Television consumption and the construction of hybrid identity among the female Javanese descendants in Malaysia

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Abstract
This ethnographic research examines how female Javanese descendants in the small village of Sabak Bernam, Malaysia negotiate their identity through television consumption. Living in Malaysia for many years, their presence and cultural identity are elaborately questioned in the debate of cultural products ownership between Malaysia and Indonesia. It can be argued that the Javanese descendant’s communities in Malaysia are too complex to define in terms of identity and self-images. For example, while our respondents in this research persistently maintain their Javanese identity and customs, they also strongly embrace the local Malay conformity. Based on the preliminary findings, this research reveals that the female Javanese descendants in Malaysia engage with devotional and democratic viewing to produce the sense of reflexive identity and interpretive identity practices in relation to their hybrid identity construction. Growing up as Javanese, Malays and Malaysians, their identity formation contribute to the Southeast Asian literatures of ethnic identity debate and television culture in the transnational contexts.

Key words: Television consumption, identity, hybrid identity, Javanese migrants, devotional viewing, interpretive identity practices

Introduction
The purpose of this research is to examine how female Javanese descendants in the village of Selangor negotiate with identity construction project in which questions of being either Malay or Javanese is the focal point of their everyday life with the coexistence of television texts. The Javanese descendants in Malaysia are the offspring of the Javanese migrants from Indonesia who opened early settlement at the state. They have been living in the shade of the Malay populace where they can enjoy all the status and privileges granted to the indigenous Malays. According to Ong (1990), the Malaysians of Javanese descent are among the descendants of the Indonesian original ethnic groups that make up the Malay population in contemporary Malaysia. They are considered as Malays but deep down in their heart they still feel themselves belonging to the Javanese community which is rooted in Indonesia. Nevertheless, as they grow up in Malaysia and are exposed to the ways of living through social interaction as well as popular media such as television, they become accustomed to the living situation in the country. This evokes a revealing question on how do they position themselves in the midst of cultural conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia.

From 2007 to 2012, there is a significant number of cultural issues between Malaysia and Indonesia pertaining to exclusive ownership of cultural products. For example, Indonesian authorities accused Malaysia of "stealing" Indonesian cultural products. The latest of such issues is the misunderstanding of the attempt by the Ministry of Information, Communications and Cultural Heritage of Malaysia to record the origins of North Sumatra's traditional Tortor dance and musical instrument, Gondang Sambilan (nine drums) under Section 67 of the National Heritage Act 2005 (The Jakarta Post, 2012). Tortor dance and Gondang Sambilan are cultural heritage of the Maindailing ethnic group who come originally from North Sumatera, Indonesia, and have settled down for centuries in Malaysia. Similar to other ethnic groups who come from Indonesia, the Mandailing communities have maintained their cultural traditions in the host country of Malaysia. Hence, the attempt to record the Tortor dance and Gondang Sambilan is considered necessary to acknowledge the traditions as well as the Mandailing society as part of Malaysia's national heritage (The Jakarta Globe, 2012). Along with this issue, Barongan, the traditional dance preserved by the descendants of Javanese migrants in Johor, has
previously been noted by Indonesian authorities as a copycat version of Indonesia's *Reog Ponorogo* (*Harian Metro*, 2007).

Such issues were largely covered by the media in Malaysia and Indonesia, manifesting in the reaction from the public and parliament members in both countries. While the people in Indonesia persistently claimed self-ownership of the contentious cultural elements, the Malaysian public believed that both countries inherited the same cultural commodities due to the similarity of cultural root. Millions of Indonesians have migrated to Malaysia since the dawn of the Malay Archipelago. With their movement, they brought along their culture to be later maintained in their new settlements. Historically, Indonesian migrants have become a major contribution to the diversity of Malay ethnicity in the Malaysian Peninsula (*Hirschman*, 1982). The similarity in culture and language allows cross-cultural marriage and acculturation which emerged into new identities such as *Melayu-Jawa, Melayu-Bugis, Melayu-Minang* and so forth.

The emergence of new sub-ethnicities occurs due to some potential factors. A myriad of researches in anthropology and history have shown that the construction of ethnic identity in diaspora has strong connection with the political, economic and social power in the host country (*Brodwin*, 2003; *Winland*, 2002; *Gordon and Anderson*, 1999; *Brown*, 1998; and *Orser*, 1998). All of these scholars look into the aspects of the social interaction among the society members. Through this paper, we argue that television narratives which exist in the midst of society play a significant role in the construction of a new, distinct form of identity. As *Lila Abu-Lughod* points out, television exists “as a ubiquitous presence in the lives and imaginaries of people in the contemporary worlds” (1997: 110). For this reason, television audience are capable of producing imagination about spatial experiences, which provide them with social knowledge, only by tuning to the television sets at their homes (*Gillespie*, 1995).

With the help of rising culture flow in the age of globalization, meaningful information from television significantly assists the community members to understand proportional representation of their world in a better order. Along with entertainment, narratives from movies, dramas, and other television programmes can help people to construct their identities and strengthen their awareness continuously to fill in the spiritual emptiness that people usually experience in the process of finding their identity. This conceptual notion of identity construction through television cultural texts applies in particular diaspora communities across the globe, especially in a society that has strong interest in transnational contents from their land of origin. In this brief paper, we are presenting the audience ethnography of the Javanese descendants living in Malaysia who are avid television viewers in which *Sinetron*—Indonesian produced soap operas—becomes the site of imagining the sense of origin.

It must be noted here that the term “Javanese descendants” will be used throughout this paper because the notion of ethnicity is somewhat political in usage as Indonesia and Malaysia have different understanding over the meaning (*Tirtosudarmo*, 2005). In previous study, *Miyazaki* (2000: 76) used the term “Javanese-Malays”, which refers to Malaysians with legal status as Malay-Malaysian but have retained a strong consciousness of their Javanese origins. In Malaysia, Javanese is considered as a sub-ethnic group within the Malay society while in Indonesia, Javanese and Malay are entirely distinct ethnicities that make up the country’s ethnic diversity (*Sekimoto*, 1988). Moreover, the Malay communities in Malaysia—including those of the Javanese origin—are generally recognised to be associated with professing Islam as their religion (*Ong*, 1990). The Javanese in Indonesia, on the contrary, are not entirely practicing Muslims and even a significant number of those who are Muslims are still embedded to traditional Javanese beliefs which are heavily influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist culture from India (*Conners*, 2008). Nevertheless, this research will not discuss ethnicity in a single conventional sense; instead it is used to explain the ethnic identity in the context of identity construction.

