

Singapore International Film Festival

An interview with Bernice Chauly—Malaysian filmmaker

Peter Stavropoulos, Richard Phillips
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Malaysian-based film director and writer Bernice Chauly screened two films at last month's Singapore International Film Festival: *Semangat Insan—Masters of Tradition*, a documentary on traditional Malaysian art forms, and *Bakun or the Dam*, a short film about the Bakun dam project in Sarawak (North Borneo).

Chauly, who is currently working on a documentary about street people in Kuala Lumpur, spoke to us about the political situation in Malaysia and *Bakun or the Dam*, which she made in 1995 about the plight of the Kayan people, who were forced from their homelands to make way for the Bakun Hydroelectric Corporation dam.

The scheme, an \$8 billion joint venture involving Malaysia, Asea Brown Boveri and CBPO, a Brazilian company, was to be the largest dam in South East Asia, flooding more than 70,000 hectares and forcing 10,000 Kayan natives from their traditional lands.

The government report into the project, which has devastated the area, was never translated into Malay let alone the native language, and never discussed with the local people. According to *Bakun or the Dam*, rainforest logging of the area was expected to earn more than \$US50 million for those involved in the project. The two largest shareholders of Ekran Berhad, the principal Malay company in the joint venture, were the Sarawak chief minister's sons.

Although the project was “delayed indefinitely” following an announcement by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir in September 1997, the local native population was relocated to an area one third of the size of their previous lands, causing major food shortages and health problems.

Bakun was one of several major projects shelved by the Malaysian government during the economic crisis in Asia in 1997. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, sections of Malaysian big business and some opposition parties opposed the Bakun dam at this time, not out of concern for the Kayan natives but because of nervousness over the profitability of the project and Malaysia's economic viability.

Peter Stavropoulos: Could you provide some background on *Bakun or the Dam* and other films you have made?

Bernice Chauly: The first film I made was in 1994 and was shot on 35mm. It was an adaptation of a short story that I wrote a while ago about child sexual abuse. The film dealt with this in a non-narrative way, through the eyes of a child.

In 1995 I was commissioned by the Malaysian chapter of Friends of the Earth to shoot a documentary in the Bakun area of Sarawak, where the dam was being built. This was my second film and it was shot on video. Friends of the Earth knew I was interested in the issue and had

empathy with the people of Sarawak.

In 1998 I conceptualised a series about masters of Malaysia's folk art—art forms that are dying out. We took two years to shoot and edit that series. It is six episodes and we have shown three of these episodes here at the festival. So with the Bakun documentary, the short film and the series on Malaysian folk art I've made eight films altogether. I also write plays, which have a strong social content.

PS: What has happened in Sarawak since you made your documentary?

BC: Horrendous things. During the economic crisis in 1997-98 the project was scaled back a lot—by a couple of million ringit—but logging has taken place and all 10,000 natives have been relocated to an area a third of the size of Bakun. I have heard from an NGO [non-government organisation] that went there on a fact-finding mission that the natives are at the point of starvation because there is not enough land, there are tribal conflicts and they have to pay for the long houses that the government promised them. They have been conned again. This is a common problem that confronts the native people in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, in Kalantan, the fundamentalist Islamic party has taken over and banned all art forms—including the very old art forms. As a result some practitioners of these forms have little avenue of expressing themselves or performing. By documenting this I am also trying to preserve this traditional art. The danger is that once the last masters of these art forms die the knowledge will be lost.

PS: Did the Bakun villagers receive compensation when they were relocated?

BC: They received compensation, but all of it has been tied up in trust or handed to a middleman who is supposed to give it to the natives. Yes, at the end of the day they get the compensation but it goes back to the government because they have to pay for their long houses and their electricity. It is a very bad situation.

The dam has not been built, but everything is very secretive and nobody knows what is going on. You are not allowed in unless you are directly involved in the project. The NGO that went there a year ago only went to the resettlement areas. They have started clearing, diverted the river and laid cables and done a lot of groundwork.

It is a massive cutback from the original plan but there are a lot of questions that haven't been answered. The man behind Ekran Berhad has been heavily compensated for the money he put in by the Malaysian government. Why have they done this? He was already making money from the timber.

PS: The film reveals that two of the project's main shareholders were

the sons of Sarawak's chief minister. Have there been any other revelations?

