Being Papuan Boys: Children Subject Formation in Denias, Senandung Di Atas Awan (2006)
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Abstract

Children are often viewed as naïve figures having no political interest that therefore they are used to represent minority groups in Indonesian movies. Denias Senandung di Atas Awan is one of the films telling about the life of Papuan boys living in mountainous area close to nature. Along with its exoticized scenic pictures and traditional folks, this movie serves the struggle of those children in getting education believed as a way to a brighter future. Launched in Post New-Order Era, it becomes a new hope in term of bringing the peripheral ethnic into the centre of Indonesian culture through the screen, giving a chance for a wider Indonesian audience to know about Papuans. Being centralized, the representation of these children in the movies should help to meet that hope. By analyzing the multimodality of movie, this research is conducted. Aimed at exploring the operation of power in Indonesian ethnic-relation context, this article dismantles that through the analysis on the intersection of their identities of ethnicity, class and age, the Papuan boys' portrayals confirm that they become subject of asymmetric power relation in Indonesian centre-periphery construction. They are brought to the centre but racialized and not more than being a power display of the centre. In relation with the nation interest on uniting its people and geography, the Papuan boys become the subject of the nation project preparing them as ideal citizens formed in their school and family. Resistance exists but the process eventually keeps bringing these children into the position of conforming this nation interest.

Keywords: *Children, Subject Formation; Centre-Periphery Discourse; Film, Denias Senandung Di Atas Awan (2006)*

Introduction

Studying Papua is important, given its historical background in joining Indonesia which is different from other regions in the archipelago. In the politics of *Orde Baru*, Java was politically positioned as the center, and Papua, which is located in the eastern tip of Indonesia and other regions in Indonesia, in the peripheral position that must be controlled. This polarity is one of the impacts of the *Orde Baru*'s political policy, which Sen & Hill (2007: 110-111) wrote as *a Javanized Jakarta's cultural*

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and ideological centrality, which means *the conquest of the periphery by the center*. Culturally, the formation of the polarity of center and periphery also occurred in any popular cultural products of the *Orde Baru* era. In the world of cinema, in the interest of Indonesian unity, films should not discuss ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup issues (Sen & Hill, 2007: 141-146). In addition, tight surveillance on all community activities is also carried out. Jones (2013: 176) states that even the organization of artistic or cultural events must obtain permission from the authoritative.

The Reformation, marked by pluralism and a change in orientation and political order from centralized single to plural/many (Heryanto, 2008: 8, 20), ended the *Orde Baru* regime that emphasized a centralized system and ideology. Changes did not only occur in the political system but also in the artistic expression of the Indonesian people, which experienced many restrictions. The Reformation gave a wider possibility of narration to all parties, including minorities and marginalized groups who due to strict government control did not appear in Indonesian popular culture. The emergence of these formerly marginalized groups and how they appear in film media are interesting to study. *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* (2002), *Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006), *Kita Punya Bendera* (2008), *Laskar Pelangi* (2008), *Serdadu Kumbang* (2011), *Di Timur Matahari* (2011), and *Tanah Surga Katanya* (2012) are some of the films about ethnic groups in Indonesia produced during the post-Reformation era. Although these films talk about different ethnicities, they have the same patterns, namely using children films as the medium and having boys as the main characters. Similarly, *Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006), the object of study on Papua in this research, has those patterns.

Given this situation, the aims of this article is to dismantle how the Papuan children subjects are formed in the Indonesian center-periphery construction seen from the cinematic representations in *Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan*, a children movie about Papuan children launched to public in 2006.

Methods

This article discusses about how power relation are represented through film language. Different from the solely written or spoken texts, film language gives a greater possibility to learn multimodality since it involves several modes of communication in delivering messages. Multimodal critical discourse analysis is proposed by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001) that is used to analyze visual images such as advertisements, photos, movies, posters etc. This analysis is used to see texts that are not neutral in representing any identities. Critical discourse analysis uncovers any injustice, unfair and unequal phenomenon. Since language is not neutral entity, like its linguistic structural elements, language expresses ideological and historical power relations in its any written texts and talks. Critical discourse analysis mediates between texts and society through its interpretive and explanatory on the issues of power, domination, hegemony, ideology, class, gender, discrimination, interests, race, social structures over the texts it analyzes.