**Research Methodology**

This paper is a preliminary report on an on-going ethnographic work conducted at Kampung Parit Tujuh Baroh, district of Sabak Bernam, northwest Selangor, which is located 120 kilometres away
from the capital city Kuala Lumpur. The selection of Kampung Parit Tujuh Baroh as the research site is due to several reasons. First, like many other Javanese villages in the state of Selangor, one of the prominent features of Kampung Parit Tujuh Baroh is that the Javanese descendants make up the majority of the population. The Javanese community in the village and in Selangor generally, are considered as the successful descendants of the Javanese migrants who come from Central and Eastern Java (Sekimoto, 1988). They have assimilated into the Malay society but they keep strong attachment to their Javanese culture and identity, though it is not as strong as their counterparts in Johor, the southern state of Malaysia (see Khazin and Bohari, 1980).

The research began in early April 2013 which used one-on-one interviews and intensive participant observation as the data collecting instruments. A group of ten female Javanese descendants, aged 43 to 71, from the second generation of Javanese pioneer settlers in the village were selected through snowball sampling (Lindlof, 1995). These ten respondents are a purposive sample that meets two specific criteria: women of the second generation of the Javanese migrants and heavy television viewers. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2000), a purposive sample is a group of research subjects that are chosen based on specific characteristics whereby those who fail to meet the criteria are taken out. We randomly selected the first informant who then referred us to some of her friends were considered suitable to be our respondents. Some of her friends also recommended some other possible informants to be included in our snowball sampling. As suggested by Lindlof (1995), snowball sampling is one of the strategic samplings in qualitative research which allows the researcher to select participants based on the recommendation of his/her initial respondent in which this recommended respondent, in turn, refers to another, and so forth. As women are recognisably perceived as heavy viewers due to their domestic attachment (Press, 1991; Honeyford, 1980), we select them as the subject of this research. However, we would not debate their gender roles in relation to the male counterparts. We choose respondents from the second generation of the Javanese migrants in the village, assuming that they have a strong association with their ancestor’s culture. As Itzigsohn (2000) notes, earlier generations of immigrants usually remain attached to the values, practices, and institutions of their ancestry. For this concern, we are able to discover more complex negotiation of identity construction where cultural milieu and television texts interweave in interpretive space. As we mention television texts, it should be noted that we do not talk about specific television genres in the interview sessions; instead we let the respondents tell everything about their interpretation of the news, soaps, talk shows, reality programmes, etc. in tandem with the prepared questions.

We conducted informal interviews in our respondents’ house by having casual conversations to allow the respondents to comfortably speak about their everyday life. Informal interviews are instrumental in ethnographic work “in discovering what people think and how one person’s perception compares with another’s” (Fetterman, 2010: 41), to acquire rich data. This strategy is also good to establish and maintain a healthy relationship with the respondents. We also did informal interviews during participant observation in which we joined in the respondents’ television viewing and other community programmes that they are involved in. We were fortunate enough to do our fieldwork during the peak of Malaysia’s 13th General Election where we are able to observe our respondents’ involvement in civic participation.

Participant observation in anthropology research usually requires prolonged stay with the people under study but this does not apply in media ethnography due to the researchers’ personal and community knowledge. Alasuutari (1999: 8) describes that media ethnographers have possessed Clifford Geertz’s (1983) “local knowledge”, that gives them a clear picture about the practice of certain regulations and discourses in a particular site they are observing, which further enables the researchers to generate questions of self-reflection. As one of us belongs ethically—though not geopolitically—to the Javanese community, and thus knows how to speak Javanese, we have the advantages to gain access to the people and the culture. Apparently, our respondents spoke in mixed language of Malay and Javanese during the interview sessions and speak in full Javanese in their daily conversations. Having local knowledge such as knowing the Javanese language benefits us in many ways, particularly in shortening the period of study, as we do not have to learn a language like most of
anthropology ethnographers do. However, as the researchers are also part of the study, we have to deal with subjectivity and self-reflexivity. In fact, qualitative approaches such as ethnography have always stimulated researcher’s narratives of subjectivity with simple confessional, an engagement with emotions and unconscious processes (Walkerdine at al., 2002).

**Television and hybrid identity construction**

The role of media in constructing identity has become the key point of cultural studies ever since the golden age of printing media. Marie Gillespie agrees with the assertion that “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) was once influenced by “print capitalism” (Gillespie, 1995: 11). Newspaper readers can take the image of their communion members by making sense of the textual imagined world. In the age of globalisation, television has emerged as a powerful resource that provides images, language and symbols of distant locations which people can perceive to redefine, constitute, construct and reconstruct their identity. As Thompson (1995) states, people utilise the messages and meanings from television and absorb them into their everyday lives to make sense of themselves as situated in time and space. While interacting with television texts, people produce meanings that intertwine in the process of negotiation with identity construction. In point of fact, identity is never fixed and it is constantly redefined, reconstructed through time and space. Stuart Hall suggests that identity must be interpreted as “a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (1990: 222).

The notion of representation interlinks meaning and language to culture (Hall, 1997). People understand the world around them by contemplating symbols, language and images that represent the culture and the elements within its boundaries. In this sense, television as a cultural resource which provides images of spatial experiences appears to be an appropriate site of negotiating with representation of self. In the process of negotiating with self representation, society members do not necessarily need simultaneous spatial co-presence. They can imaginatively draw experiences of their lives and the others’ only by tuning to the television sets in their homes. With the help of globalisation that makes cultural boundaries invisible, television presents ideas, values and knowledge from distinct locations and reinforces them into everyday life. As ideas, values and knowledge come from varied places and interweave in a shared cultural space, they undergo processes of “hybridization” (McGrew, 1992, in Gillespie, 1995: 4).

