A Study of “Upin & Ipin”: Observing Their Roles in Promoting Positive Values in Children

Introduction

Brief History and Some Background Information

“Upin & Ipin” is a Malaysian television series of animated shorts produced by Les’ Copaque Production, featuring the life and adventures of identical twin brothers in a fictional Malay village. Originally it was a side project for the blockbuster animated film “Geng: The Adventure Begins.” “Upin & Ipin” was introduced on Malaysia TV9 in 2007 as a six-episode Ramadan/Eid special, to instill the significance of the Islamic holy month into children. The series has reached its fourth season (as of January 2011). Season three saw “Upin & Ipin dan Kawan-kawan” (Upin & Ipin and Friends) make its international debut via the Disney Channel Asia.

“Upin & Ipin” has gained popularity and has strong influence in the countries of the Malay archipelago, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia, which share common traits in language and cultural values. In its first season, it won the award for Best Animation in KLIFF 2007 (Isma, 2007). Till now, it has been watched in 11 countries. In three of these countries, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey, the program is shown on national TV stations. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures is the distributor for “Upin & Ipin,” and it is shown on Disney Channel Asia that can be viewed in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Turkey.
Each episode intertwines humor with moral values, and the storyline is kept simple, but interesting. It teaches universal moral values in an interesting way, trying not to allow children viewing the program to get bored or feel that they are being lectured. These moral values usually emerge as the plot of the story; positive values can be learned in every episode. Through "Upin and Ipin," children are taught about hard work, honesty, determination, kindness, and social values.

"Upin & Ipin" season two in Ramadan 2008 was reportedly watched by 1.5 million on TV9 (Mahdi, 2009) making it the second most-watched animated series in Malaysian television history, behind "Doraemon" (1.6 mil). This represented almost double the audience for "SpongeBob SquarePants," which had 800,000 viewers (Lee, 2009). The popularity of "Upin & Ipin" helped in the success of Malaysia's first 3 Dimensional (3D) animated feature film, "Geng: The Adventure Begins" (2009), which featured the twin characters Upin and Ipin; the movies generated RM 6.31 million at the box office throughout its seven-week run in Malaysian cinemas. It was one of the highest-grossing Malay-language films in history (Lee, 2009).

As the third season reached its conclusion in late 2009, TV9 reported that "Upin & Ipin" was viewed by 1.6 million, making it the second most viewed program on the channel, just behind the free TV premiere of "Geng," which was watched by 2.45 million (LCP, 2009).

While gaining fame in the country in which it was born, "Upin & Ipin" has also stirred interest in Indonesia, where, since 2009, it has drawn a huge following, proving to be popular not only with children but also with adults. According to Viny Felasiani, a media official with Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia (Indonesian Educational Television, TPI), the show was the highest-rated program in Indonesia at one point in January, capturing almost 25 percent of all viewers during its time slot, according to the data from ratings and trend-tracking agency Nielsen. It is currently the second-highest rated program on TPI and the highest-rated among the education channel's numerous shows for children (Siregar, 2010).

The Story

The "Upin & Ipin" story is told from the little ones' perspectives - naive, simple, and speckled with humor. Its aim is not only to entertain but to instill positive moral values in the young generation. Good values are told in a subtle manner so that the children do not feel they are watching an educational program. Very subtly, Upin and Ipin take the audience through their life lessons, which are richly flavored with adventures and interesting journeys. Even though it has educational motives, Upin and Ipin's natural life lesson can easily be understood by children, while the parents can reflect on the realities of what is taught.

The first season of "Upin & Ipin" was aired in conjunction with Ramadan (fasting month) and Aidilfitri (Eid Festival). The stories revolved around the twins' preparations for fasting; learning how to fast
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and getting ready for the celebration at the end of the fasting month. The ever-patient Opah is responsible for teaching and guiding them through the holy month. Sister Ros, although a little impatient with the duo, still diligently looks after them. Their parents have passed away and she is the only sister they have.