Those visual images are selected from the images that are widely-known that then being selected and imported to be the representation of certain groups. In multimodal discourse this process is called as *provenance* (Noviani, 2018). In other words, what the audience/spectator sees in movie is representation that is a construction, not a reflection of reality. Images and any modes of visual communication in movie is seen as semiotic resources that work together in making meanings. Their doing specific semiotic works in constructing meaning is analyzed. Kress & Leeuwen (2021) extends Halliday's language "metafunctions" into visual images and developed them into *representational meaning, interactive meaning,* and *compositional meaning* that can be used to analyze visual data, to find any hidden message behind them. In this research, film language that employ more than one mode of communication explain human relations producing meaning, that Turner (1999) formulate it as films as social practice.

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Data on film language and the characters' speeches related to Papuan boys' activities and social interactions are categorized in terms of the intersection of their age, ethnicities and gender identities. These data are analyzed on their structures of meaning (representational, interactive and compositional) according to the theory proposed by Kress and Leeuwen. From this meaning-making process, the asymmetrical power relation in the Papuan boy subject formation are revealed.

Result and Discussion

Center-periphery Discourse

The discourse of center and periphery places those with power in a dominant position, which therefore has the ability and facilities to control those in subordinate/weak positions. Before the Reformation, there had never been a movie produced about Papua. *Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006) is the second movie about Papua after *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* that was launched in 2000. Children's films were chosen as a medium to convey sensitive topics considering the wide gap in education, health and other infrastructure facilities between Papua and other regions, especially Java. Furthermore, since Papua's integration into the state of Republic of Indonesia, the center (the government) had been continuing in carrying out any political and military efforts to keep Papua under its sovereignty. So are the discourses produced in the Indonesian media and popular culture (Pekey, 2018: 98-118). Far before the declaration of Indonesian independence, the 1930 Dutch census dividing the population into sixteen ethnic groups (Suryadinata, Arifin, & Ananta, 2003) put essentialist notion on identification, that according to Anderson (2006: 166) 'made no room for multiple, politically "transvestite," blurred, or changing identifications'. After independence, Soekarno speech on Papua as a part of Indonesia's body and the establishment of Kodam XVII Cendrawasih on May 17 1963 intended for special operations four years before the Papuan people referendum show the interest of the dominant discourse over the Papua ((Taliawo, 2022). Furthermore, the representation of Papua in the media during *Orde Baru* is no less important to see how this ideological apparatus works in strengthening the dominant ideology in this ethnic minority issue. They are often compared to the animals they hunt, and are described as mountain people who wear *koteka* ((Duncan, 2001: 45-52). *Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan* was launched in 2006 in the midst of Reformation Era, that therefore it is valuable to find out the representation of center (Java) and the periphery (Papua) in it.

In *Denias Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006), the nature of Papua with *honai*-its traditional house, local animals, big rivers, forests, waterfalls and snowy mountains is the place where Denias lives and spends his time. Unfortunately, its beautiful scenery cannot prevent Denias from leaving his village to get an education in the city. Education becomes the representation of the central system and his desire to go to the city and study is also motivated by Javanese figures (Pak Guru and Maleo, a Kopassus army). These non-Papuans figures are narrated leaving this Papuan village.