Hybridization means the process of articulation of baffling alikeness and banal divergence, which provides a space of negotiation of culture formation, which is neither assimilation nor collaboration (Bhabha, 1996). In his previous study, Bhabha (1994) uses the term “hybridity” to describe a discourse upon an “in-between” space in which “third image” is constructed in an attempt to offset hegemony interference. Such alternative space becomes a conducive environment for constituting hybrid identity. However, hybrid identity is not always the result of the negotiation of minority groups in countering hegemony values. Taking Japan as an example, Iwabuchi (1998: 71) points out that the Japanese do not exercise hybridity but hybridism which means “a discourse in which the practice of Japanese strategic assimilation of the foreign is historically associated with a particular image of the Japanese nation: Japan as a great assimilator”. In this sense, Japanese acts as a “sponge” which constantly absorbs foreign influences while maintaining their origin. Hybrid identity formation has always been associated with transnationalism and social interaction within diasporic communities (Barker, 1997; Gillespie, 1995, 1989; Gilroy, 1987), which is not necessarily occurring in a marginalised society. Brown (1998) discovers black communities in Liverpool appear to exert a class privilege and are highly respected as they display the same qualities as those images shown in Hollywood movies though they are distinctive from those of black Americans. Similarly, the Javanese community in Malaysia is by no means a subaltern group as their ethnicity is instrumentally categorised as Malay, the predominant ethnic group in the country which have feasible accesses to political and economic status and privileges (Sekimoto, 1988). Some of the community members even become Members of the Malaysian Parliament.

Gillespie (1995) examines how young Punjabis Londoners produce meanings about their own youth culture and their inherited cultures in the midst of co-presence of various cultures at Southall in
relation to their media consumption. These young diasporic society members, as Gillespie discovers, engage in textual negotiation by which they reflect on their awareness of cultural differences to imagine a complex metaphor of their social world. They interpret Bollywood images depicted in Video Cassette Recordings and western representation in British television broadcasting to redefine their collective identity as well as to acknowledge the essence of “others”. It is obvious that transnational and local contents have influenced the young Punjabis in Southall to maintain the family culture and at the same time to observe the social change in relation to their identity construction.

Gillespie’s study shows that young people appropriate the messages and meanings of television to constitute their identity. Television makes a range of choices of symbolic identification available and instrumental for its viewers in finding role models. The consumption of “sacred” soaps and “western” soaps significantly affects their commitment to religious and cultural traditions as well as to social participation. Peter Brook’s stage adaptation of Mahabharata on Channel 4 and Doordarshan’s 91-part serialised version of Mahabharata on BBC2 were among the “sacred” soaps that a family in Southall watched on regular basis (Gillespie, 1995: 87-88). However, this consumption of religious contents has been merely a part of family watching in which young people participate due to their parents’ encouragement and not by their own accord. On the contrary, the Southall Punjabi youth regularly watched Neighbours and dissolved into the story that makes them feel to belong to a wider youth culture shaped by the soap. In this matter, “devotional viewing” (Gillespie, 1999: 95) seems less significant for young people in Southall construct their own youth identity. Gillespie (2005) finds that enforcement of religious values has significant influences in the construction of identity as it encourages people to maintain religious and cultural traditions as well as obedience and loyalty to family. A review work on youth and religion by Pearce (2012) finds that religious identity cannot be separated from other identities. It is a common believe that the young see religious matters less as important as older generations.

While Gillespie’s findings suggest that self-narration of young people in Southall is dominated by the images of youth culture depicted on television soaps, this research looks at different aspects of life of older generations. As part of the second generation of the Javanese settlers, the female Javanese descendants in Malaysia understand their everyday culture in different perspectives as their younger counterparts. They remain embedded to most of the Javanese customs and wisdoms which influence their thoughts about their identity. Furthermore, as part of the rural Malay community, their strong attachment to Malay and Islamic norms becomes an integral part in the process of negotiating with multiple identities. According to his qualitative analysis of prominent Malay novels from the early independent era of Malaysia, David J. Banks (1990) observes that rural Malays make judgement over the political system in the country based on their understanding about Islam and shared Islamic practices among the Muslims. This view gives assumptive picture about how female Javanese descendants interpret social phenomena in conjunction with identity construction.

Identity, reflexive identity and interpretive identity practices
According to a popular notion, identity is always in process and constructed within representation (Hall, 1990). As Abu-Lughod (1997) argues, people tend to interpret the messages from television based on their socio-spatial experiences. In the Malaysian contexts, the discourses about identity have significant associations with ethnic groups or social classes where state, capital and global interference have come in between. Zawawi Ibrahim (1996) calls this notion as “mediating identities” which means that identity is not taken as something inherited from previous generations to younger generations but rather is reconstructed from time to time through social transformations determined by the government. As Shamsul (1996) suggests, the study of identity formation should be seen in what he calls a “two social realities” context. Identity is generated from the “authority-defined” social reality which is determined by the regime truth of the country to be observed by the people and the “everyday-defined” social reality which comes from people’s experiences on a daily basis (Shamsul, 1996: 477). The latter co-exists with the former for a certain period of time.

Identity is frequently perceived as embedded to either racial or national locales. In the debates of Malaysian national identity, cultural aspects of bumiputeras (sons of soil) have been dominantly
privileged as the core of national identity while the other ethnic group’s traditions are still recognized considerably. This construction of identity is discussed in a larger scale which cultural aspects of different races are taken into consideration. Identity formation, however, is not only cultural-centred but is also somehow economic-oriented. Taking the emergence of Malayu Baru as an instance, the formation of this elite Malay middle class under the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) was an authority-defined social construction (Abdul Rahman Embong, 1996). The policy was intended to forge a new middle class group from Malay society to be actively involved in the dynamic economy industry as part of the Malaysian way of modernisation. After the 1969 ethnic riot which was rooted from unhappiness by the Malays with the more economically successful Chinese communities, the Government of Malaysia came up with a policy that was centred to empower Malays to also be the key motivators and drivers of success of the national economy. It is an obvious attempt by the government to generate a new identity of a social class by defining economic traits as one of the identity features apart from the ethnicity.

