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A REINTERPRETATION OF CHIU KENG GUAN'S *OLA BOLA*: A REDEFINED NOTION OF *BANGSA MALAYSIA* FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

¹Abdul Halim Ayob & ² Ali Abdul Rahman Yosri

^{1,2} Centre for Foundation Studies in Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia

¹Corresponding author: abdul.halim.ayob@uum.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

National identity plays a crucial role in the development of a nation, with its essence continually evolving over time. Consequently, various endeavors have been made by authorities to shape a national identity in Malaysia. Among these efforts is Mahathir's concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*. Despite being labeled as a non-Islamic production, Chiu Keng Guan's film, *Ola Bola*, subtly reflects Islamic principles in fostering national identity. This study aims to redefine the emergence of a Malaysian national identity depicted in *Ola Bola*, aligning with Islamic values, and to challenge the established notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*. Through a thematic analysis and literature review of *Ola Bola*, the film's narrative is revisited and examined. *Ola Bola*, effectively conveying Islamic values in nurturing a cohesive national identity, was directed by a non-Muslim Malaysian, reshaping the predominantly Malay-centric concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, as is evident. The film's three principal themes which are equality and fairness, the spirit of brotherhood and a shared identity and common goals, redefine *Bangsa Malaysia* and resonate with Islamic ideals of multiculturalism and a pluralistic society within the Malaysian context.

Keywords: *Bangsa Malaysia*, Film Analysis, Malaysian Identity, Muslim Identity, *Ola Bola*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is characterized by a system that emphasizes 'hegemonic consociationalism', according to Milne and Mauzy (1999), which prioritizes Malay-Muslim dominance and accentuates ethnic divisions within the country. Consequently, this fosters ongoing negotiations regarding national identity, which is primarily shaped by Malay nationalism and cultural traits, as noted by Mamat (2012). On top of that, Shamsul contends that while Malaysia acknowledges the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups, Malay Bumiputera culture remains central to Malaysian national identity (1996). Additionally, Shamsul highlights that fellow non-Malay Malaysians recognize Malay language as the national language, Malay special privileges, and Islam as the official religion of Malaysia (1996). As Malaysia progresses and evolves as a nation, the concept of national identity remains contentious due to its Malay hegemonic characteristics. Consequently, national identity is a pivotal focus of this research.

Malaysia has actively pursued the formation of a national identity through various policy initiatives, including the Shared Prosperity Vision (SPV 30), Transformasi Nasional 2050 (TN50) 1Malaysia, Vision 2020 and New Economic Policy (NEP). Mahathir Mohamad, serving as Prime Minister for 23 years and again from 2018 to 2020, notably promoted the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, aiming for a balanced national identity with the launch of Vision 2020 in 1991 (Akmar, 1995). Years later, former Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, pursued the 1Malaysia initiative, which seemingly incorporated elements of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Mamat, 2012). The latest endeavor in this direction is the concept of *Keluarga Malaysia* introduced by Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the former ninth Prime Minister, aimed at fostering economic resilience among Malaysians in the aftermath of Covid-19 (Zin, 2021). These policies have sought to reconcile various interests in shaping national identity, with *Bangsa Malaysia* being recognized as the most prominent and widely embraced policy (Mamat, 2012). In summary, *Bangsa Malaysia* will be a focal point of this study, given its significance in Malaysia's efforts to forge a cohesive national identity.

In an effort to reevaluate the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* as a construct for fostering national identity, and to explore Islam's role in shaping this identity, this research endeavors to redefine *Bangsa Malaysia* from an Islamic perspective. However, rather than directly analyzing policy or theoretical constructs, this study utilizes *Ola Bola*, a film directed by Chiu Keng Guan, as a medium for this examination. *Ola Bola* achieved significant commercial success, becoming one of the highest-grossing films in Malaysian history by amassing approximately RM 16 million within just 39 days of its release (Mohamad, 2016). This underscores its popularity among Malaysians and its impact on the local film industry. The film offers a fictionalized account of the Malaysian football team's journey during the 1970s and 1980s, as they strive to qualify for the Moscow Olympics and bring honor to the nation. Through this narrative, *Ola Bola* effectively captures the ethos of multiculturalism prevalent among Malaysians. Chiu's portrayal of a diverse team united in their pursuit of a common goal resonates strongly with audiences, reflecting a vision of a cohesive and inclusive national identity. This study contends that while *Ola Bola* may not be explicitly Malay or Muslim in nature, its depiction of national identity aligns with Islamic principles of multiculturalism and inclusivity. By examining the film through an Islamic lens, the aim is to demonstrate how adherence to genuine Islamic values can contribute to the cultivation of an inclusive and multicultural national identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, national identity, Islam in Malaysia, Ola Bola and Bangsa Malaysia are discussed as the foundations of the study.