Picture 1. Koteka ceremony takes place in a Papuan traditional village in the forest
Source: Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan (2006)

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Papuan people/traditional bodies in this film are often presented in medium and long shots to provide a spectacle of Papuan people living inseparable from nature. In picture 1, a long-shot scene is used to show to the viewers that the Papuan lives in traditional village near forest. The flock of people of the same skin-colour constructs *representational meaning* that they are Papuans, having different physical traits from the viewers of the movie. The *honai* house, traditional clothes, body and nature are positioned as identity markers that differentiate it from the cultural center. Exoticism is a real form of entertainment that is related to geographical issues, by contrasting the principles of normality of the audience and the abnormality of what is being watched. Exoticization is the result of a discursive process of symbolic material distance, that it works in the imagination: the viewer often never visits the area being watched. Exoticism is characterized by the asymmetry of power relationship (Staszak, 2020: 6), where the dominant parties have greater power which give them access and facilities to produce stereotypes which they consider normal. Papua is presented as exotic in the eyes of the dominant party and its presence in the midst of the dominant culture, in the form of a film, is a form of exhibition of power. As stated by Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin (2001: 95), "Exotics in the metropoles were a significant part of imperial displays of power...". In other words, this film is a form of viewing the power of the center over Papua as a periphery. Papua is a periphery that has adorable scenery but being left by the both the non-Papuans and Denias.

The assistance provided by non-Papuans is a form of infantilization which assumes that Papuans cannot help themselves. Bill Ascroft's concept of parent-child metaphor in describing the relationship between colonizers and their colonies: *They implied the same distinctions as those existing between metropolis and frontier: parents are more experienced, more important, more substantial, less brash than their offspring. Above all they are the origin and therefore claim the final authority in questions of taste and value* (Ashcroft et al., 2001:15) can be used to explain what happens in the center-periphery relationship of this film. Figures assisting the Papuans in getting medication, education, and jobs are represented by non-Papuans implying that Papuans cannot help themselves. Professional occupations namely teachers, soldiers and helicopter pilots are done by non-Papuans, while any trivial jobs like porters and house-servants are done by Papuans. This confirms the infantilization process happens in this movie.

Tribal chiefs as local powers are represented as powerless before the Javanese systems and figures. Their threat of curses, as a form of resistance to the school system, is presented powerless submitted to the interest of the dominant in this children's film. This shows the existence of homogenization practices, which according to Rae (2002: 2) were carried out because of economic interests, the accumulation of weapons in the early days of the state, as well as to centralize state administration. The cultural dimension also has an important position in upholding state sovereignty. In practice, this takes the form of marking what is considered as the outsider according to the state. It is done because state leaders need legitimacy to rule, so they create a single and strong political community and make the government a representation of that community. In the context Papua, the submissiveness of the local leader shows the process of centralizing state administration.

Papuan Boys Subject Formation

Papuan children live in the midst of a discourse that produces knowledge about their ethnic group as different, needing help and being subjugated by the power of the center. They are also formed as the figures who embody the foundation of the center-periphery discourse. Their subject formation occurs at the intersection of their age, gender and ethnicity identities. The genders of Papuan boys and Papuan girls are represented differently in *Denias Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006). Boys in are depicted as always engaging in physical activities in the open air, such as running and playing football. Papuan girls are not even given a presence in *Denias Senandung di Atas Awan*. The boys fill the screen with their physical activity. However, the Papuan boys in this film experience what Reeser calls racialized masculinity where masculinity is associated with race/ethnicity where primitive society is considered undeveloped (Reeser,

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2010: 160). Thus, their masculinity is also not as developed as western nations which are considered advanced. This is in line with what Said (1978: 207) said to a process of feminization where in the Orient (non-western colonies in South Asia and the Middle East) was created as the weak, irrational, non-martial "other" in contrast to a rational strong, martial European "self". Even though *Denias* was presented as a boy who was superior compared to his fellow tribesmen, he was never presented along with non-Papuan boys.