In his study of television soap opera talk, Barker (1997) identifies that television serves as a resource for British Asians and Afro-Caribbean girls in constituting their self-identity. Through his interpretation of the teenagers’ talk about several local and imported soap operas such as East-Enders, Neighbours, Heartbreak High and Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Barker finds that the girls in his study see the genre as representations of self and reality. He further argues that soap and soap talk are not a picture of reality but rather as a means to engage in producing reality on account of identity projects (Barker, 1997: 626). He points out that identities are interpretatively constructed by using the multiplying resources provided by globalization, which help to produce multiple and hybrid identities. Further, Barker argues that the British Asian and Afro-Caribbean girls in London engage in the concept of “reflexive identity” by reflecting their own participation in everyday practices and those enacted by soap opera characters (Barker, 1997: 613). The girls’ self-reflections continue to act as social knowledge in order to construct their identity as a member of diaspora community. These reflections involve consciousness to identify the similarities and differences that lie between them and the characters depicted on television.

One’s identity can also be conceived by exploring her or his “identity practices” (Gerson, 2001). In his study of identity practices among the German Jewish immigrants in the United States, Judith M. Gerson explores the involvement of those immigrants at micro levels of interaction as well as macro-level structures in the host country. Derived from “theory of practice” (Connell, 1987), Gerson’s concept of identity practices suggests that the identification of constant praxes of “search for origins” and of civic participations in correspondence to “loyalty to the state” that are observed by diaspora community members (Gerson, 2001: 186-188). In Gerson’s case, the German Jews constructed a set of practices that constitutes being American of German Jewish descent. The complexity of becoming an American forced them to change the way they negotiated with the dominant culture. Although some of them had become Americans, they tended to refuse to be fully Americans. They might join the military service to express national patriotism or be Americanized through food but they were apt to live in the local Jewish community with all recollections of German pictures. Their national identity practices appear to be distinguishable from their other immigrant counterparts, that make them a "different form" of American, yet they are literally no longer German Jewish.

Gerson builds the concept of identity practices in the context of national identity politics which correspond to the debate of national allegiance, citizenship and nationalism. The notions of “search of origins” and “loyalty to state” that she suggested appear to be applicable in understanding the interpretation of television narratives which implies the conception of “interpretive identity practices”. In association with the notion of origin inquiry, television does play an important role in reinforcing the remembrance of the past. In their qualitative analysis of televised entertainments after the Franco’s regime era, Carlota et al. (2012) identify the significant roles of television in socialisation of history and representing shared experiences to create historical memory. Similarly, Meyers, Neiger and Zandberg (2009), who explore the public mnemonic role of commercial channels, find that Israel’s television broadcasts constantly construct commemorative narratives that reinforce commemoration of the country’s memorial day, the Holocaust, to the audience. In another writing, Meyers, Neiger and
Zandberg (2011: 141) further reveal that electronic media professionals, as mnemonic agents, maintain self-awareness to create commemorative conventions.

Recent studies (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd, 2004; Graber, 2004) demonstrate that media use influences the degree of civic participation proportionally. Bromley, Curtice and Seyd (2004) note that people put trust in television more than newspapers or internet in providing the most fair and unbiased news (cited in Livingstone and Markham, 2008: 355). Citizens’ information needs encourage society members to pay attention to the news, particularly in efforts to acquire political knowledge (Graber, 2004, in Livingstone and Markham, 2008: 355). Contrary to Putnam’s “Bowling Alone” that believes media distract people from civic engagement, Livingstone and Markham (2008) prove that the consumption of different forms of media enhance the participation in civic actions with emphasis on sustaining political interest. For example, a positive engagement in the news contributes to the growing interest in political issues and voting (Livingstone and Markham, 2008: 366). This news engagement, to be noted, involves cognitive, motivational, habitual and normative form of consumption in regular basis.

It is argued here that civic participation is part of the loyalty to the state. Gerson (2008) uses military/national services and political participation as the examples of civic engagement in relation to the contribution to the state. It must be noted that search of information through television news viewing is also part of civic engagement, and thus it corresponds to citizens’ submission to the state. Apparently, as a citizen of a state, a person lives with a set of national identity that consists the narratives and ideas of a nation, forged by the nation’s dominant group and promoted by regulated broadcasting systems (Price, 1995). Not to mention, civic participation is most probably enforced within the broadcasting system as well.

In concern to the nexus of search of origins and loyalty to the state and television consumption, this paper proposes the concept of interpretive identity practices as a means to identify the characteristics of the interpretive use of television in negotiating hybrid identity project. Television audience uses their interpretation of their awareness about ethnic origin and civic participation in a complex negotiation to deal with the formation of multiple identities. In the process of that negotiation, a set of distinct traits will appear to be a prominent, distinctive form of identity.

The identity and culture of the Javanese descendants in Sabak Bernam

In historical context, migration flow from the Island of Java to Malaya began since the glorious age of the Malacca Sultanate (Khazin, 1984). These first groups of Javanese were traders who were actively doing business along the Straits of Malacca. It was reported then that the migration of Javanese during pre-independent Malaya was associated with economic difficulties and labour demand by the British colonial in the land (Spaan, 1994). However, Teruo Sekimoto’s work about the early settlement of Javanese in Selangor found that the common reasons articulated by the first generation of Javanese in the area were the “the land shortage due to population pressure in Java” and the urge to gain experience as well as opportunities to make the pilgrimage to Macca (1994, 1988).

After a period of time, the Javanese pioneer settlers had successfully established early settlements and yielded massive agricultural crops which satisfied the local administration. Khazin (1984: 82-83) reported that the local district officer expressed commendation to the Javanese who successfully developed forest areas to become scenic residential villages and paddy fields in Kuala Langat, Selangor, and even used them as role models for local Malays who inhabited around the area. The Malays embraced them and interacted with them very well due to the similarity of the national language used in Malaysia and Indonesia, and religion. They have been insofar pleasantly enjoying their ethnic status and privileges as Malays as it was defined by the pre-independent British authorities and the present Malaysian government for political reasons (Sekimoto, 1994). To date, the majority of Javanese descendants can be found primarily in Johor and Selangor.