National Identity

National identity is a complex concept shaped by historical, cultural, and social influences, evolving significantly over time. The historical relationship between Korea and Japan from the late nineteenth century continues to influence their national identities (Seo, 2024). In sports, national identity has transformed due to migration, citizenship, diaspora, and globalization, with athletes often representing countries they were not born in (Storey, 2024). Papanikos (2024) argues that modern Greek identity shares characteristics with ancient Greek identity through language, customs, and religion, despite ancient Greece's focus on wars like the Greek-Persian War. American identity is dynamic and shaped by personal interpretations and societal influences, requiring innovative interdisciplinary approaches to fully capture (Bui, 2024). In Malaysia, national identity is formed through government policies and political ideologies proposed by various prime ministers as mentioned in the introduction. These diverse studies highlight the evolving nature of national identity across different contexts, emphasizing historical legacies, global influences, cultural continuity, personal interpretations, and state interventions.

Islam in Malaysia

Despite the emergence of modernity and the dawn of the 21st century, the influence of religion remains significant (Moore, 2020). To illustrate the enduring power of religion, particularly Islam, in shaping the Malay world, we must trace its historical roots and its multifaceted impact. Islam, now the official religion of Malaysia, first made its appearance in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago in 674 A.D. (Saleem, 1980). According to Azmi and Shamsul (2004), the religion was initially introduced by traders, merchants, Sufis, and indigenous Malays who had performed the Hajj and studied Islamic theology. The spread of Islam was further facilitated through intermarriages between Muslim merchants and local populations, significantly increasing the number of Muslims during this period (Saleem, 1980).

Islam's prominence in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago began to rise notably in the early fifteenth century, marked by the conversion of rulers such as Parameswara (Saleem, 1980). Prior to this, the inhabitants of the Malay peninsula predominantly practiced animism. The conversion of the aristocracy to Islam played a crucial role in the mass conversion of the general populace (Abdullah, 1999). By the seventeenth century, Islam had become deeply embedded in Malay identity, particularly as non-Muslim communities began to arrive in the eighteenth century, cementing the Malay-Muslim connotation (Abdullah, 1999).

The revival of Islam in Malaysia during the 1970s and 1980s significantly influenced the nation's sociopolitical landscape. Abu Bakar (1991) identifies three pivotal events that spurred this revival: Egypt's partial victory in the 1973 war with Israel, the formation of an alliance by the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its Arab members, and the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Additionally, Abu Bakar (1991) outlines five other factors contributing to Islamic revivalism: the works of Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Abu Ala Maududi, and Jamaat Islami; the influence of foreign fundamentalist movements; the re-education of Malay students studying abroad; the impact of the fourth Arab-Israeli War and the Iranian Revolution; and the formation of international Islamic organizations appealing to the global Muslim Ummah.

In the post-colonial era, the 1970s Islamic revivalism in Malaysia challenged and reshaped the role of religion in Malay society and politics (Abdullah, 1999). This period saw the politicization of Islam, leading to significant shifts in the Malaysian political landscape (Yong Liow, 2004). Lee (1988) notes that the revivalism created divisions within the Malay Muslim community, particularly as the movement attracted many youths and professionals who adopted new dress codes such as veiled clothing, turbans, and robes. The emergence of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) in the late 1970s further impacted the Malaysian political system, highlighting the profound and enduring influence of Islamic revivalism (Lee, 1988).

Patriotism, unity and multiculturalism in *Ola Bola*

Nurul Asyikin and Fariza Hanis (2018) and Mazalan (2016) highlight the pervasive themes of patriotism and unity woven throughout the film, emphasizing its celebration of multiculturalism. Furthermore, Maheendran examines *Ola Bola* through a structuralist film theory lens, identifying several key aspects such as interracial friendship, cross-cultural interactions, multilingual dialogues, depictions of minority communities, and the promotion of color blindness (2017). The portrayal of patriotism and unity in the movie *Ola Bola* instills sentiments of hope and conviction within Malaysian audiences (Johari, 2016; Lim, 2019). Besides that, the portrayal of diverse characters from various backgrounds serves as a lesson on what it means to be Malaysian, emphasizing the importance of patriotism and love towards the country and fellow citizens, as noted by Azizi (2016). These reviews examine the film's potential to positively influence Malaysians, resonating with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Fundamentally, the film epitomizes the principles of solidarity and cultural diversity within the Malaysian context.

Discussion on National Identity and Islamic perspective

The emphasis on universal values serves as a foundational element in the construction of national identity. Tiara Jacqueline underscores and critically assesses one of these universal Malaysian values—the celebration of Malaysian Independence Day, which she observes is increasingly treated as just another public holiday (2019, as cited in Abdullah, 2019). Both the film and the musical adaptation aim to revive these memories for Malaysians, perhaps refreshing the recollections of some individuals and illustrating the harmonious image of Malaysia during those times for younger Malaysian audiences. This endeavor adds depth to the repertoire of national identity.

