

Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Cultural interpretation and social
intervention

Edited by
David C. L. Lim and
Hiroyuki Yamamoto

First published 2012

ISBN: 978-0-415-61763-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-62618-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-18190-4 (ebk)

Chapter 7

‘Our People’

Telemovies, *bangsa* and nationalism 3.0 in
Sabah, Malaysia

Hiroyuki Yamamoto

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0)

7 ‘Our People’

Telemovies, *bangsa* and nationalism 3.0 in Sabah, Malaysia

Hiroyuki Yamamoto

A thousand miles across the South China Sea from West or Peninsular Malaysia, the state of Sabah in the East enjoys a thriving telemovie industry that exists independently from filmmaking on the Peninsular side. Sold in the markets in video-CD format rather than made for television, homegrown telemovies made in Malay and local languages and dealing with local issues have become a highly popular entertainment medium in urban and rural Sabah ever since *Orang Kita* (Our People), the first to be made, was released in 2002. *Orang Kita* was a runaway success in Sabah, where it was most popular. It sold an impressive 35,000 copies and triggered a whole series of new titles released over the years (Abu Bakar Ellah 2009). Approximately forty to fifty telemovies have been produced to date, thirty of which by Skyline/Skylaser Enterprise, Sabah’s biggest telemovie production company. Aside from *Orang Kita*, popular titles include *Orang Kita 2* (2006), *PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* (Love Without Permission; 2005), and *PTI 2* (2008). The telemovie explosion in Sabah has also increased the popularity of local celebrities such as Abu Bakar Ellah, Mat Kongo and Ela Sabah who are almost household names in the state.

Sabah’s telemovies have relatively straightforward storylines. All are made on tight budgets and rely on small casts and limited equipment and technologies. In terms of production value, they are discernibly much less polished than telemovies made for terrestrial or cable television, including Malay telemovies aired on Malaysian channels. In *PTI*, for instance, viewers can even spot the cardioid microphone peeking out from the top of the screen to capture dialogues between characters; while in *Orang Kita*, toilet humour frowned upon by the highbrow is used liberally. Such production shortcomings do not, however, detract from the value of local telemovies as appreciated by at least a majority of the target audience, namely the general populace of Sabah, encompassing the indigenous groups (such as the Kadazandusun, Murut and Bajau), the Malay and Chinese, as well as (illegal and legal) immigrants, especially from the Philippines. Clearly, for these viewers, the attraction of Sabah’s telemovies does not rest solely on standard production values; other variables matter too, including their regard for participatory values, social integration, diversity, truth-telling and fairness (Mulgan 1990).

As we shall see, these aforementioned qualities derive primarily from the unique treatment of social alterity in Sabah and Sabah's telemovies. *Orang Kita*, *PTI*, Sabahan society and indeed East Malaysia are generally free from Peninsular strictures. Ethnicity, religion and nationality are for the most part a non-issue in the telemovies, as for the thirty-two officially recognized ethnic groups coexisting in Sabah. Sabahan identities are and have been historically fluid and shifting in ways unthinkable in the Peninsula where ethnic and religious boundaries are thick and policed. In Sabah, a Kadazan in one district could self-identify as a Dusun in the next district and a Murut in yet another. Similarly, a Malay(-Muslim) immigrant today could by volition switch identity to being a local Bajau without raising an eyebrow, let alone cause a politico-religious uproar on a national scale, as such a conversion would in the Peninsula.

It is often said that Sabah's fluid multiculturalism and non-racial openness to difference offer a model of interethnic harmony that West Malaysia would do well to emulate. Not mentioned as frequently is how these same qualities also put Sabah at a relative disadvantage when engaging the three *bangsa* from the Peninsula on the federal and political levels. *Bangsa* is a Malay term which is typically taken to signify ethnicity, race or people but is redefined in this chapter as a historically-shaped social, political and economic power-bloc which, although ethnic-centred, is not a status that all ethnic groups attain. Sabah, too, has some indigenous equivalent of *bangsa* in the typical sense of the term but it never developed into a social, political and economic power-bloc that the Malays, Chinese and Indians in West Malaysia have respectively become.

Threading the discussion through *Orang Kita* and *PTI* as anchor films, this chapter examines the evolution of Sabahan nationalist conceptions of 'our people' as attempts to create a *bangsa* that is able to engage the three *bangsa* from the Peninsula on equal political footing. It demonstrates how *Orang Kita* and *PTI* visualize what I describe as the third generation conception of 'our people', or 'nationalism 3.0' in short. Although nationalism 3.0 does not yet exist as an organized political movement, and may never in future, it is already present today on the ground in Sabah as a developing ideal and a sentiment that is gaining popularity. *Orang Kita* and *PTI* are testament to this, as to the interventionist role of film in Sabahan society.

***Orang Kita* and attitudes towards alterity in Sabah**

Shot in the Malay language, *Orang Kita* is a comedic drama revolving around Ampal, a country yokel who has never ventured beyond his *kampung* (village) in the interior of Sabah. Played by Abu Bakar Ellah, who is also the director, Ampal is a visually striking comic figure, not least because of the Penan upside-down bowl haircut he sports. He is a river fisherman in his *kampung*, where he finds it hard to make a living. He desires to move to Kota Kinabalu (KK), the capital of Sabah, and find work there, imagining the city as a locus of

opportunities beyond what a remote village could offer. Ampal's chance arrives when he crosses paths with and befriends Om, who frequently drives between KK and the interior parts of Sabah where he delivers fresh vegetables and other goods. Ampal asks Om (Mat Kongo) for help to get to the city and find a job there, and the latter agrees without hesitation or artifice, even though they barely know each other. That night, Ampal bids farewell to his girlfriend, Sulima (Ela Sabah), who tearfully insists on coming along but is finally placated by Ampal's promise to send for her once he has found a job in the city. The next morning Ampal goes to KK for the first time in Om's mini-lorry.