Despite recognised ethnic identity, there are no official statistics of the actual number of Javanese descendants in Malaysia due to the ambiguity of ethnic classification in Malaysia. The government of
Malaysia categorises the Javanese as “one of many subgroups of the Malays, in contrast to the Chinese, the Indians and the Orang Asli” (Sekimoto, 1988: 175). The Javanese in Sabak Bernam, Selangor, particularly, are the major contribution to the Malay population in the district. According to the statistics revealed by the village headman, In Kampung Parit Tujuh alone, the Javanese comprised over 90 per cent of the population of 1,440. They live within their own community with the co-presence of Banjarese descendants and urban Malays and Chinese, who reside at the urban-styled housing area of the village. All the Javanese in the village are Muslims.

Like many of the Javanese villages in Malaysia, Kampung Parit Tujuh Baroh was established by the Javanese migrants. Records indicated that the area began to be developed in 1935 by twelve Javanese migrants mainly from East Java. The village broadened to a land area of 1,491 hectares which is divided into the paddy field and coastline part which is adjacent to the Malacca Straits. The village headman, one of the key informants in this research, mentioned that the Javanese descendants prefer to dwell in the coastline part and grow gardens in the surroundings of their houses where the Javanese women earn income from their small-scale agricultural practices. Apparently, tending the garden is one of the activities they do on a regular basis.

The Javanese in Sabak Bernam still maintain their ethnic awareness and Javanese customs. The older generations fluently speak Javanese every day even though they have embraced the Malay ways of living. Some of the cultural traditions they have preserved include Lek-lek-an and Rewang. We were fortunate to have been able to join one Lek-lek-an which was conducted at the village by the Department of Information of Selangor in conjunction with Malaysia’s 13th General Election campaigns. We also had a chance to interview the Director of the Selangor’s Department of Information who told us that Lek-lek-an is one of the oldest traditions of the Javanese migrants in Malaysia. The term Lek-lek-an itself means staying up late at the night to celebrate an occasion. The Lek-lek-an event that night, as explained by him, was intended to rejoice in the good fortune of the nomination of a Javanese community member as one of the election candidates to the Malaysian Parliament. The event of Lek-lek-an includes Marhaban and Makan Nasi Ambeng. Marhaban is a performance of Islamic chantings devoted to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), played with three styles of instrumental music: Khadarah, Kompong Jawa, and Kompong Ribu. Khadarah is an instrumental music played with a set of tambourines that have small pieces of metal hanging around the edge. Kompong Jawa is a hybrid style of Kompong, the Malay-style of tambourine instrumental music performance, that represents a combination of Malay and Javanese cultures. A Kompong Jawa set includes a clutch of common tambourines and percussion drums. Kompong Ribu refers to a Kompong played by the youths of the village which combines fast hand-tapping on the tambourines a thousand times. After all the instrumental music performances, the participants of Lek-lek-an are dished out with Nasi Ambeng, the Javanese signature dish served on a large tray which is filled with rice, black-sauced chicken, grated coconut, and fried noodles. A tray of Nasi Ambeng can be taken to be eaten together by three to four persons. Makan Nasi Ambeng (share-eating Nasi Ambeng) is believed to tighten the relationships among the Javanese as it represents sharing and togetherness.

Another hereditary tradition of the Javanese in Malaysia is Rewang. Rewang in Javanese means mutual cooperative work involving a group of people who does a range of activities to prepare a celebration. Rewang includes cooking, setting up the event tents and distribution of the food. Rewang is carried on mostly when a Javanese family has a wedding celebration, and it is not restricted to wedding events only. In fact, the preparation of Lek-lek-an also includes Rewang. An interesting fact about Rewang in the Malaysian Javanese communities is, though it is a voluntary activity, it is organised by a structured sub-committee. The sub-committee is under the committee of village development and security (JKKK) which functions to record all the events that would be celebrated by the community members. The committee members, co-working with the host of the events, then remind and invite the people if there is a Rewang event to be held. Usually, the community members would willingly come over an invitation because their presence represents their commitment to the communal values upheld by all the members. If they were not present once or a couple of times, their
presence in the society will be seen as less significant; therefore when they host an event in the future, the Rewang community reserve a right to exclude them.

There is no authentic literatures that specifically discuss the origin of Lek-lek-an or Rewang but based on the interview with some key informants and the Javanese in Kampung Parit Tujuh Baroh, these two traditional customs originated in Java Island. As one of the authors of this paper is a Javanese from Indonesia, from our standpoint, we note that there is a significant difference between the Javanese in Malaysia and their counterparts in Indonesia. Rewang, for example, is well-maintained within the Javanese communities in Malaysia with all the arrangement involving a great number of people from the whole community. While in Indonesia, Rewang is just a term used to refer to a mutual aid given by a person to another in the same Javanese family kinship or neighbourhood. This fact proves that the Javanese descendants in Malaysia posses a set of traits that distinguish them from the other Malay communities in Malaysia and the Javanese in Indonesia.

Presumably, the identity and culture of the Javanese in Malaysia have been influenced by the social and cultural milieu of others’ through the process of “cultural localisation” (Tan, 2000). In fact, the Javanese have to accept the Malay conformity in order to become Malaysians. Tan (2000: 451) stated, “The Malays of Arabic and Javanese origins have become Malays although they may retain their original identity as a sub-ethnic category.” Realistically, the Javanese have no problem with accepting “Malayness” as their lives as Javanese and Muslims do not contradict the Malay way of life and they could easily assimilate into the Malay culture. Based on the Malaysian constitution, a Malay refers to a person who accepts Islam as his/her religion and habitually speaks Malay and follow the Malay traditions (Mohamad Suffian, 1976, in Tan, 2000: 451). In point of fact, Islam has become the guidance for the Javanese descendants in Malaysia in negotiating their multiple identities, particularly, in becoming Malays.

Devotional viewing and reflexive identity

In becoming Malays, Malaysian Javanese have to observe the Malay identity and culture. Many literatures (Miyazaki, 2000; Tan, 2000; Spaan, 1994; Sekimoto, 1994; Khazin, 1984, Khazin and Bohari, 1980) mention that the Javanese migrants can easily integrate into the Malay society due to the similarity of religion, Islam. However, in the early settlement, the Javanese migrants refused to amalgamate into the local culture and were persistent to preserve their culture, including the continuity of using Javanese language and maintaining their traditional customs that carried Hindu influences (Khazin and Bohari, 1980). They then only accepted the traditional Malay customs that resembled theirs such as seeking medical treatment from bomoh—a rural healer that practiced traditional healing methods (Miyazaki, 2000). Long after Hindu heritage began to wear off, and perhaps because of the “modernisation” and “Islamisation” in Malaysian society, the Malays and the Javanese gradually withdrew from the non-Islamic elements and continues with some which had been accommodated to Islam (see Miyazaki, 2000; Khazin and Bohari, 1980).