Picture 2. Obedient boys gather around and under the Merah-putih flag, the rebellious gets punishment
Source: Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan (2006)

In relation to the state, Papuan boys are described as school children. In the postcolonial context, education is one of the main types of technology in producing child subjects and in the colonial context, schools do not only form/produce child subjects but also produce colonized others in the school system in colonial culture (Nubla, 2014: 13; Wallace, 2008: 292). Wallace follows Foucault's analysis in Discipline and Punishment, that schools provide a 'technology of power' that calls children subject to emerge (just as criminal subjects are produced by prisons, and insane subjects are produced by mental hospitals), so child subjects are produced by schools. One of the themes surrounding children as Others is their ability to be educated and assimilated ((Nubla, 2014: 52). In long-shot, picture 2 shows the poor condition of the emergency school where Denias and his friends study every day. Discipline and punishment is connected with the nationalism represented by the Indonesian flag, that discipline and obedience are favorable to the country. Wallace in (Lawson & Tiffin, 2002: 175) said that the main focus of schools and education is to provide a civilizing process for colonized peoples. One way of civilizing the colonized is to teach language mastery that is standardized by the state ((Perunovic, 1991: 41). According to Leigh, 1999: 37), the function of education in Indonesia serves a primarily political function. Those are constantly asserting and structurally assisting in the maintenance of the unity of the nation-state.

Picture 3. Papuan boys learn about male-sovereignty from the picture of the national hero
Source: Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan (2006)

School is also a place where Papuan children learn about male-sovereignty in the process of the struggle for independence through heroic stories that male heroes are obliged to defend the Mother Earth. This Mother Earth figure of speech is widely used to describe the state as a heterosexual family entity (Banerje, 2003: 168; Peterson, 1998: 44). Although female national heroes have been presented in the national narrative as fighters against invaders or fighters for educational opportunities in Indonesia's

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history of national struggle (Sunindyo, 1998: 2), nation remains the male's possession. Tamar Mayer (2000: 1) states that *despite its rhetoric of equality for all who take part in the "national project," the nation remains, like other feminized entities—emphatically, historically and globally—the property of men.* In *Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006), not even a photo of the female hero can be found on the school walls. In a medium shot that shows the activity of the actors in the frame, Picture 3 shows the images of national heroes who come from Papua (Frans Kasaepo and Marthen Indey) that are put on the school walls. The display of images of Indonesian national heroes on the walls of an emergency schools in the mountainous interior of Papua, along with the Geography subject on Indonesian map in the blackboard taught by Maleo-a Kopassus soldier, is intended to build unity over the hierarchy of national identity and ethnic identity of Papuan children that they are part of the Indonesian state. On the other hand, this confirms the ongoing gender hierarchy that men are the ones who play a role in defending the country. In this movie, this is emphasized by the role of mothers who care for and maintain the health of their children who will later become leaders of their communities. They have an important role in caring for and instilling important values in their sons, but are omitted or positioned as weak: *Denias'* mother is depicted as having died in a *Honai* fire.

Papuan children become the representation/embodiment of this nation discourse. In their age as children they have relationship with their fellow children and adults around them, both with the same or different gender and ethnicity identities. From the intersection of these identities, the power relations that shape the subject of Papuan children are known. Children who are in elementary school age are described as living in their tribal community, in an imagined community (Ben Anderson, 2006: 6) named Indonesia. The community where these children live and go to school has an important role in shaping these children into the subjects desired by the state.

In term of children movie as the media, it relates to a common assumption that children are innocent, fragile, passive and potential victims in all situations. Even Martins (2011: 435) mentions "innocence as one of the main synonyms of childhood". Based on this principle, the use of children's films and child characters in narrating Papua, which has a special history in the process of joining Indonesia, is a strategy to criticize as well as to avoid possible political threats received because it uses child figures considered in having no political tendencies (Wibawa, 2018: 72-73). On the other hand, children are also portrayed as entities that are dependent on their parents and cannot yet rationalize as adults, as the relationship between colonializing and their colonized countries. The colonial power relation in the imperial discourse divides two opposing identities, namely black skin and white skin. The former is positioned as primitive and irrational, where evil is part of nature and will forever be dependent on white countries (Van Wormer, K., & Juby, 2016). If this logic is brought into the Indonesian context, Java is positioned as the mainstream and therefore dominant, and Papua as marginal is on the periphery of the mainstream.