The second series, under its full title “Upin & Ipin: Setahun Kemudian,”(A Year Later) again went on air in conjunction with Ramadan. In the intervening year, Upin and Ipin started kindergarten at Tadika Mesra. They have made new friends but still make mischief with their close friends. During class, Upin and Ipin, and their friends talk excitedly about their previous fasting experience. In the latest season (three and four), entitled “Upin & Ipin dan Kawan-kawan,” the stories differ as the character are no longer restricted to their life in the village.

Main Characters

The animated series gains its popularity from realistic setting and stories, easily grasped by the audience. What makes it more appealing are the “cute” characters, especially Upin and Ipin. As normal children, Upin and Ipin are far from perfect, certainly not superhero types; this makes it easy for all children to relate to them, regardless of race, religion, or nationality. All the stories in the show revolve around Upin and Ipin. Upin, the elder brother of Ipin by five minutes, is outspoken and the mastermind of their mischievous actions. Ipin, more cheerful, is known for phrasing “betul,betul,betul” (“right,right,right”), a popular phrase among many Malaysian children.

The Malay twins live with their elder sister Ros and their grandmother Uda (whom they call Opah) in wooden house in Kampung Durian Runtuh (Big Fortune Village). Their parents died when Upin and Ipin were very young. They attend the village’s Tadika Mesra (Friendly Kindergarten), where they befriend a multi-racial group of classmates, including an adorable and smart Chinese girl, May May, a joker and poetic Sikh boy, Jajrit Singh, a clumsy and short-tempered Malay boy, Ehsan, an easygoing and sarcastic Fizi (Ehsan’s cousin), and a business-minded Malay boy, Mael. Another character is the headman of Kampung Durian Runtuh, Isnin bin Khamis, better known as Tok Dalang, the wayang kulit (shadow play) champion. Tok Dalang keeps a rooster named Rembo. Other village’s only food stall, who lives with his son Rajoo and their pet bull, Sapy; Salleh (Sally), a silly transgender-apparent, and Ah Tong, a vegetable farmer. Kampung Durian Runtuh is also home to an Indonesian girl, Susanti, and her family.

“Upin & Ipin” and Some Issues In Animation

Three main issues tied to animation are discussed here: foreign influence, cultural stereotyping, local contents and elements.
**How “Upin & Ipin” Avoids Foreign Influences**

Imported animated movies have become popular among Malaysians, young and old. With cable TV channels, such as Astro, access to such programs has become easier, which means Malaysians are increasingly exposed to “imported values”. With this exposure, large audience segments may have become attached to the foreign norms and values of imported entertainment. This, in turn, may have had a subsidiary effect on Malaysian animators, who adopt the mindset that they should follow western or foreign styles, rather than local cultures. This makes it more difficult to evaluate Malaysia’s achievements and set its own values. The majority of locally produced animation reveals an identity crisis indirectly affecting the audience.

Because many animators believe foreign influences attract local audiences, it has become difficult to pull away from this norm; the mindset says that following the trend is the right thing to do. When first started, animation shorts produced by National Film of Malaysia in 1983, and directed by Hassan Muthalib, successfully portrayed Malaysian culture, tradition, and outlook. The content contained rich and original Malaysian flavors that local audience could relate to.

Somehow, when “Upin & Ipin” was born, audience’s attention and perception began to shift slowly. From always being negative about locally produced animation, people started to appreciate it. “Upin & Ipin” is seen to unite people from different demographical and geographical background. What “Upin & Ipin” tries to achieve is to be recognized as made up of unique characters from global culture but grounded in the realities of the world Upin & Ipin are portrayed as normal children-nothing special about them in appearance — but they do have natural charm.

Foreign animated TV series have long been an influence in Malaysia. Many of these have been from the West. But, more recently, Japanese animation has a strong impact on Malaysian animation; for example, in 2008 “Doraemon” was watched by 1.6 million viewers, placing it at the highest ranking.

