual storytelling. Now, Hollywood has never revealed how they tell stories visually. Over the last 40 years of teaching, I discovered that Hollywood has been using four theories, archetypes, semiotics, binary opposition and the principles of gestalt perception. Something to do with perception. And I discovered that we are using all of it but we didn't know the theories. So if you go to academia.edu, and then you can type my name, you can find 20 over of my papers. And some of them I talk about visual storytelling and these theories, about how important it is to teach these theories in schools today. So visual storytelling is about communicating meaning without dialogue. Like the frame, left, right, top, bottom, center, every part has got a meaning. I give you an example, if the hero is standing on the left, he will win. But when he stands on the right, he will lose. So if you look at Hollywood movies, the army that's coming from the left will win. The army that's coming from the right will lose. And if somebody's wearing dark glasses, he's a bad guy. Or, when you take a shot from the back, he's the bad guy. This is visual storytelling that has never been revealed and there are no books. I'm the only one teaching this. In Philippines, I went to Norway, Singapore. I taught all over and they didn't know all this.

Researcher: So is there anything else that you would like to comment or add on Malaysian animation?

Hassan: Ok. On the training side, more and more important is that we go back to the basics which is about storytelling. You don't have to teach them so much on the techniques, on the technical aspects, software and so on. You have to go deeper in developing the story, understanding the characters, understanding story structure and then understanding how to put it across visually using icons or indexes or symbols. So then only we can be on par with international production. The other thing is, in the final year, especially for degree students, they should go into experimental animation. This is where you explore ideas and you break the rules that you have learned. And teaching of literature, theatre, music and philosophy is as important as all the animation subjects because I believe, since I've been doing these outcome-based trainings from 1970s. Only last year they came up with OBE. So I've been doing this from the 70s and what I did was, whenever I had to train people, I started from the bottom. Come up with an idea, create a story, create the characters, until the final stage in post-production. Now, the idea is not to make you an animator but to make you an animation filmmaker. That's how they teach in Europe. So in America, it's about big businesses and specialization of labor, which we cannot go in because sometimes the animator has to go in as the writer, as the voice over guy. We can't have that because our studios are smaller.

Researcher: I just remembered something. I just want to go back to audience reception again. How far are you aware of the reception among non-Malay audiences in Malaysia towards Malaysian animation?

Hassan: I can say that among my non-Malay students, they are not aware of all these folktales, legends and so on. But then, even Malays students also, they don't know. Now there is something wrong with our curriculum that Malay literature is not being taught. Only when you teach Malay literature can they understand about the roots of the country, the culture of the country. So you cannot blame people when they don't understand our own culture and then they start to copy western culture. So during the British time, they taught English literature and they had literary and debating societies and they stage plays and so on. Now all this became missing when Anwar Ibrahim took over. So he was the one who threw away English literature. He's the one to be blamed.

Researcher: So En. Hassan, I think I've covered all the questions. I would like to thank you for your cooperation, for spending your time attending to my interview.

Hassan: My pleasure.

Researcher: Thank you so much.

Hassan: No problem at all.