Despite the strong attachment to the Javanese culture (Kejawen), the majority of the Javanese migrants who moved to Malaysia were Muslims. They even used Malaysia as a stepping-stone to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca (Sekimoto, 1994). Among them were religious teachers who then taught Koran recitation to their own children and the local pupils. As descendants of the Javanese Muslim migrants, all the respondents interviewed confessed that they received Islamic teachings from their Javanese parents. Some of them did not even attend formal school and only learnt Koran recitation and Fiqh of Salah (the practice of ritual prayers) at home or in the rural Islamic institutions (Sekolah Agama). The urge to learn more Islamic knowledge grows along with their awareness of becoming “modern Malays”. Evidently, the Islamic resurgence that has always been part of the modernisation of Malaysia (Mohamad Abu Bakar, 1981) enables television—as a modernisation vehicle—to deliver more programmes that carry Malaysian modernity in which Islamic values become the central theme. All the ten respondents uttered that they liked to tune in to the religious programmes to learn about Islamic teachings that they never had before.
I always watch Semanis Kurma on TV9... (it is a talk show that discusses) household issues... . I watch the rerun in the morning. I learnt that we should not be unfaithful to our own husband. After that, I watch a programme on TV1, shows the beautiful recitation (taranum) of Koran. Someone recites (a verse in the Koran) and the ustaz gives comments. I loved watching that programme. We can correct our ways of recitation. We can learn (something from the programme) (Ramona, 50, a part-time home teacher).

Ramona is a full-time housewife who also teaches a small group of village pupils how to recite the Koran. She has taught Koran recitation at home for 18 years. She learns how to recite the Koran from her Javanese father and improves her reciting skills by watching the television programme regularly. Ramona and some of the other respondents find television has provided tremendous knowledge about Islam that guides them in everyday life as Javanese as well as Malays. They reflexively feel that as a Javanese, they are less Islamic compared to the other Malay community and the information about Islam on television has taught them how to be a good Muslim Malay.

The Javanese are less Islamic unlike Banjarese that strongly practice Islam. When we were young, we did not really wear tudung (head scarf) and we liked to wear short-cutting kebaya. I did not use to wear tudung. I just started wearing tudung many years ago. We only knew the importance of wearing tudung and baju kurung by watching television because we want to follow Islamic practices. Nevertheless, the Javanese are competent in obligatory practices. If a thing is religiously said compulsory (wajib), it really is. It cannot be sunat (optional) (Fatihah, 61, homemaker).

The respondents indeed emphasised that their parents only taught them about Islam in terms of obligatory duties such as five-time prayers and other components of the five pillars in Islam. They learnt about all the optionally supplementary practices particularly like sunat prayers and the proper methods of reciting Koran (tajwid) from the Friday congregations at the village surau (prayer hall) and television. When learning the tajwid, for example, some of the respondents said that it was difficult to recite the Koran in the proper ways like the ustazah demonstrated at the surau. The ustazah stressed out the proper, Islamic ways of reciting Koran with the right, clear articulation and discouraged her students from reciting in Javanese-styled vocalisation. At home, a respondent who is also a student in the Friday congregations commented on the ustazah’s advice. She said:

We are accustomed to reciting Koran in Javanese ways. We do not recite like the Arabs do. What the ustazah said is only applicable for the Arabs. It is so difficult. We, Javanese, recite (Koran) in Javanese ways (Tamia, 61, homemaker).

It is obvious that this Javanese woman tries to accommodate Islamic teachings based on her cultural capacity derived from her Javanese beliefs. She also applies this manner in another circumstance. Coincidently, this fieldwork was going on in the month of Rajab (the seventh month in the Islamic calendar) when most Muslims, including the Javanese at the Kampung Parit Tujah Baroh, were fasting to follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Some of the respondents were fasting, some were not, and Tamia was one of those who were. Ideally, Muslims fast for the first 10 days of the month but this requirement is not compulsory for all the Muslims. Tamia did not intend to fast for the whole 10 days and only fasted a couple of days for some reasons.

I fast again today and tomorrow (Friday) will be the last. I won’t fast on Saturday because I have to attend a Rewang (for a wedding party), and on Sunday because of the wedding party. I think fasting for three days is enough. We are not allowed to fast when we are attending an event, in the midst of a lot of people. Some people might think we try to riya’ (show-off). Like the ustazah (in the Tanyalah Ustazah) on TV said, when we got invited to an event, we were not encouraged to fast. We should respect the host; eat when food is served. And this Rewang is important. There is no way I will miss the Rewang just because I fast. The people will judge me negatively. That’s why I try my best to observe the fasting for today and tomorrow (Tamia, 61, homemaker).
What can be noted here is, Ramona, Fatihah and Tamia interpret television as “devotional viewing” (Gillespie, 1995) by which television functions as a strategic resource to impart religious knowledge. Indeed, these female Javanese descendants have used television as their “Islamic homeschooling” to provide them with useful information about Islamic teachings. Interestingly, they interpret the Islamic messages from television within the Javanese cultural boundaries and implement them into their everyday life which also involves the practices under the Malay tenets.

Though they presume that religious programmes on television as beneficial, they do not simply “take and use” whatever they receive. They do some negotiated filtering to distinguish the goods and the bads and which ones are applicable in their cultural lives. When they were asked if they applied all the advice given by the ustaz or usta-zah on television, one respondent said:

The right ones, we take. The wrong, we left behind. I am far from applying all the suggestions (from TV). I do not mean that I cannot accept all of them. I only take some of the things that TV has taught me. I understand. I do accept but I do not have the capacity to absorb all the advice. I cannot learn all the teachings given. I mean, they are not applicable for me, I cannot apprehend them. What I cannot apprehend is, sometimes when there is a discussion on a certain matter; I would ask myself, “is it like this?” “is it the right thing?” I am not certain. Let’s say a religion is a tree. A tree has many branches so does a religion. The branch that we think applicable for us, we accept it. We practice it. (Umaya, 57, homemaker).