With the premise thus set, *Orang Kita* takes viewers through Ampal's and Om's comic journey and misadventures in the city, and the former's encounters with urban modernity. Having never experienced the situation, Ampal is amazed that everyone has to pay a fee to use the public toilets. He talks to the vending machine, thinking that it holds a real person inside whose job is to dispense canned drinks. He gawks at the elevator and escalator the first time he uses them. He is simultaneously curious and afraid when he sees a toy car driving itself near him, thinking it is animated by spirits. Ampal's child-like village naivety results in his being put in tight situations, such as when he and Om are left with the bill after a man in the city invites them for a meal but sneaks away after eating without paying. *Orang Kita* concludes when Ampal's love interest, Sulima, suddenly appears in the city with her father to ask him to return to the village, the implication being that Sulima's father, hitherto against Ampal marrying his daughter, has had a change of heart and now accepts him as a future son-in-law.

Orang Kita is sold without any subtitles but viewers who understand Malay would easily be able to follow the simple plot and enjoy the film on the universal level as a story about the search for a better life, the value of friendship and the like. Viewers who are able to follow the film in this way but are unfamiliar with Sabah's complex social fabric are, however, likely to overlook how *Orang Kita* signifies much more than might be apparent on the surface, particularly where identity markers like ethnicity, religion and nationality are concerned. For instance, Ampal, despite his Penan haircut, is not, as some viewers might imagine, Penan, the aboriginal people found not in Sabah but Sarawak (the other state in East Malaysia) and Brunei. From the signs provided by the film and from contextual knowledge, it is clear that he is a non-Muslim who belongs instead to the 'land people'.

'Land people' generally inhabit the interior districts of Sabah, although some live in the coastal districts as well. They traditionally engage in paddy and shifting cultivation methods and are mainly animists, with some proportion of them being Christians and Muslims (Roff 1974: 21–23). Historically, Dusun and Murut were names given to 'land people' by the Muslim feudal lords working within the Brunei sultanate, which once claimed suzerainty over Sabah. British administrators used the same labels as a means of classification after Sabah came under British rule in the 1880s. With the rise of the first wave

of nationalist sentiment in the 1950s, a group of 'land people', who were officially categorized as Dusuns, proclaimed themselves to be Kadazan. In 1961, this growing emotion among the 'land people' led to a resolution by state-wide Dusun leaders, stating that Dusuns should be called Kadazans. Murut leaders declared a similar resolution for Muruts to be called Kadazans. Thus the 'land people' officially came to be called Kadazans. When an identity crisis occurred in the 1980s, regarding whether 'land people' should be called Kadazans or Dusuns, the term Kadazan was officially changed to Kadazandusun in 1989 (Topin 1995). The question of whether the Muruts were a part of the Kadazandusun or a separate ethnic entity remained unresolved. Currently the official term for 'land people' in Sabah is Kadazandusun but some use the term Kadazandusun-Murut or simply 'KDM community'. Meanwhile, in the 1991 census, 'land people' were divided into several categories: Dusuns (16.6 per cent of 1.3 million people, the total population of Sabah), Kadazans (8.0 per cent), Muruts (3.8 per cent) and other indigenous groups. To avoid complexity, this chapter refers to these groups as 'land people'.

In contrast to the 'indigenous' Ampal whose character silently bears the historical burden of the 'land people', Om is a Muslim of 'sea people' background. 'Sea people' generally live in the coastal districts of Sabah, traditionally engaged in trade and fishery, and profess Islam (Roff 1974: 23–24). In the pre-colonial period, the former were subjects of the Muslim sultanates of Brunei and Sulu. When Sabah came under British rule in the 1880s, the state boundary for the colony of Sabah (then called North Borneo) was demarcated and both sultanates became detached from the colony. This led British administrators to believe that 'sea people' originated from outside of Sabah. The 'sea people', therefore, became the immigrant population in Sabah while the 'land people' were thought to be indigenous. 'Sea people' became classified in Sabah as Bajaus, Bruneis, Suluks and other ethnic groups. 'Sea people' with Malaysian citizenship were subsequently recognized as also indigenous to Sabah, and their 'native' status was recognized along with the 'land people'. Perception of indigenusness became confusing again when Sabah gained its independence in 1963, becoming a state in the Federation of Malaysia. Then, the 'land people' claimed to be indigenous people of Sabah, while the 'sea people' claimed they were indigenous to Malaysia where Malay Muslims are recognized to have the privilege of being 'native.' In the 1991 census, 'sea people' were counted as Bajaus (16.3 per cent), Malays (8.1 per cent), and other indigenous groups.

Because of their entangled histories, 'land people' and 'sea people' of Sabah are often thought to be mutual rivals. From this standpoint, Ampal and Om should not be mingling, let alone become good friends, were it not for the reality at grass-roots level that 'land people' and 'sea people' have never developed their communities exclusively of each other. The two groups in fact have long been dependent on each other in many aspects of their social life, as Ampal's and Om's relationship in *Orang Kita* intimates. In spite of their ethnic and religious differences – differences which are neither underlined

nor made an issue in the telemovie – the two characters become mates, constantly poking fun at each other in good humour. Driving Ampal to KK for the first time, for instance, Om makes a rest stop at a place overlooking Mount Kinabalu, Sabah's most famous tourist destination, which was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. Ampal's ignorance of Mount Kinabalu prompts Om to lecture the former, emphasising that every citizen of Sabah ought to be knowledgeable about the iconic mountain, unless they want to be laughed at by foreign tourists. This might seem like an insult to Ampal by those who hold that 'land people' are indigenous to Sabah and the 'sea people' are immigrants. However, in *Orang Kita*, Om's lecture is neither insulting in intent nor taken as an insult by Ampal. Throughout the film, Om and Ampal constantly jibe at each other without either party taking offence. When Om has to make an emergency stop on the way to KK so that he could relieve himself in the bush, Ampal cheekily fiddles with Om's mini lorry and gives Om a fright when he almost speeds off (despite not knowing how to drive) on his own, forcing Om to scramble after him before giving Ampal an earful. Subsequently, in the city, when Om buys *halal* (kosher) 'chicken rice' for both himself and Ampal, the latter half-feigns confusion to poke fun at Om, saying that he does not want to consume food meant for chicken.