Its message is evident: utilizing the potent medium of football to evoke a robust sense of patriotism and unity within a multicultural society. Malaysia, as noted by one critic, grapples with cultural and religious tensions, particularly between conservative Malay Muslims and other Malaysians of diverse ethnic backgrounds. For instance, there are instances where Muslim culture discourages interactions with dogs, reflecting one aspect of these tensions (Choo, 2016). Choo elaborates that the film plays a significant role in the nation-building process by tackling ethnic and social divisions within Malaysia's multicultural landscape through the characters' patriotic odyssey, notwithstanding the personal, economic, and familial hurdles they encounter. Choo's critique prompts deeper investigation into the endeavor of nation-building, particularly in responding to apprehensions voiced by conservative Muslims. Such concerns could potentially lead young Muslims to reassess the notion of Muslim identity within the broader framework of national identity or *Bangsa Malaysia*. This emphasizes the significance of exploring Islamic perspectives on multicultural relationships in the process of forging a national identity among Malaysians.

Islam is constitutionally recognized as Malaysia's official religion, as mandated by the federal constitution. In the film *Ola Bola*, religion assumes a notable role within Malaysia's diverse religious

landscape, prominently depicted by the characters (Nor Ain et al., 2016). Matnoh et al. undertook a study of the movie, examining the dialogue across Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil, Mandarin, and English, as well as characterizations, to elucidate the importance of religion and Malaysian identity. They utilized Fludernik and Ferdinand De Saussure's theories to explore socio-cultural symbols and character traits (2016). Furthermore, Nor Ain et al delve into the religious dimension of the film, emphasizing a particular scene where Tauke, a pivotal character, lights joss sticks as a tribute to his deceased father, symbolizing the significance of religion within Malaysia's diverse community. Religion plays a significant role in shaping Malaysian identity, with Islam holding an official and constitutional position (2016). However, as Ahmad Zaharuddin et al. (2014) note, Malaysia exists within a nuanced interplay between secularism and Islamic principles, residing in a "grey area" between the two extremes. Malaysia is neither strictly an Islamic state nor entirely secular, necessitating a deeper exploration of this ambiguous space. Understanding the connotations of Islam's position within the country is essential to facilitating comprehension among non-Muslim Malaysians regarding Islam's role in a multicultural society.

Critical review of *Ola Bola*

Philip (2019) critically examines an intriguing aspect of both the film *Ola Bola* and its musical adaptation, pointing out that they fail to delve into deeper themes. She asserts that *Ola Bola* the musical lacks active engagement with provocative concepts, as its primary aim is to entertain and elicit joy from the audience. According to Philip, both the film and the musical prioritize entertainment and emotional resonance over addressing challenging concepts, thus neglecting certain thought-provoking ideas. In contrast, Azizi highlights the films' prominent focus on entertaining and emotionally resonating with the audience, emphasizing their ability to tug at the heartstrings (2016). This juxtaposition suggests that while the directors, Chiu Keng Guan and Tiara Jacquelina, opt to prioritize entertainment value to attract a wider audience, they may overlook the exploration of more complex themes present in the narratives.

Philip raises insightful queries, pondering whether there was any examination of the dissipation of "unity, determination, and brotherhood" depicted in the film, echoing sentiments akin to those expressed by another film critic, Tanaka. Tanaka urges filmmakers to confront topics that engage the intellect of the audience. Tanaka specifically calls for exploration into the growing ethnic divide and why it persists in the country, a topic conspicuously absent from the film (2016, as cited in Augustin, 2016). Additionally, Philip (2016) examines *Ola Bola* and states that any reflection or questioning that arose was predominantly on a personal level, with the majority expressing nostalgia for the past without delving into practical measures to revive it. There was a lack of inquiry into whether the past was truly as idealistic as remembered.

Despite Philip's subsequent acknowledgment in the following paragraph of her review that it might be "unfair to pose such inquiries," *Ola Bola* nevertheless offers Malaysians a chance to explore the intricacies of their identity as Malaysians, or *Bangsa Malaysia*. Consequently, prompted by the inquiries raised by Philip, examining *Ola Bola* from an Islamic standpoint offers a means to revisit and discuss how the Muslim community, the largest demographic in Malaysia, shapes their identity within the context of *Bangsa Malaysia*. This approach aims to illustrate the progressive nature of Islam in embracing the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* while addressing the ongoing religious and racial tensions in Malaysia. Through reviewing and critically analyzing *Ola Bola* from an Islamic perspective, it is hoped that this may mitigate some of the enduring tensions in Malaysian society.