Umaya seems engaged in complicated negotiation of religious personality. She is married to a very pious man who actively joins the Tabligh movement. She and her husband have travelled to India and Singapore to assemble with the other Tabligh members from around the world. She considers herself pious and is always careful in her daily presentation. She rarely joins neighbourly chats as she perceives the talks would generate slander which is wrong in Islam. She appears to judge everything based on the Islamic teachings she obtained from the movement, which slightly differ to a certain extent from the common Islamic teachings in Malaysia. Umaya’s project of religious identity corresponds to what Pearce (2012) notes that the construction of religious identity is reinforced somehow by the sense of belonging to a particular group.

Other than learning to recite the Koran and practicing prayers, the female Javanese descendants also watch television for pleasure purposes. Some of them love to watch Indonesian soap operas or better known as sinetron. It can be said that they belong to a group avid followers of sinetron as they know the schedules of their favourite programmes. Despite the pleasure of watching, they interpret the contents of those sinetrons in some extent and relate them to their everyday lives, particularly pertaining to religious and humanistic values.

I like to watch dramas. Usually I watch the one that is aired at 2.30 pm on TV3, the Indonesian soap. [...] I like to watch Indonesian soaps due to the religious messages. It also depicts social status. It is common in daily life, isn’t it? Especially about family matters. The Indonesian soaps that I watch regularly are the ones on TV3 at 2.00 to 3.00 pm and the one on TV9 which is aired from 5.30 to 6.30 pm. But I usually watch at 6.00 pm after picking up my children from the (afternoon) Islamic school. (Zaiyah, 43, homemaker)

Thompson (1995) has noted that television audience have the capability to appropriate messages and meanings from television to comprehend their own lives in a specific time and place. They interpret the messages and produce the meanings based on their knowledge and experiences. They reflect their own experiences to those portrayed on television.

I like to watch the programme Bersamamu, a programme about the common people’s lives. Why do I watch it? I feel like, there is no way our lives can become so poor like that until there is no food at all to eat. In my opinion, Malaysia is a prosperous country. Everything is available here. We should make an effort. If we work hard enough, In Shaa Allah (with Allah’s will) we won’t be poor like that. (Kalidah, 65, homemaker).
In relation to their reflexive identity construction, television audience reflect themselves to the representations on television by identifying the sameness and difference that lie between them and the television texts (Barker, 1997). Kalidah can reflexively relate what television depicts with her own experiences. Growing up in a Javanese migrant family with 12 siblings near the rural paddy fields, and never attending a formal school, she can feel all the difficulties of being a minority. Her family used to confront the difficulties like the one depicted in Bersamamu but she thought she never felt so desperately poor. She stressed that people should work hard to earn a living like her family did. With two university-educated sons, and a quite luxurious brick house, she perceives her life now to be quite well-off. She can afford to send her only two children to universities till Master’s degrees though she herself never underwent formal education. It shows that she appreciates the importance of education in building a better, modern future. With her social status now, she can associate herself with the modern Malaysian society and no longer belong to the poor Javanese migrant family like she used to be.

Television presents enormously varied information to its audience to conduct daily exercises of their ethnic identity. The female Javanese descendants in this research use television as the source of religious knowledge. They also feel that their comprehension of Islam is lesser than those of the Malay society in general. For them, Islam serves to bridge the gap between their Javanese culture and the Malay’s and television has made them feasible to interpret Islam in a convenient sense. As they were born in Malaysia and granted the citizenship, they are bound to become “real” Malaysians. Growing up as Malaysians living in the Malay majority, they feel obligated to observe Malay ways of living, including the practice of Islamic norms and values. However, they adapt Islam as the religion of the Malays in a sense of negotiation with their Javanese culture and beliefs. They might belong to the modern Malay society but they persistently maintain their Javanese customs. Their attachment to their origin remains strong but they understand their duty as a Malaysian citizen.

Democratic viewing and interpretive identity practices
As suggested in this paper, the concept of interpretive identity practices avails the female Javanese descendants in Malaysia in the negotiation of their hybrid identity construction. They use television to interpret identity practices pertaining to the search of origin and allegiance to the nation. One prominent form of loyalty to the state imposes the people’s civic participation which is not necessarily involving socio-spatial actions. As Livingstone and Markham (2008) suggest, the consumption of television news enhances the people’s involvement in political involvement, leading to their civic participation.

Conducted during the peak of the Malaysia’s 13th General Election campaigns, this research managed to capture the village women’s engagement in “democratic viewing” as well as in the democratic function. The female Javanese descendants in this research expressed their interest in the electoral activities. Some of them, like Tamia and Zaiyah, are directly involved in the political campaigns of Barisan Nasional (National Front). They were registered members of the village-branched Wanita UMNO who served to invite the village women to vote for Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition government candidates. Some of them only follow the news on television in order to follow current information about the election. [...]

During the General Election, I always watch the news programmes. I like to listen to the candidates’ speech. They said they would serve the rakyat (people) with ministrations, so rakyat vote for them. They visited all the states; gave political speech (like) “don’t vote for the oppositions”, so we follow (their instructions). If the oppositions perform wrongdoings, they let us know. I watch it like that. (Suraya, 58, tailor).

Scannell (1996) suggests that classical television news functions to shape the viewer as a member of the polity. In this matter, Television has shaped Suraya to be a loyal follower of the ruling regime. Like the other respondents, she was very certain to vote for the Barisan Nasional candidates. Although she was not closely involved in the political campaigns, she heavily engaged in the
consumption of the electoral news. She even talked to her friends about the current situation of the General Election. For instance, when Tamia visited her to collect her garments, she took the chance to tell her that the veteran dangdut singer, Herman Tino, ran for the Tanjong Karang constituency. Apparently, Suraya and Tamia know Herman Tino because he belongs to the Javanese community in the city nearby.