In *Orang Kita*, as in Sabah, differences in ethnicity and religion rarely if ever lead to the creation of insurmountable barriers or give rise to tensions and animosity, as they have the potential to in Peninsular Malaysia. This remains true even after 1991 when the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Peninsula-based Malay-Muslim political party, brought its brand of racial and religious politics into Sabah. By no means does this imply that ethnic and religious tensions are entirely absent in Sabah. Indeed, as Fausto Barlocco contends, some Kadazans in Sabah bear an expressed disdain for the *Malazu* (Malay in Kadazan) whose monoracial TV dramas originating from the Peninsula are rejected and identified, 'often unconsciously', as propaganda that promotes 'a national culture based on Malay and Islamic values' (Barlocco 2009). None of this, however, detracts from the reality that ethnicity, religion and even the country of origin or nationality generally play a negligible role in Sabahan social life.

Sabahan society is generally open to difference in ways that go far beyond 'tolerance' practised between a majority of the Malays, Chinese and Indians in the Peninsula. This is certainly fortunate, considering that, in comparison to the Peninsula, Sabahan society is much more diverse, mixed and fluid as a result of higher numbers of marriages across ethnicity and religion, as well as migration from Kalimantan, Sulawesi and the Philippines. Leaving aside the slapstick humour, the conviviality and affection demonstrated between Ampal and Om despite their different backgrounds, for instance, suitably exemplifies the spirit of mutual acceptance that characterizes Sabah's social life. It is an acceptance that is neither affected nor forced but spontaneous and emphatic. Their symbolic bond could only strengthen, as suggested by *Orang Kita 2*. In the sequel, while travelling together with Ampal, Om is

mistaken for someone else and is arrested and jailed by the local police. Ampal stands by his friend and ends up waiting a long time before Om is released.

A subplot in *Orang Kita* involving Ampal and Sulima as cross-boundary lovers provides another illustration of what the typical West Malaysian psyche would regard as a problem of otherness but is literally a non-issue for a majority of Sabahans. In several scenes, Sulima wears *baju kurung*, while her father is seen in one wearing *kain sarung*, both being traditional outfits for Malay-Muslim women and men respectively. That they dress like Malay-Muslims does not in itself signify that they are Malay-Muslims as it is common in Sabah for both Muslims and non-Muslims to wear similar clothing. In one scene, Sulima's father (who earlier rejected Ampal as his daughter's suitor) confides in Sulima that he is growing old and wants to *bertaubat* by going clean and giving up the 'sinful' (black magic) work he had been doing. The term *bertaubat* in Malay can mean either 'to repent' or 'to be converted' into Islam, which, again, leaves the question of the father's religion unanswered. The next time Sulima's father appears, he wears a black *songkok* (male Muslim headgear), explaining to his daughter that he had just returned from *surau* (a small mosque). This confirms finally that Sulima's father is henceforth a Muslim, irrespective of whether he was previously a non-Muslim or a lapsed Muslim.

Assuming that Sulima, too, has always been a Muslim, or becomes one in practice like her father, then, Ampal too would have to convert to Islam by law before he could marry Sulima. In *Orang Kita*, however, the issue of religious conversion is not taken up at all simply because marriages across ethnicity and religion are commonplace in Sabah. It is not unusual for East Malaysians to have Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and animist relatives, sometimes staying under the same roof. As Sabahan journalist, Erna Mahyuni (2010), writes, the common reaction upon receiving news that someone is marrying a person from another religion or ethnicity is: "Oh, your kids will be cute!" No heated discussion about traditions and religious differences because the unspoken assumption is that the couple will work them out.' The hybrid fluidity of identities in Sabah can be unsettling to the typical West Malaysian psyche, which is accustomed to racially categorizing Malaysians as Malay, Chinese, Indian or 'other races'. Erna notes, 'I have met West Malaysians who get very agitated when I refuse to tell them either what religion I profess or what race I am. They don't know what to do with me because they can't categorise me.'

Bangsa and the first two waves of Sabahan nationalism

Sabah's unique openness to difference, as intimated by *Orang Kita*, is due in no small measure to the fact that clear-cut ethnic and religious boundaries were never developed in Sabah by the British colonial administration (Ongkili 1972: 1; Lee 1976: 14). Furthermore, when Sabah became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, it was recognized as having special privileges and state

administrative independence. Sabah has control over its immigration system and anyone who is not from Sabah, regardless of whether the person is a Malaysian citizen or not, needs to obtain a work permit from the state to be employable in Sabah. This unique system explains how Sabah was able to remain relatively free from interference from the federal government in Peninsular Malaysia until recent decades. Sabah's independent trajectory is in radical contrast to West Malaysia which has evolved a system of *bangsa*. *Bangsa* is a Malay term commonly employed to denote ethnicity, race or people (Ariffin 1993: 14–21; Milner 1994: 50–54). In this discussion, however, I define and demonstrate *bangsa* as primarily a social, political and economic power-bloc which, although culture-centred, not all cultural groups are privileged to become.