Mahathir Mohamad's *Bangsa Malaysia*

Before the formal inception of the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* in 1991, Mahathir Mohamad initially proposed the idea in 1988 in a speech when he stated that upon achieving independence, there was a collective agreement to adopt Malaysia as the official appellation of the nation, with a concurrent recognition of a Malaysian identity and Bahasa Malaysia as the national language. These designations derive from the nomenclature of the predominant indigenous community, the Malays. Embracing Malaysia, identifying as Malaysians, and utilizing Bahasa Malaysia do not equate to a shift in ethnic affiliation. Individuals of Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan, Murut, and other ethnic backgrounds retain their respective ethnic identities. The notion of Malaysian citizenship denotes a political allegiance specific to the nation-state. Consequently, there exists no rationale for harboring concerns regarding the erosion of ethnic identity. Ethnic languages and cultures remain intact and unaffected by this national allegiance.

The primary concept behind *Bangsa Malaysia* is to forge a political identity that unifies all Malaysians while simultaneously preserving their ethnic identities. When Tun Mahathir proposed Vision 2020 in 1991, he also coined *Bangsa Malaysia* officially to the public (Mahathir, 2021). In addition, in his biography, Mahathir (2011) explains that *Bangsa Malaysia* signifies identifying oneself with the country, speaking Malay language and adhering to the constitution of Malaysia. Furthermore, at the 'United Malaysian Nation by the year 2020' dinner in 1992, Mahathir elaborates on the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, and he states that adhering to individual duties and obligations as outlined in the Constitution, spanning areas such as politics, citizenship, socio-economic opportunities, language, religion, and the distribution of authority between the central government and the states. He adds that it is emphasized that maintaining steadfastness in upholding the pledge with sincerity and completeness is crucial. Additionally, effectively managing nation-building efforts involves addressing socio-economic disparities among different ethnic groups and regions within the nation. Mahathir also highlighted in his speech that *Bangsa Malaysia* is needed for national growth and evolution, as without growth, there will be insufficient resources to address such disparities. Furthermore, achieving the strategic objective of fostering national unity depends on maintaining peace and stability, facilitating unimpeded progress towards collective aspirations. In summary, in his speech, Mahathir elaborates on what *Bangsa Malaysia* entails, emphasizing two crucial points: the obligation to adhere to the Constitution and the need to address socio-economic imbalances for the collective progress of the nation.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this research integrates thematic analysis and literature review to scrutinize Chiu Keng Guan's film, *Ola Bola*. Thematic analysis is utilized to dissect and interpret the film's narrative, with particular emphasis on themes such as equality, brotherhood, and a shared national identity. This approach enables an exploration of how these themes are portrayed in the film and their congruence with Islamic principles. Complementing this, a literature review contextualizes *Ola Bola* within the broader discourse on national identity and multiculturalism in Malaysia, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the film's relevance and impact within the Malaysian socio-cultural landscape.

ANALYSIS

The themes depicted in *Ola Bola* include equality and fairness, the spirit of brotherhood and a shared identity and common goals.

Equality and fairness

Several scenes highlight the notion that decisions are based on merit rather than ethnicity. In this subsection, there are two scenes which epitomise the value of equality and fairness: Tauke's leadership and Harry Mountain's decision. An illustration of this is how everyone in the film - including the players, coach, and Malaysians - accepts Tauke, an ethnically Chinese individual, as the team leader. This illustrates that in Chiu's Malaysian society, leadership is determined by merit rather than ethnicity. One scene depicting Tauke's leadership is when the coaching staff observe him leading a training session, sparking a conversation among them. One staff member questions, "Since when did the captain become the coach?" to which the other coach responds, "He's been with the team the longest, that's why the kids call him Tauke," which means "the owner." Tauke's significant influence within the team is evident as he is referred to as "the owner," highlighting his leadership position.

Furthermore, in a training scene where Tauke assumes control, Chiu employs the technique of invisible sound to emphasize Tauke's influence over his fellow football players. During a conversation between Ah Chai, Abu, and Samad about Tauke's strictness, Tauke, though not visible on-screen, loudly calls out "Ong Tiam Chai!" (Ah Chai's full name), prompting them to swiftly return to their activities as shown in Figure 1. This use of sound highlights Tauke's authority and leadership among the team. Through the utilization of off-screen sound, Chiu portrays Tauke as ever-present, consistently monitoring his teammates. The audience, similarly unable to locate the source of the sound, experiences a sense of Tauke's pervasive presence, enhancing the impact of his authority.

Figure 1

Chiu employs the technique of invisible sound, exemplified by Tauke shouting "Ong Tiam Chai!", to underscore Tauke's authority over the team.



In addition, when Tauke announces his decision to leave the team, everyone is visibly shocked and their morale appears to plummet. This event serves as yet another testament to Tauke's significance within the team, both as a key player and as its captain. The players and coaching staff, including Harry Mountain, hold Tauke in high regard due to his unwavering dedication, credibility, and skill both on the field and in his leadership role as team captain. This demonstrates that the choice to make a non-bumiputera for an important leadership role is made based on merits not skin colour.