Past research includes lengthy discussions on the influence of foreign productions on locally produced animation. More recent research reveals that the creators behind “Upin & Ipin” make a deliberate effort to break away from foreign influences. Indeed, this is reflected in the series itself- its look and feel, and its overall theme. Characters have no resemblance to any existing character that audiences know and remember. “Upin & Ipin” tries to use local elements to portray a life as accurately as possible to the realities of life in Malaysia. The flavors of Malaysia are reflected without exaggeration, and the stories revolve around the daily lives of everyday people with all their subtleties and natural inclinations. It comes through as original and unexploited.

Aesthetically, the overall beauty of the animations lies within the uniqueness of each element. The appearance of every character, the way the characters act, the simple costumes, the lush background, the rich
colors, the polite spoken language, the music, and almost everything to reflect the “true” essence of Malaysia shine through.

"Upin & Ipin “ Tackles Cultural Stereotyping Issues

Animation production in Malaysia, has had two local models to emulate, the early work of “Hikayat Sang Kancil” and “Lat, The Kampung Boy,” both of which projected the essence of Malaysian identity successfully. Other productions are close in quality, and, thanks to be increasing popularity of “Upin & Ipin,” the trend in local animation is showing positive signs of change.

As far as cultural stereotyping is concerned, there are cultural this to be an who are against such stereotyping, while others do not consider this to be an important issue, because they do not see any bad consequences that come out of cultural stereotyping. It appears that “Upin & Ipin” is not part of this debate “Upin & Ipin,” having attracted the attention of more children around the world, is giving new hope to parents. Children are starting to re-learn and practice positive values fro their own culture, which, some believe, they have been neglecting while exposed to foreign animation.

"Upin & Ipin” Amplifies Local Contents and Elements

Identifying potential local elements is not an easy task. Animators must be prepared to forego their personal interests while trying to foster that the audience. Animators need to work closely with people who do not necessarily have technical animation skills, but are more in tune with cultural and audience perceptions.

Local elements may contain not only visuals but also physical, psychological, and sociological variants. Therefore, observation enriches the animation. Audiences are interested in watching and experiencing something that is close to them and speak the same language. These local elements include multi-faceted issues such as stories that comprise original legends and myths, the “true” Malaysian lifestyle, cross-cultural scenarios, character designs, background and scene design, color palette, costumes, etc. These elements can be seen in “Upin & Ipin.” Many other local animation series neglect these aspects. Local elements and values are often dismissed; stories focusing on superheroes are usually a priority.

The creators of “Upin & Ipin” work to produce a product nearly 10 percent Malaysian. All characters are created in such a way that they have enough traits to be Malaysian, but global enough to be accepted in other countries. It is evidenced from foreign reviews that children from different countries perceive Upin and Ipin as friends among themselves. “Upin & Ipin” also has introduced some nostalgic elements to its stories. Some local games nearly forgotten, such as upih or playing betel nut
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leaves, are making a comeback. Children do not only learn the games played by previous generations, but also see how Upin, Ipin, and their friends play in harmony without fighting.

"Upin & Ipin"s effort to promote positive local values is hampered by the difficulty to pinpoint exactly what Malaysian culture entails. A multiracial society, Malaysia is also made up of various religions, languages, and lifestyles. Such a mixture is hard to explain, as Gaik Cheng Koo(2005) wrote: "What are you' may sometimes be the first question one is asked of one's ethnicity in Malaysia. In a country where the term 'race' is still used unproblematically in official and popular discourse, race underpins the crux of Malaysian society and identity."

Generally, "Upin & Ipin" has made a point that Malaysia is unique because of its multicultural nature, portraying different cultures according to the "true essence" of the ethnic group the characters represent. However, apart from wanting to promote Malaysian culture, "Upin & Ipin" also aims to be accepted globally without pre-determined perceptions, trying to do this through the use of universally acceptable characters that are charming and cute.

Conclusion

"Upin & Ipin"s efforts to educate children with positive values seem to be working and should serve as an example for other local animation companies, that need to pay more attention to their social obligations to educate and set good examples for the younger generation.

References


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Tentang Penulis

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