Picture 4. Maleo is teaching Denias about Indonesian map
Picture 5. Weekly Flag ceremony on Monday in Indonesian schools
Picture 6. Military Surveillance
Source: Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan (2006)

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Picture 4, 5 and 6 clearly show the interest of the center to keep the Papuan loyal to Indonesia. Picture 4 shot Maleo clearly telling us that the knowledge about *Where the Papuans live* is told by a non-Papuan Kopassus soldier, who also plays role as the guardian of the state (picture 6). Through schooling, the Papuan children are constructed to be an idealized citizen (discipline, knowing that they are part of Indonesia, and obedient). Picture 6 in its aerial shot shooting a soldier's shoe and his gun above the snowy peak of Jaya Wijaya mountain represent center's surveillance over Papua.

Therefore, the emergence and recognition of minority/marginalized groups in popular media spaces must be received critically. The film *Denias, Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006) is a part of the site where the center and periphery struggle and contest, to see whether the child subjects in them voice themselves as subjects with agency, or are entirely objects of the existing dominant discourse. Rocha (2014: 2) in *Can Children Speak in Film?* states that children in commercial films are objects of the spectatorial gaze and perform the story according to the film script whereas adults control the storyline, shooting, editing, and distribution of the film. As a site for the production of discourse about Papua, this film produces knowledge about Papua through the representation of nature and Papuans in it.

Globally, dynamic and fluid shifts in the relationship between race and representation have also characterized film culture since the 1980s. In the British context, issues of cultural difference, identity and otherness, encapsulated in the word ethnicity, marked all the debates caused by these shifts and developments (Julien & Mercer, 1988: 452). Meanwhile, 1980s and 1990s America was also characterized by the emergence of independent films made by black directors into mainstream cinema. Race emerged as an important theme that was widely discussed during these times (Hall, 2013: 245-246). All this phenomenon shows that there are shift and dynamic in way world perceives the ethnic issues.

Conclusion

The creation of Papuan boy characters in this film is inseparable from the Indonesian context that underwent a radical shift from the strong and authoritarian New Order into Reform Era giving a wide chance for the marginal to emerge. However, it is important to interrogate the way they are represented in this children movie. Among the wave of minorities written or told in Post-Reform Indonesian popular culture, the depiction of Papuan children is still unattainably far from being recognized equal with other ethnicities in Indonesia. They are narrated but the narration only confirms their backwardness.

The findings of this research reveal that the representations of Papuan and Javanese bodies and landscapes are depicted in stark contrast. Java is portrayed as a locus of material comfort and modernity, while Papua is characterized as a region associated with both adored but neglected nature. Papuan children, living in the communities, are central to the production of the aforementioned knowledge, embodying the center-periphery discourse. The intersection of their gender, ethnicity, and age identities reveals that, despite being the dominant gender, Papuan boys experience racialized masculinity. Adult role models in these narratives are predominantly non-Papuans, further reinforcing this marginalization. In terms of national identity, Papuan children are shaped as subjects of the national project through the school and family systems, which instill obedience as a prerequisite for being ideal citizens. This dynamic illustrates the state's power over the bodies of Papuan children. The control mechanism exerted through school and family persists despite these films being produced post-Reformation. Those all show that children, especially boys, along with their being prepared to be the future of their people become the site of ideological struggles between the center and the periphery.

In spite of being central characters of the story, these Papuan boys remained peripheral. In the acquaintance with children from the city or from different ethnic background they are marginalized. They are present but being presented as children from a backward ethnic group subordinated to all represented as development. They need help from non-Papuan adults to reach the education, a way of attaining that

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development. The film employs the spirit in taking the peripheral or minority into the centre after the crumbling down New Order era. Unfortunately, the spirit was only the way to introduce and to display the exotic other in Indonesian popular culture. In other words, the Papuan boys remained objectified. From the intersection of their multiple identities. They were kept being racialized in the meantime they were formed to be idealized future citizens of the nation,

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