Another example which delineates the value of equality and fairness is portrayed through Harry Mountain. Despite occasionally making decisions that some might find 'controversial,' Harry Mountain consistently emphasizes merit in his judgments. During the initial training session, he reassigns Abu and Samad from right to left positions and vice versa. Subsequently, he astounds the team by selecting Eric, a goalkeeper who earned a spot on the national team, as the primary striker, displacing Samsul, the team's esteemed striker. Mountain justifies this decision by highlighting Eric's successful record as a striker during his youth. He explains that Eric had a successful record as a striker for the national youth team. Mountain highlights the statistics which Eric has at that time to justify his decisions. This illustrates Mountain's meticulousness in evaluating players and his commitment to fairness and equality in decision-making. Following the scene with Harry Mountain and the players, Chiu transitions to a traditional mini cardboard football game played by Rahman's daughters (Figure 2). This transition occurs after Mountain firmly states the conventional and outdated methods of trainings are to be abolished and that new training regimes will be applied to the players.

Figure 2

This depicts a traditional mini cardboard football game, appearing immediately after Harry Mountain articulates his principles centered around the merits of each player in the preceding scene.



Figure 2 portrays each player represented by a mini cardboard figure. Through this image, Chiu illustrates that Harry Mountain possesses an intimate understanding of each player, akin to the players' familiarity with their own mini cardboard counterparts in the traditional football game. This shift underscores the importance of understanding each player and their abilities, highlighting the evaluation of players based on their individual merits. The judgments rendered by Harry Mountain involve discussions between Rahman and Tauke, with Rahman providing insights into the statistical rationale behind

Mountain's decisions. Rahman highlights that Abu has participated in 18 matches over a span of 3 years, with 80% of his goals originating from the left side. Additionally, Rahman notes that Eric has achieved record-breaking performances within the youth team. These statistics were provided by Rahman to serve as the foundation for Mountain's controversial decisions. The sudden yet well-founded choices made by Mountain are anchored in facts and the players' abilities. This highlights the principle that players selected for the national football team undergo evaluation predicated upon their individual merits rather than their racial or ethnic background. Such practice exemplifies the principles of impartiality and egalitarianism in the process of player selection for national representation.

In the Quran, God advocates for fairness and equality in His judgment, particularly in the context of creating a multicultural and multireligious world. In Al Maidah verse 48, the Quran states, "...if Allah had willed, He would have made you one community, but His Will is to test you with what He has given each of you..." This suggests that while God could have created a single, homogenous mankind if He desired, He deliberately chose to create a diverse world to test humanity. By doing so, God offers equal and fair opportunities for testing to all of mankind, regardless of their backgrounds. This highlights the concept of fairness and equality while emphasizing the essence of meritocracy as depicted in Chiu's *Ola Bola*. The opportunities presented to the characters are a result of their actions and achievements. The portrayal of meritocracy in the film, influenced by nuances derived from the Quran, is manifested through the journeys of the protagonists. The ethos of meritocracy is unmistakably evident in *Ola Bola* and can be interpreted as resonating with the principles of fairness and equality central to Islam. This alignment with Islam's values is reminiscent of the *Ummah* established during the time of Prophet Muhammad. Siddiq Fadzil elaborates that the *Ummah* of that era celebrated ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity without imposing assimilation. Furthermore, they refrained from promoting any particular ethnic group as superior. This charter illustrates the functioning of an inclusive interpretation of Islamic law within a diverse society characterized by multiculturalism, multi religiosity, and multi-ethnicity. It is structured to uphold and promote equality and safeguarding irrespective of racial, ethnic, tribal, religious, or gender differences, as substantiated by numerous scholars (Md Jani et al., 2015; Arjomand, 2009; Kaka Khel, 1982).

On top of that, the *Ummah* established during the era of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the Charter of Medina does not espouse the idea of a 'superior' ethnicity; rather, it advocates for equal rights in a pluralistic society, as highlighted by scholars such as Md Jani et al(2015), Arjomand (2009), Kaka Khel (1982), and Siddiq Fadzil (2016). Additionally, Article 13 of the Charter of Medina emphasizes that the people of Medina are obligated to combat evil and injustice, even if the perpetrator hails from their own tribe, underscoring the principle of fairness and justice for all, regardless of tribal affiliations (Azyati Azhani et al., 2013). The Charter of Medina also stipulates that Jews possess the same rights and obligations as Muslims in Medina, exemplifying the principles of equality and fairness for all citizens. This demonstrates that Islam indeed promotes the ideals of fairness and equality, disseminating the notion of equal opportunity and justice within the framework of an inclusive Islam.