This qualified notion of *bangsa* has its roots in Malaya, where its application today dominates the political imaginary in the Peninsula. During British rule, the multiethnicities in Malaya had to fit into one of the politically recognized *bangsa* (Malay, Chinese, Indian) if they were to be recognized as qualifying for certain rights. Marriages across these divides gradually reduced and over time the boundaries separating the *bangsa* became thicker. Subsequently there emerged movements among the people of Malaya to mobilize *bangsa* to uplift their own group status, which resulted in the emergence of *bangsa*-based political parties. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) was formed in 1946, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in the same year, and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1949. These three parties formed an election coalition that won the federal council elections in 1955, two years before Malayan independence. Since then, the administration of Malaya and later Malaysia has been under the control of a coalition of ethnic parties, with UMNO, MCA, and MIC as its central core. Through this process, it could be said that the three ethnic groups came to be recognized by each other as qualified to form political parties and to send representatives to the federal government, and to discuss and make decisions on issues at the national level. Under this system, every *bangsa* is an ethnic group but not all ethnic groups constitute a *bangsa* each. Ethnic groups in Malaysia not recognized as *bangsa* include Orang Asli, Thais, Portuguese, Baba/Nyonya, and so on. They do not possess their own cultural institutions, unlike the three recognized major *bangsa*, each of which possesses its own state-recognized mother-tongue (actively used in newspapers, radio, TV, schools and so on), cultural holidays and political party.

The above-described *bangsa* system of West Malaysia is alien to Sabah first because, as signalled earlier, the British never installed it in the state; and second, because *bangsa*-based political parties from West Malaysia did not spread their wings to Sabah upon the formation of Malaysia. The British broadly categorized the people of Sabah as indigenous groups, coastal Muslims and the Chinese. The indigenous groups mostly comprised non-Muslims who shared similar cultural characteristics among themselves, such as language and beliefs. They did not have a single, unified collective identity; rather, they

identified themselves differently from district to district but they were generally called Dusuns by the Brunei Muslims, who had been ruling a part of the region before the British arrived. Dusun, which in Malay means ‘the people of the orchard’, was the official name the British gave the indigenous groups of Sabah when they ruled the region in the late nineteenth century. As outlined earlier, the Dusun subsequently became politicized and evolved into Kadazan and later Kadazandusun or Kadazandusun-Murut (KDM).

That the *bangsa* system is absent from Sabah might be seen as a blessing insofar as it prevented a potential repeat of the deep racial polarization caused by the entrenched system in the Peninsula. Its absence is, however, a major political disadvantage for the indigenous people of Sabah since, as previously underscored, attainment of *bangsa* status is necessary to engage the three *bangsa* of the Peninsula on equal terms at the federal level. This is particularly true from the 1980s onward, when Sabah could no longer expect large revenues from its timber industry. Changing political circumstances meant that Sabah could no longer afford to be concerned only with its internal affairs, forced as it has been since to review its position in the context of national Malaysian politics, and even its treatment towards immigrant populations from neighbouring countries, as we shall see in the subsequent discussion of the telemovie, *PTI*.

In response to such internal and external pressures, a group of ‘land people’ launched its first wave of Sabahan nationalism in the 1950s based on lineage or indigeneity (Roff 1974; Luping 1994: 97–105; Yamamoto 2002: 216–219). The prime movers were from Penampang, a west coast district of Sabah. Historically, the local people of Penampang were subjected to the Brunei sultanate and were called Dusun, which, although literally means ‘people of the orchard’, connotes yokels. They were also exposed to the English language, Christianity and the West earlier than most parts of Sabah by a Catholic missionary group settling in the area during the early stages of British colonization. The missionaries subsequently standardized the indigenous language of Sabah, which led to the development of Kadazan consciousness and nationalism. This, as signalled earlier, awakened the Dusun to push for a renaming and reunification of the indigenous people under the term Kadazan, the supposedly long-forgotten name for the ‘land people’ of Sabah then called Dusun, although the understanding of this was shared only among those in the Penampang and surrounding regions.

The first wave of Sabahan ‘land people’ nationalism was successful insofar as it managed to bring about a sense of self-reliance among the Kadazans, and to install the president of the Kadazan-based political party, the United National Kadazan Organisation (UNKO; later United National Pasok-Momogun Kadazan Organisation or UPKO), as Chief Minister of Sabah in 1963 when Malaysia was formed. The explosive growth of Kadazan nationalism, however, caused uncertainty among the mostly-Muslim ‘sea people’ who felt excluded from Sabahan state affairs. They also felt that Kadazan nationalism, which was interwoven with aspects of Christianity and the English language, promoted

an image of anti-Islam and anti-Malay language. As a result, although Kadazanism thrived initially, it soon faced strong opposition from Sabah as well as from the Malay-Muslims in Peninsular Malaysia. UPKO was dissolved following the party's loss in the state general elections of 1967, supplanted by the Muslim-based party, United Sabah National Organisation (USNO). Many 'land people' who identified themselves as Dusun, some of which converted to Islam, then joined USNO, siding with the 'sea people' to run the state. The Kadazans, as a distinctive political power, were no longer seen in the arena of state politics in Sabah, although many 'land people' took part in state administration.

A second tide of Sabahan nationalism to obtain *bangsa* status, again initiated by the 'land people', emerged in the 1980s when the people began criticizing the state government, arguing that Sabah's economic development had failed to benefit the common people of Sabah. Indigenous nationalists of the second tide aimed to uplift the position of Sabah in Malaysia and demanded that Sabah be treated as an equal partner with other states in the Federation of Malaysia (Luping 1994: 428–438; Yamamoto 2002: 219–222). Instead of basing their claims to rights based on lineage or indigeneity, they employed the concept of nationalism based on regionality. This was a move calculated to overcome the limitations of the first wave of nationalism in the 1950s which, in emphasizing Kadazanism, alienated the non-Kadazans. Led by a group of mostly-Christian 'land people' from Tambunan, an interior region of Sabah, the movement gradually gained momentum.¹ When the Tambunan group formed the Sabah United Party (PBS) in 1985, it attracted members from all corners of Sabah, including 'land people', 'sea people' and the Chinese. The multi-ethnic PBS often employed the slogan 'Sabah for Sabahan' in its struggle to unite Sabahans and to forge a common identity among them so that they could be recognized as a *bangsa*. Well supported by Sabahans, PBS won four successive state general elections from 1985 onwards.