BC: Not as far as I know. There is no publicity anymore about the Bakun case, unless you go into environmental websites that still talk about the issue. The press is not allowed into the area and so it is very difficult to monitor the situation. The reports I've heard are all very negative but as you would realise the whole thing has been very hush-hush. This is not unusual in Malaysia. At the moment I am working on another project about a dam to be built outside Kuala Lumpur. This is rife with corruption—from top to bottom.

PS: Apart from Singapore, where else has your film been screened?

BC: It was screened at the Bakun conference in 1995 in Malaysia. This was an international conference of NGOs against the project. I believe it has also been screened in Europe, on Swedish television and the BBC. One of the tenderers for the project was a Swedish company.

PS: What comments do you have about the trial of former deputy prime minister Anwar?

BC: Oh god, this is a complete farce. Recently we had a former deputy home minister admit that the allegations against Anwar were slanderous. This was the first time that a minister had made a statement like this. I think the whole thing is a complete farce. Mahathir wanted Anwar out and wanted to humiliate him and his entire family.

Many people have stopped reading the newspapers and if they want real news they go to the Internet. Although people don't take to the streets as much as they used to when Anwar was arrested there is a strong feeling that there has to be a change. Malaysians know that what Mahathir is doing in this trial is wrong. This is indicated in the last election when UMNO [United Malays National Organisation] lost so badly. Mahathir has split the Malay vote in half and now many Malaysians have voted for PAS, the fundamentalist party, which is a real problem.

Richard Phillips: Is Anwar a real alternative to the Mahathir government—after all his policies are in line with the IMF and the demands of the World Bank? This is something Mahathir uses to claim that he is defending Malaysia from control by the international banks.

BC: This is true. Anwar is a player in all this as well—right up until the very end when he suddenly turned. He was appearing with Mahathir at national day celebrations and so on. But when someone like this is beaten up by the chief of police, not given a fair trial or not even let out on bail then something is seriously wrong and this has made people very angry. To have the audacity to say that Anwar punched himself—what kind of prime minister makes a statement like that?

Anwar has said there is no transparency in the Malaysian government and this is true. It can basically do anything and is not accountable. In fact all sorts of things are taking place in Malaysia. The amount of environmental devastation in the country is incredible. There are a number of us talking about forming a green party or something like it to take up these questions. These issues have to be addressed and the only way to do it is at a political level. Nobody really takes any notice of the NGOs.

PS: What are conditions like for independent filmmakers in Malaysia?

BC: Very, very bad. It is appalling. A lot of the funding that comes from the government's film body goes to established commercial filmmakers, which gives very little opportunity to emerging, new and independent filmmakers. People like myself have to go round and get

private funding, look for investors, and do all that kind of work on our own. It is very difficult and so good films are not getting made. Someone has just made an independent film recently and they managed to raise about \$2 million from private funding. This is a commercial film.

I think U-Wei Bin Hajisaari, a Malaysian filmmaker, is probably the most successful independent filmmaker. By independent I mean that he does not rely on local funding but is able to get some foreign funds.

PS: What sort of censorship exists in Malaysia?

BC: Two newspapers were banned recently or at least one has had its circulation cutback from a weekly to a bimonthly and another banned completely. There is no freedom of the press in Malaysia.

At the moment the government does not allow sex, religion or politics at all. Unless, that is, you are part of a very elite group of artists. They are able to do satire, which is accepted because most people don't understand it anyway. It is a very elitist thing. The Instant Café Theatre Company has been around for about 10 years and they do political satire. They have even performed for Mahathir and get away with it because they don't reach out to the masses. You are talking about a very, very small group of people. This is how it works.

My documentary on Bakun would never be shown on national television. There is a lot of fear and self-censorship around. I passed it to a friend who wanted to enter it in a film festival and then pulled out at the last minute because he was concerned about the reaction of the authorities. Of course this is changing somewhat because of the Anwar issue and people, particularly young people, are not as scared as before. They are willing to put themselves on the line.

RP: There has been a large expansion of the working class in South East Asia over the last two decades and yet there are few films dealing with this. Could you comment?

BC: There are different ways of looking at this. I am working on a documentary that will examine the situation facing immigrants to Malaysia but this doesn't really answer your question. I'm not sure why filmmakers are not dealing with these issues. Certainly the gap between rich and poor in KL [Kuala Lumpur] is incredible and there are many stories could be told. A certain educated minority can talk about these things but not many people want to address these issues because it doesn't make money.

The main films produced in Malaysia are commercial productions—romances, stories about models becoming singers and actresses—this kind of thing. It is really strange. To some extent people are scared about what they can produce and whether it will be banned or even whether they will be arrested. This is the reality in Malaysia.

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