All the respondents pointed out their sense of obedience to the ruling government and of disobedience to the oppositions through their interpretation of the attitudes of some political figures described on television. For example, one respondent said:

[...] PAS and PKR perpetually curse Najib and Barisan Nasional. They said the prayers of the UMNO members would not be accepted by God. Is that true? We never know Allah’s judgement. How come a human, just an ulama’ (Islamic scholar) said like that? Is he God? [...] I was like, why would he say that? If I could phone-call the news anchors, I would ask them how could an ulama’ utter such negative words, about something that precedes God’s will... (Hasmah, 71, homemaker).

Similar to what David Banks (1990) notes about rural Malays, this respondent clearly judged the political situations in the country based on her Islamic knowledge. She perceived that UMNO and other components of Barisan Nasional had acted as good government by supporting the rights of the citizenry. She interprets that the ruling government has done many things within Islamic tenets. She stated that her family was close to two political leaders from Barisan Nasional who also belonged to the Javanese community in the nation. Obviously, she is a proud Javanese that strongly supports Barisan Nasional.

One of the reasons the Javanese women in Kampung Parit Tujuh Baroh support Barisan Nasional is the capability of the government to maintain social stability. At least what they watch on television portrays that the nation remains safe to live in without any significant political and economic turmoil. Asked what she thought about Malaysia, one respondent uttered:

I feel grateful to live in Malaysia because the country has never been in disarray unlike the other countries that deal with wars every day. If something clashes, the government solves it efficiently, like the current case that happened in Sabah. I hope there will be no such incident occurring throughout the country, especially in the Peninsular. (Maria, 56, tailor)

This respondent’s statement represents her trust towards television news particularly, and the country generally. Television newscast, as Blondheim and Liebes suggested, transforms into a “transnational object” that portrays society and culture to forge what Giddens (1991) calls “distant trust” (Blondheim and Liebes, 2009: 188). This trust appears to be significant in shaping the sense of identity and security among the audiences.

Other than loyalty to the state, identity practices also cover the idea of the search of origin. During the general election, the respondents tuned to the news to get updated about the current situation of the event. In normal days, they did likewise to have some idea about the life of others in distant parts of the world, like Indonesia. As part of the Indonesian diaspora, some of the respondents feel associated with the country where their origin is rooted.

Indeed, I feel like an Indonesian. I like Indonesia. [...] The country used to be ruled by Soeharto, didn’t it? And there was a female president too, right? [...] We also come from Indonesia. (Sumira, 70, homemaker)

Knowing the presidents of Indonesia shows that this respondent has the sense of connectedness to the country. She keeps aware of the political life in the country where her ethnic origin is derived from. Despite only belonging to the Javanese ethnicity, she feels like she is a part of Indonesian community in general. Her travel to visit her relatives in Indonesia recently was one of the efforts to maintain her cultural connection to her origin. Referring back to Gillespie (1995: 21), this respondent has created
“mediascape” (Appadurai, 1990) of “invented homeland” through travel experiences to her “homeland” and news representation of Indonesia. This mediascape serves a purpose of imaginary location to negotiate with hybrid identity construction.

Television newscast has constructed its audience to have the sense of belonging to a country and a cultural community. As a citizen of Malaysia and a member of the Javanese community, the female Javanese descendants in this study engage with television news to practice their sense of allegiance to the state and pursuit of origin. They are mindful of their citizenship act by seeking information about it and at the same time they also feel a connection to the distant locale in which television news has made it proximate. Their hybrid identity is shaped in the interpretive negotiation of identity practices narrated by television.

Conclusion
Television extends the people’s sense of belonging to the more abstract social locations. It serves a purpose of the sources of religious and democratic knowledge. For the female Javanese descendants in Malaysia, television has provided them with Islamic knowledge that appears to be instrumental in constructing their identity as Malays. Nevertheless, their Javanese customs and beliefs impose them not to become a fully Malay. They have tendencies to relate their past life—when they lived in a poor Javanese migrant family—to the portraits of the Malays in the modern Malaysia on television. They are aware of the similarities and differences that lie between their collective selves and the images on television. For them, becoming a Malaysian means to accept the Malay ways of living in a certain extent that they should act as a loyal citizen without eliminating the remembrance of their origins. In this sense, television narratives have encouraged them to partake in civic engagement and recollection of the historical life. Their identity construction takes place in the interpretive negotiation of becoming Malaysians, Malays and Javanese.

References


Notes:

1 A male Islamic teacher.
2 Kebaya is a traditional blouse for women. Kebaya here refers to the old Javanese-styled blouse that is narrow at the waist with bottom-high cutting. In the local Malay community itself, kebaya is fashioned to accommodate with Islamic norms by which the cutting should be extended to the knees to cover the waist-down part of the woman’s body.
3 Baju Kurung is a set of the Malay traditional outfit which loosely covers all part of women body except head, hands, and feet. Baju Kurung is appropriate for Muslim women because it follows the Islamic convention about body covering.
4 A female Islamic teacher.
5 Tanyalah Ustazah is an interactive programme which its viewers can ask about Islamic matters to an ustazah who hosts the programme. It is aired live in TV9 every Friday from 1.30 to 2.30 pm. (retrieved from the channel’s website at http://www.tv9.com.my/schedule/schedule/index.1.html)
6 Tabligh movement or worldly known as Tablighi Jema’at is an Islamic movement originated in India. The movement works on sharing and teaching Islamic fundamental knowledge, following the manners of the Prophet Muhammad. The members of Tablighi Jama’at usually come to door-by-door to invite Muslims to join their congregational gatherings. See Metcalf (1998).
7 Sinetron refers to Indonesian-styled soap operas which is usually aired on television for long episodes.
8 Malaysia’s ruling party that has been governing the country since the pre-independent era. The party is a coalition of three ethnic-representative parties namely UMNO (United Malay National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress). See Crouch (1996). In last general election, Barisan Nasional won the majority votes and dominated the House of Parliament with Datuk Sri Najib Tun Rajak as selected as the Prime Minister.
9 Founded in 1947, Wanita UMNO is the women’s wing of UMNO. See Manderson (1980).
10 PAS or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party was originally the former religious wing of UMNO which then formed an oppositional coalition with PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) or People’s Justice Party and DAP or Democratic Action Party. See Crouch (1996).