At the same time that a pan-Sabahan identity was being forged, the Tambunan leadership, through the Kadazan Cultural Association, also pursued the goal of revitalizing Kadazan culture and identity. It resolved the naming dispute between 'land people' who saw themselves as either Kadazan or Dusun by renaming the people as Kadazandusun (KD), resulting in their relative reintegration. The successful revitalization of the Kadazandusun identity, however, served to weaken the integration between the 'land people' and other groups in Sabah, leading to the demise of the Sabahan state administration under PBS. It alienated the 'sea people' who saw the Tambunan leadership as being pro-Christianity, driving them to seek closer relations with Malay-Muslims in the Peninsula. Amidst conflict between the Sabah state government and the federal government, UMNO entered Sabah in 1991 and set up branches. A group of 'sea people' left PBS to join UMNO, while other splinters formed Chinese- and Kadazandusun-based parties. After staying on as the opposition, PBS was co-opted in 2003 into Barisan Nasional (BN), the national front led by UMNO. PBS remains multi-ethnic like other local

political parties in Sabah, but is regarded as a Kadazandusun party within the BN framework.

As a result of its struggles over the decades, the KDM community today has had some of its key cultural festivals marked as national holidays, as well as its own Kadazan newspapers and radio programmes. The KDM mother tongue is also now taught in schools in Sabah. These developments suggest that Kadazandusuns are making progress in their struggle to attain *bangsa* status, although the key point remains that they have yet to attain it insofar as they still lack full *bangsa* representation at the national level.

Nationalism 3.0 and *PTI*

Having sketched the evolution of indigenous identities and attitudes towards ethnic, religious and other similarities/differences in Sabah vis-à-vis the Peninsula, I want to now examine the ways in which Sabah's telemovies like *Orang Kita*, *PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* and their sequels envision what I posit as an emergent third generation indigenous Sabahan nationalism, or Sabahan 'nationalism 3.0'. Nationalism 3.0 as I define it here does not yet exist as an organized political movement; nor is there any guarantee that it will. It exists at present as a developing ideal and a sentiment that is gaining popularity in Sabah, as I observed in my six years of fieldwork there.

This qualified emergent third generation of Sabahan nationalism is distinguishable from the first in that it eschews indigeneity as a precondition for inclusion in the construction of *bangsa* Sabah. It shares with the second generation the regional emphasis but adds a crucial twist. In 3.0, 'our people' is framed as an inclusive category that does not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, religion, class or origin (whether one is a Sabah-born or foreign-born citizen, or a citizen or an immigrant). The only condition for inclusion in good faith, as intimated in *Orang Kita* and developed in *PTI*, is that one should enter and reside in Sabah legally, and, at the same time, recognize the rest of 'our people' in Sabah as partners in life, as exemplified, for instance, by Ampal's and Om's friendship.

Abu Bakar Ellah and Mat Kongo who play Ampal and Om in *Orang Kita* return in *PTI* to play different characters but remaining on one level the respective representatives of their 'people'. The former takes on the role of Angkon, one of the 'land people' living in Kudat in northern Sabah, while the latter plays Otok, a Muslim of 'sea people' background who has acquired Malaysian citizenship after living in Sabah for an extended period as an immigrant from a neighbouring country. *PTI*, though, is not so much about Angkon and Otok as it is about their respective daughter and nephew, Clarice and Den. Strangers who become friends and lovers, Clarice and Den enter into a relationship that cuts across class, ethnic, religion and state boundaries in a way that would raise eyebrows in West Malaysia. Clarice is a high-school teacher from a middle-class background, while Den is a labourer who sells vegetables and fruits at a market in Kudat. Clarice's father is non-Muslim,

which makes Clarice more likely to be non-Muslim, too, taking into account the norm for the majority of ‘land people’ in Sabah. Den, on the other hand, is a Muslim of ‘sea people’ background.

In line with the inclusive philosophy of the third wave of Sabahan nationalism, *PTI* makes no issue of ethnic, religious or even class difference, raising as its sole concern Den’s status as a PTI, which in Malay denotes *pendatang tanpa izin* or ‘illegal immigrant’.² A homographic pun on PTI as the acronym is commonly understood, the title of the telemovie, *PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* (Love Without Permission) describes Clarice’s and Den’s relationship – one that is ‘unauthorized’ because Den has no legal standing to reside in Sabah, be it temporarily or permanently. From the ethical perspective of the film narrative, nothing, apart from Den’s PTI status, stands in the way of Clarice and Den developing their relationship and perhaps even getting married some day, not even the fact that Clarice’s hand in marriage has already been promised to someone else. *PTI* reveals in a subplot how, in order to unite their land and continue to work together, Clarice’s father, Angkon, had in the distant past made a friendship pact with his now-deceased Muslim friend to have their children marry each other when they reach adulthood. As Angkon says to his friend in a flashback, ‘a friend is a friend even if he is from another ethnicity and religion. This (way of life) is our inheritance from our forefathers.’

Years later, Angkon, faithful to the pact, invites his friend’s son, Rudy, to get to know Clarice with the intention of seeing them married in the near future, unaware that Rudy is already engaged to Lydia, who is furthermore pregnant. That Clarice is non-Muslim while Rudy is Muslim is hardly a factor in Clarice’s decision to not to marry Rudy. Rudy’s status as a Muslim is in fact a potential solution to the unhappy love triangle. As Rudy proposes, he could fulfil his duty by marrying both Lydia and Clarice since he is allowed to have up to four wives in Islamic law. Clarice could not take up the offer simply because she finally realizes that her heart already belongs to Den. Her realization comes a little too late, however. As she returns to the remote island of Banggi from Kudat after conveying her decision to her family and Rudy, Den is already leaving the pier on a boat heading to his hometown in a neighbouring country. He is forced to leave Sabah by Otok, his uncle, who is concerned for Den’s safety as the Malaysian authorities are in the midst of an operation to mass-arrest illegal immigrants in Sabah.