As previously mentioned, the Charter of Medina serves as a crucial constitution that embodies the principles of inclusive Islam. For instance, in the film, Tauke, who is classified as a non-bumiputra according to the government's definition, leads the national team composed of players from diverse ethnicities and religions. He emerges as a leader who embodies the aspirations of the country based on his leadership qualities and skills as a player. This portrayal resonates with the perspective of Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, who advocates for the equal participation of non-Muslims in shaping a nation-state (as cited in Jaffar, 1980).

The protagonists from various ethnic backgrounds are afforded greater visibility and recognition by the establishment in the film, a concept that aligns with Modood's perspective on multicultural and

multireligious societies (1994). This is exemplified by the composition of the football team, which comprises Malaysians from diverse ethnicities and religious backgrounds. These scenes reflect Reza Aslan's assertion regarding Prophet Muhammad's approach to celebrating multiculturalism and multi religious society. Reza Aslan (2015) highlights how the Prophet empowered Jews and Christians during his reign.

In summary, characters like Tauke, Eric, Abu, Samad, Rahman, and the football players in *Ola Bola* are empowered and elevated to leadership positions to represent Malaysia, free from racial prejudice. This portrayal underscores the film's promotion of fairness and equality, aligning with an inclusive interpretation of Islam. Notably, non-Muslim characters in the film are not depicted as needing protection, challenging the historical notion of dhimmis, which refers to non-Muslims protected by a Muslim-majority nation. Osman, a character in the film, articulates this perspective by advocating for non-Muslim Malaysians to be recognized as equal citizens with rights and responsibilities within the nation-state.

The spirit of brotherhood

There are few scenes which portray the spirit of brotherhood in this film. However, due to the limitations of this study, two scenes are to be highlighted and to be explored from the Islamic perspectives.

Figure 3

The shot portrays the conversation between Tauke and Rahman comparing skin colour



The first scene in *Ola Bola* unfolds with Rahman and Tauke conversing on Rahman's veranda, reflecting on the current state of the Malaysian football team while awaiting dinner as shown in Figure 3. This intimate moment highlights their camaraderie and brotherly bond. The second scene delves into their personal connection, symbolized by nasi lemak, as Rahman remarks, "Kulit kita warna lain-lain, tapi kita sama-sama makan nasi lemak" ("Our skin colors may differ, but we all eat nasi lemak together"). Food, particularly nasi lemak, serves as a powerful symbol of Malaysian unity, transcending ethnic and religious boundaries. Just as the diverse ingredients of *nasi lemak* harmonize, Malaysians from various backgrounds come together. Moreover, Tauke points out Harry Mountain's physical differences, such as his brown hair and blue eyes, highlighting his foreignness. However, this observation stems from a lack of familiarity

with Harry as a person and as a coach. Interestingly, Tauke and Rahman bond over these differences, fostering a sense of "us versus them" mentality. This dichotomy may symbolize the divide between insiders who understand the Malaysian experience and outsiders, reminiscent of post-colonial identity struggles where Tauke and Rahman may resent the influence of colonial powers.

The second scene of *Ola Bola* illustrates a poignant brotherhood dynamic between Tauke and Muthu as portrayed in Figure 4. Following an accident involving Muthu's brothers, Muthu's father places blame on him, leaving Muthu feeling distraught. Tauke witnesses the familial turmoil between Muthu and his father, and later, he steps in to comfort Muthu. As Tauke drives Muthu in the dark, the song "Arena Cahaya" by Zee Avi plays in the background, with lyrics like "Walau dunia menjadi gelap gelita" ("Even if the world turns dark and dim"), adding to the emotional depth of the scene.

Figure 4

The moment when Tauke brings light to Muthu's most challenging period, accompanied by the calming melody of Zee Avi's "Arena Cahaya," which alleviates the emotional turmoil felt by the characters



Zee Avi's "Arena Cahaya" sets a melancholic tone following the emotional turmoil of the familial dispute. The song intensifies the mood while also underscoring the deep bond between Tauke and Muthu, which extends beyond their relationship on the field. This scene exemplifies the profound level of brotherhood they have cultivated. Metaphorically, as Tauke guides Muthu home and illuminates the road, their brotherly connection is symbolically "lightened," offering solace and reassurance amidst the darkness of their circumstances.