PTI ends ‘unhappily’ with the lovers thus separated, prevented from uniting despite transcending ethnicity, religion and class. Den simply could not be absorbed as ‘our people’ in the conception of Sabahan nationalism 3.0 that underlines *PTI* because he does not have the legal papers. Even Clarice tells him so directly in a scene where immigrants, even illegal ones, are defended and redignified, instead of stigmatized as they are likely to be in West Malaysia. Mistakenly assuming that Clarice would not marry him because of his PTI status, Den pleads, and I paraphrase, ‘Do PTIs have no feelings? Are we not allowed to marry? Is it because PTIs are bad people, all thieves and robbers?’

Clarice responds to this not by placating Den but by insisting that the laws of the country are such that PTIs cannot be allowed in Sabah. Only years later, in *PTI2*, does Den return to Sabah after clearing the legal hurdles. *PTI2* revolves around Den's return, his discovery that Clarice has married a wealthy businessman and changed her name to Camila, and his attempts to rekindle their love.

To better understand why the third generation of Sabahan nationalism exemplified by *PTI* should insist that only legal immigrants be counted in its definition of 'our people', it is necessary to take into account the historical context and the urgency of the problem of illegal immigrants in Sabah today. Because of Sabah's porous boundaries and geographical proximity to the Philippines and Indonesia, movements of people from surrounding areas into the state continued even after Sabah became part of Malaysia in 1963. Broadly categorized as Filipinos and Indonesians, these immigrants include Bajau, Suluk and other 'sea people'. According to the 1991 census (Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 1991: Table 1.3), residents of Sabah include Indonesians (10.7 per cent) who rank as the second largest non-native ethnic group after the Chinese (15.2 per cent). Filipinos (1.6 per cent) constitute the third largest non-native ethnic group. These figures do not include foreigners who entered Sabah without the proper documents and those who entered legally but become illegal when they failed to renew their work permits. Because it is often difficult to distinguish by appearances only if a person is a citizen, a legal immigrant, or a PTI in Sabah, PTIs have largely been able to blend in and evade the authorities.

Sabah's PTI problem falls under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The Federal Special Task Force for Illegal Immigrants reported that 120,000 illegal immigrants were deported between 1990 and 1998. Out of these, 70 percent were from the Philippines, while the rest were from Indonesia. The task force estimated there were some 100,000 illegal immigrants remaining in Sabah when they completed their 1999 operation in the state, but the real figures remain unknown. The current estimated Sabah population is about 2.8 million while estimates of the number of illegal immigrant population range from 130,000 ('Only') and half a million to above 1 million (Sadiq 2005: 107).

The moral and political attitude of *PTI* and *Orang Kita* towards immigrants in general and PTIs in particular is markedly sanguine in the face of Sabah's PTI problem. The telemovies remain inclusive in ways qualified earlier, despite acknowledgement on the ground level that the problem has long gone out of control. Sadiq (2005: 108) notes in his study that almost one in three residents of Sabah is a foreigner (legal and illegal). In the coastal town of Sandakan, the residents are 'overwhelmingly Filipino, while Indonesians comprise the majority of residents in Tawau' (2005: 106).

What complicates the PTI problem in Sabah is that, as popularly believed by Sabahans, illegal immigration into the state is not a 'natural' phenomenon and is deliberately encouraged by certain sections within the Malaysian state

dominated by UMNO (Kitingan 2006). Hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim immigrants have been given Malaysian citizenship (which includes the right to vote) in order to alter Sabah's demographics and increase UMNO's vote banks. A result of this has been the shrinkage of the size of the KDM community. Constituting 49 percent of Sabah's population in the early twentieth century, Kadazandusuns were the majority ethnic group. 'They fell to 32 percent by the 1960 census, 29.9 percent by 1970, and then, to their alarm, by 1990 they had fallen to 19.6 percent' (Sadiq 2005: 108).

'Our People'

That *Orang Kita*, *PTI* and their sequels remain steadfastly inclusive in their shared conception of 'our people' at a time when the political map of Sabah is being altered by illegal immigration might perhaps be construed as insensitive to the plight of Sabah's indigenous people gradually coming to be outnumbered by foreigners. Worse, by advocating a conception of 'our people' that includes legal immigrants, the telemovies might be seen as being unwittingly complicit in what many Sabahans regard as UMNO's attempt to hijack Sabah by flooding the state with mostly Muslim immigrants and granting them citizenship at the expense of the mostly non-Muslim indigenous citizens, many of whom ironically do not even possess the documented proof of citizenship easily acquired by foreigners. Consider, however, an alternative interpretation of the telemovies' insistence on inclusivity over exclusivity. What if it is precisely *because* (rather than in spite) of the severity of the problem that the inclusive ideal becomes even more necessary and urgent? It bears underlining here that the telemovies do not pretend to offer direct solutions to the PTI problem, just as they do not deny that practical solutions ought to be found to tackle Sabah's PTI problem in all its dimensions. What it does offer, arguably, is an ideal, a long-term goal and a reminder to Sabahans not to forget and neglect the inherited inclusive spirit of 'our people' while attempting to resolve the immediate problem. Fixing the problem but losing the spirit that makes Sabah unique relative to West Malaysia would only ultimately amount to losing the war.

That *Orang Kita*, *PTI* and their sequels remain steadfastly inclusive despite everything may not be unintended by their makers, including Abu Bakar Ellah who plays Ampal and Angkon and directed and acted in these productions. Although appearing 'comical' in his Penan hairstyle which he sports on and off camera, Ellah is far from politically simple or naive, as demonstrated for instance by his contesting in the 2004 general elections as an independent candidate in the Kuamut state constituency deep in the interior of Sabah. Quoted as saying, 'Like in the movie, I am a humble man, a kampung [village] boy who wishes to make a change' ('Singer' 2004), Ellah stood against a candidate from Barisan Nasional, the race-centred coalition, and lost. He has since decided to quit politics and focus on his entertainment career ('Saya' 2005)

but his productions such as *Orang Kita* and *PTI* remain a testament to attempts by Sabahans to cast *bangsa* Sabah in the inclusive mould of 3.0.

Abu Bakar Ellah is a member of *Orang Sungai* or the ‘river people’, the community into which he was born in 1959, which puts him in good stead to filmically intervene in the construction of *bangsa* Sabah. ‘River people’ traditionally live along the Kinabatangan and other rivers on the eastern coast of Sabah. Linguistically, they are categorized as a sub-group of the Kadazandusuns but because the majority of them are Muslims, they are seen as an exception among the Kadazandusuns. As the name suggests, ‘river people’ are in an ideal position to mediate between ‘land people’ and ‘sea people’ (including foreigners); they have built-in advantages with regard to the momentum for dismantling and reshaping the dichotomies still existing between ‘land people’ and ‘sea people’.

Abu Bakar Ellah’s most pointed intervention in the direction of 3.0, which encapsulates the philosophy of *Orang Kita* and *PTI*, is the theme song from the former telemovie, which I want to now examine by way of concluding the discussion. A huge hit in Sabah, ‘Orang kita’ (Our people) was written by Abu Bakar Ellah who is, apart from being a well-known actor, also an accomplished popular singer with five albums released to date. Repeated multiple times in the running time, part of the song reads as follows:

<i>Makan pakai tangan</i>	To eat with fingers
<i>Suka makan belacan</i>	Enjoy the taste of <i>belacan</i> [shrimp paste]
<i>Jumpa ucap salam</i>	And to say <i>salam</i> [greeting] when they meet
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Pandai bikin tapai</i>	Good at making <i>tapai</i> [fermented rice]
<i>Suka ramai-ramai</i>	Getting together with a lot of people
<i>Kadang ampai-ampai</i>	Being relaxed and going with the flow
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Jaga-jagalah budaya kita</i>	Uphold our culture
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Jaga-jagalah budaya kita</i>	Uphold our culture

The song is reminder of the shared similarities between the different communities that effectively make up ‘our people’. Eating with fingers is a common local practice, as is relishing *belacan* (shrimp paste), a typical sauce used in the Malay world, of which Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia are parts. *Salam* is a salutation used between Malay-Muslims in Peninsular Malaysia;

in Sabah, however, it is a common term used by ‘sea people’ and ‘land people’ regardless of their religion. *Tapai* is fermented rice and usually served as rice wine. In Sabah, *tapai* is commonly thought of as an alcoholic beverage and the traditional drink of the ‘land people’ who would on special occasions gather and drink *tapai* through the night with nuts as nibbles. The mention of *tapai* in the song would seem to exclude Muslims (for whom alcohol is forbidden) but consider the lyrics, which say ‘making *tapai*’ instead of ‘drinking *tapai*.’ The *tapai* mentioned here could only be fermented rice paste. The paste-type *tapai* is a snack commonly enjoyed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Therefore, in a society like Sabah, where people from various backgrounds frequently gather and share, ‘upholding our culture’ (as mentioned in the song) does not mean distilling different cultural aspects but rather embracing the various aspects of life as it is practised in Sabah.

The next part of the song reads:

<i>Laksmana Hang Tuah</i>	Admiral Hang Tuah
<i>Paduka Mat Salleh</i>	Noble Mat Salleh
<i>Si Aki Antanom</i>	And great Antanom
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	They are
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Ingat-ingat asal-usulnya</i>	Remember the origins
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Ingat-ingat asal-usulnya</i>	Remember the origins

In the above section, three important names are invoked as a way of ‘remember[ing] our origins.’ Mat Salleh is known as the leader of a series of rebellions in Sabah against the British from 1884 to 1900. He is the most prominent anti-colonialist figure in Sabahan history and has long been regarded as a Sabahan hero, although attempts have been made recently to reposition Mat Salleh as a hero of the ‘sea people’ or as a Muslim hero for Sabah. As if in response to this, the song invokes Antanom, another rebel leader who fought against British rule in 1915 in the interior district of Rundum.³ Antanom belongs to the Murut ethnic group and is known also for his unique hairstyle, which Abu Bakar Ellah models. By placing Mat Salleh and Antanom together, the song emphasizes inclusivity – that Sabah’s heroes come from various backgrounds.

Interestingly, the song also includes Hang Tuah, a well-known Malay admiral of the Malacca sultanate on the Peninsular side, as one of ‘our people.’ Hang Tuah could have been replaced by another hero from Sabah, for instance, Albert Kwok, who was the leader of the Kinabalu guerrilla group who fought against Japanese rule in Sabah in 1943 (Wong 2010: 89). Including a historical figure of Chinese background such as Kwok would create a more Sabah-centric image of the people. But it appears that Abu Bakar Ellah seeks to avoid

restricting ‘our people’ solely to those originating from East Malaysia and the surrounding region. Choosing Hang Tuah as the third hero (but placing him on top of the list) indicates that Abu Bakar Ellah does not look upon Peninsular Malaysia as detracting from the ‘we feeling’ in Sabah. At the same time, by putting Mat Salleh, Antanom and Hang Tuah together, the song suggests to the people of Sabah that they should be proud of their ancestors and heroes as much as the people of Peninsular Malaysia are proud of Hang Tuah, and that Sabah is as rich in history as Peninsular Malaysia. By ‘remember[ing] our origins’ this way, the song opens up for Sabahans the world beyond Sabah.