The theme of brotherhood depicted by Chiu in *Ola Bola* resonates with the Islamic perspective on the spirit of brotherhood within a multicultural society. Specifically, the relationships between Rahman and Tauke, and Tauke and Muthu, are resolved through dialogue, reflecting the concept of *taaruf* mentioned in Al-Hujurat verse 13 of the Quran. As Rahman and Tauke deepen their bond through commemoration, and Tauke supports Muthu during his family struggles, their relationships exemplify the principles of brotherhood emphasized in Islam. Chiu's portrayal of brotherhood in *Ola Bola* mirrors the spirit of camaraderie exhibited by the Ansar who welcomed the Muhajirin during the hijra, as promoted by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). This demonstrates the inclusivity of Islam in fostering brotherhood within a multicultural society. The lyrics of Zee Avi's song, "walau dunia menjadi gelap gelita, pegang erat penuh percaya, kepada mimpi kita" ("even if the world turns dark and dim, hold on tightly

with faith, to our dreams"), resonate with the spirit of the Muhajirin who left behind their possessions and lives in Mecca to fulfill the command of Allah and His Messenger, migrating to spread Islam. The challenges they faced were alleviated by the brotherly support of the Ansar who embraced them with open arms (Kaka Khel, 1982). In essence, Islam promotes the values of brotherhood, as depicted in Chiu's *Ola Bola*, demonstrating how the film reflects the principles of inclusive Islam. These principles have the potential to foster a united national identity, akin to the strong team spirit developed by the players in the film.

A shared identity and common goals

The scene depicting Malaysians jubilant over their victory against Korea illustrates a shared goal and collective identity among Malaysians. This scene transitions across various significant locations in the film, showcasing people at the stadium, the clothing company where Tauke's sister works, the funfair where Tauke is employed, the office where Ali works, and Rahman's house. In each setting, individuals are seen celebrating as a cohesive unit, expressing their desire for the success of the country's football team, *Harimau Malaya*. Chiu employs a parallel montage technique to convey the collective sentiment of Malaysians celebrating the victory. This technique captures similar reactions and emotions across different locations, creating a sense of continuity in the portrayal of Malaysians' jubilation. The celebration, enjoyed by individuals of diverse ethnicities, religions, and social classes, united by a common goal and shared identity, encapsulates my redefinition of national identity, *Bangsa Malaysia*, through the lens of an alternate narrative of Islam as proposed in the preceding chapter. Below are the shots summarizing the montage technique:

Figure 5

Malaysians jubilantly celebrating the victory outside the stadium, reflecting a shared sense of pride and unity in their national team's success.



Figure 6

Malaysians rejoicing amidst the festivities at the funfair, demonstrating a collective joy and camaraderie in celebrating the triumph of Harimau Malaya.



Figure 7

Depicting Tauke's family members exuberantly celebrating the victory, showcasing their shared excitement and support for Harimau Malaya's success.



Figure 8

Capturing the genuine enjoyment and elation of Malaysians in the aftermath of the victory, reflecting the widespread jubilation and sense of national pride.



Figure 9

The image depicts Ali's colleagues celebrating the victory in the office



The highlighted shots above, Figure, 5,6,7,8 and 9 depict Malaysians from diverse ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds joyfully celebrating the victory. Through a montage-style presentation, Chiu effectively conveys a sense of shared goals and identity among them, underscored by the significance of the song played during these scenes, "We Will Believe Again." The lyrics of the song are as follows:

“We will stand *Bersama* (together) through thick and thin, We have conquered doubt and disbelief, Now it’s time for love and hope to live, loud and proud and free, This is our new start, we have proved we are stronger than we *sangka* (expect), all that matters is the size of hearts, yes our hearts”

The lyrics echo the concept of common goals and shared identity through the repetition of the word 'we,' emphasizing togetherness and a collective sense of identity. Additionally, the lyrics serve as a reminder to Malaysians of their shared objectives: overcoming doubt and disbelief, living loudly, proudly, and freely, and always seeing each other as Malaysians, transcending ethnic and religious differences. Through Chiu's use of montage-like visuals coupled with the song, the film portrays the idea of Malaysia as a nation united by common goals and a shared identity.

The subsequent sequence that embodies the notion of collective objectives and communal identity is depicted through Eric's soliloquy, wherein he articulates that despite the linguistic diversity and disparate cultural backgrounds of the players, they coalesce in harmonizing their voices to sing a uniform anthem, symbolizing their unity and shared national identity.

Figure 10

Chiu employs a slow-motion technique during Eric's monologue, accompanied by his voice narrating his feelings at the moment. This technique enhances the emotional impact of the dialogue, emphasizing the significance of Eric's words.



As the camera pans slowly and deliberately, focusing on Tauke, Ali, Muthu, and the other players as shown in Figure 10, Eric's monologue vividly depicts the celebratory atmosphere following the victory over the Korean football team at the film's conclusion. Eric's nostalgic and empowering voiceover captures the emotions of the players, effectively illustrating Chiu's concept of embracing common goals and a shared united identity. Chiu skillfully coordinates the camerawork, cinematic techniques, and sound design to complement the theme I highlighted earlier, creating a harmonious and impactful portrayal of unity and celebration.

Chiu further underscores the concept of shared objectives and collective identity in the scene where the players embark on a helicopter journey following the completion of their military training. As

previously delineated, the training episode epitomizes the ethos of camaraderie through intimate portrayals of the players' countenances. Prior to transitioning to these intimate portrayals, however, Chiu captures the landscape through aerial perspectives in Figure 11 and 12, which resonate with the dialogue articulated by one of the accompanying soldiers. The soldier exclaims, "bawah tu, tanah air kita, yang kita pertahankan dengan darah, keringat dan air mata" ("down there, our homeland, which we defend with blood, sweat, and tears").

Figure 11

Chiu employs this shot to foreshadow the significance and spirit of common goals and shared identity, mirroring the sentiments expressed in the lyrics of the song that the players later sing in the helicopter.



Figure 12

This bird's eye view shot of the motherland, as depicted by Chiu, enhances the emotional resonance of the scene, reinforcing the themes of common goals and shared identity.



From the conversation, it can be deduced that these athletes are ready to fiercely compete and exert maximum effort on the field against their adversaries. Despite their diverse ethnic backgrounds and religious affiliations, the players collectively pursue identical objectives and uphold shared principles. They epitomize the notion of mutual objectives and communal identity, a concept delineated by Chiu through his adept utilization of camera techniques and the selection of music for this particular scene.

The openness with which Malaysians express their identity in the public sphere resonates with Modood's perspective on Muslim identity. Modood (2010) suggests that Muslims should explore existential questions such as "What does it mean to be Muslim?" and "What kind of Muslim am I?" ("Moderate Secularism"). This introspection can lead to a more nuanced and authentic projection of Muslim identity in the public sphere, demonstrating a commitment to and contestation of identity. Similarly, Chiu portrays Malaysian identity through the five highlighted scenes, reflecting a parallel set of existential questions for Malaysians: "What constitutes Malaysian identity?" and "In what manner do I identify as Malaysian?" Just as Modood advocates for Muslims to engage with their identity, Chiu's portrayal suggests that Malaysians are also grappling with questions of identity, contributing to a richer understanding of their national identity in the public sphere.

The scenes depicting common goals and identity in *Ola Bola* resonate with the principles of the Charter of Medina, which is considered one of the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. This charter aimed to establish an *Ummah Wahidah*, or a united community, comprising people of diverse backgrounds including Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Hashim Kamali, 1993). Through the portrayal of the protagonists and the picturesque Malaysian landscape, *Ola Bola* captures the spirit of *Ummah Wahidah* through the actions and interactions of the Malaysian national football team. What's striking is that these depictions are portrayed by characters of different ethnicities and religions, yet they embody an Islamic principle: the creation of *Ummah Wahidah* as outlined in the Charter of Medina, which is considered part of the sunnah left by the Prophet. This underscores how *Ola Bola* promotes common goals and shared identity as one of its central themes. Moreover, these themes indirectly reflect the principles espoused in the alternate and inclusive narration of Islam.

DISCUSSION

While *Ola Bola* may not be categorized as an Islamic film per se, it effectively communicates and portrays Islamic values through its nuances. As discussed in the literature review, *Bangsa Malaysia*, a term coined by Tun Dr. Mahathir, serves as a political identity aimed at uniting Malaysians. Dr. Mahathir emphasizes that *Bangsa Malaysia* adheres to the constitution and addresses socio-economic imbalances. However, Malaysian identity extends beyond political, constitutional, and socio-economic factors. The concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, as defined by Mahathir, may be perceived as rigid and superficial, confined within a box. Formation of identity not only depends on ethnicity, language, and culture but also stems from the religious factor, which this study advocates. In Malaysia, Islam is the official religion; hence, it should be part of the repertoire of building a united Malaysian identity. *Ola Bola* demonstrates the need for identity to be placed beyond rigid conservatism and for religion to be included in the discussion.

In this study, not only is *Ola Bola* reinterpreted from an Islamic perspective, but it also provides a redefined notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*. While the link and roles of Islam with national identity are not extensively discussed in this study, it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia. This serves as the primary motivation for the study, given its limitations. Through this examination, it becomes evident that Islamic values are effectively portrayed in Chiu's *Ola Bola*: the spirit of brotherhood, the advocacy for equality and fairness, and the promotion of a shared identity and common goals. As discussed, Islamic values and perspectives are not exclusive to Muslims but are inclusive for all Malaysians, regardless of their religious beliefs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research reinterprets *Ola Bola* from an Islamic perspective, illustrating how the film promotes principles of equality, brotherhood, and a shared national identity, thereby advocating for an inclusive Malaysian identity. Future research should explore the influence of Islamic values on other Malaysian films to deepen understanding of their role in national identity formation. Additionally, educators and policymakers should leverage films like *Ola Bola* to promote multiculturalism and unity, while further studies should examine the evolving relationship between national identity, religion, and multiculturalism in Malaysia.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by all authors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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