How can the people of Sabah simultaneously put in practice the seemingly contradictory ideas of remembering their origins and embracing the world beyond Sabah? The final part of the song explains:

<i>Sifat rendah diri</i>	To keep a humble attitude
<i>Hormat-menghormati</i>	To pay respect to each other
<i>Berbudi pekerti</i>	And to be well disciplined
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Pura-pura lupa</i>	To pretend to forget
<i>Suka angan-angan</i>	Like to dream
<i>Lupa asal-usul</i>	And to forget one’s origins
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people

The song suggests that apart from remembering their origins, Sabahans should also ‘forget’ them – not with mindless abandon but strategically, with humility, self-discipline and out of respect for others. ‘Forgetting’ is an act that seeks to include others as part of ‘our people’, as well as one that seeks to diffuse antagonisms that are often sparked when too much is invested in ‘origins’ as a category of inclusion/exclusion.

Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen the ways in which Abu Bakar Ellah suggests in his telemovies that a Sabahan identity can be fostered without being ‘anti-’ anything. This notion of ‘being-together’, while diametrically opposite to the racial practice in West Malaysia, has not led to the formation of a political movement and there is no guarantee that it will. Nonetheless, for the present, it serves as an interesting case study of identity formation in the age of global population migration, and of a potentially emergent future for contemporary Sabah at crossroads. A Sabahan *bangsa* that is on par with the three *bangsa* from West Malaysia may yet crystallize to serve as a guide for the latter to rethink the constitution of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in a world of irreducible plurality.

Notes

- 1 On Kadazan leaders from the inland district of Tambunan, see Yamamoto (2002).
- 2 *PTI* departs radically from films emerging from Peninsular Malaysia that deal with cross-ethnic and cross-religion romance, such as *Anak Sarawak* (Son of Sarawak, 1988, directed by Rahim Razali), *Spinning Gasing* (Spinning Top, 2001, directed by Teck Tan) and *Sepet* (Slit Eyes, 2005, directed by Yasmin Ahmad). In these Peninsular love stories between Muslim and non-Muslim, either the non-Muslim converts to Islam in order to marry their Muslim partner or they break up because the conversion is not an option for the non-Muslim partner.
- 3 The man's true name was Ontoros Antanom. He should be called Ontoros instead of Antanom, his father's name, but as the person is referred to as Antanom in English documents and is widely known to the people of Sabah, the conventional name is used to address him.

References

- Abu Bakar Ellah. (2009) Personal communication. 29 December.
- Anak Sarawak* (Son of Sarawak), Rahim Razali, dir. (Angkatan Seniman Abad XXX Films Productions, 1988) [film].
- Ariffin Omar. (1993) *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community, 1945–1950*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Barlocco, F. (2009) 'Media and Belonging to the Nation in Sabah, East Malaysia', Paper presented at the EASA Media Anthropology e-Seminar, 8–22 September. Available online at: www.media-anthropology.net/barlocco_sabah.pdf (accessed 17 March 2010).
- Kitingan, J. G. (2006) *Justice for Sabah*, Kota Kinabalu: Shelma Publications and News Agency.
- Lee, E. (1976) *The Towkays of Sabah: Chinese Leadership and Indigenous Challenge in the Last Phase of British Rule*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Luping, H. J. (1994) *Sabah's Dilemma: The Political History of Sabah (1960–1994)*, Kuala Lumpur: Magnus Books.
- Mahyuni, E. (2010) 'Why is Your Allah not My Allah?', *Malaysiakini.com*, 6 January. Available online at: www.malaysiakini.com/news/121232 (accessed 6 January 2010).
- Milner, A. (1994) *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mulgan, Geoff. (1990) 'Television's Holy Grail: Seven Types of Quality', in G. Mulgan (ed.), *The Question of Quality*, London: British Film Institute.
- Ongkili, J. P. (1972) *Modernization in East Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- 'Only 130,000 Illegal Migrants in Sabah'. (2008) *Mysin Chew*, 30 May. Available online at: www.mysin Chew.com/node/12168 (accessed 21 May 2009).
- Orang Kita* (Our People), Abu Bakar Ellah, dir. (Sky Laser, 2002) [film].
- Orang Kita 2* (Our People 2), Abu Bakar Ellah, dir. (Sky Laser, 2006) [film].
- Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 1991. (1995) *State Population Report: Sabah*, Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics Malaysia.
- PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* (PTI: Love Without Permission), Abu Bakar Ellah, dir. (Sky Laser, 2005) [film].

- PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin 2* (PTI: Love Without Permission 2), Abu Bakar Ellah, dir. (Sky Laser, 2008) [film].
- Roff, M. C. (1974) *The Politics of Belonging: Political Change in Sabah and Sarawak*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Sadiq, K. (2005) 'When States Prefer Non-citizens Over Citizens: Conflict Over Illegal Immigration into Malaysia', *International Studies Quarterly* 49:101–122.
- 'Saya sudah ketepikan politik, kata Abu Bakar Ellah'. (2005) *Bernama*, 5 January.
- Sepet* (Slit Eyes), Yasmin Ahmad, dir. (MHZ Film, 2005) [film].
- 'Singer Abu Bakar Ellah Among Independent Candidates'. (2004) *Bernama*, 12 March.
- Spinning Gasing* (Spinning Top), Teck Tan, dir. (Niche Film and Spinning Gasing Films, 2001) [film].
- Topin, B. (1995) 'The Historical Background of the Kadazandusun Cultural Association, Sabah (Koisaan)', Paper presented at the 7th Koisaan Delegates Conference, Kota Kinabalu.
- Wong, T. D. (2010) *Historical Sabah: The War*, Kota Kinabalu: Opus Publications.
- Yamamoto, H. (2002) 'From Penampang Boys to Tambunan Sons: Kadazandusun Leadership and Their Cultural "Revival"', in Mohd Hazim Shah, K. S. Jomo and Phua Kai Lit (eds), *New Perspectives in Malaysian Studies*, Bangi: Malaysian Social Science Association.