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Bridging identities through religious television contents: Javanese female descendants, Islamic viewing and Malay identity projection

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the uses of Islamic television content in bridging the gap between Javanese and Malay identity among the Malay women of Javanese descent in Malaysia. Malaysian religious television programmes have constantly promoted the Islamic identifications of Malayness, enabling the Malay audience to reconstruct the culturally religious identity. While the reconstruction of Islamic identity through television viewing simply represents a lived experience for the majority of the Malay society, it has some cultural meanings for certain Malay sub-ethnic communities, such as the Javanese. This ethnographic study on a Malaysian Javanese community reveals that the interpretive engagement of this particular community in Islamic television viewing serves the purpose of negotiating Malay identity. The results of this study suggest that religious content can serve as an engaging platform to construct multi-ethnic identities beside popular and ethnic-related contents.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the way Javanese female descendants in a Malay rural community interpret Islamic television content in relation to their identity construction. Firstly, this study questions to what extent Islam in Malaysia constitutes Malayness and what are the impacts of TV-adopted Islamic piety on the sub-ethnic groups in Malay society. The impacts of Islamic resurgence on the Malaysian broadcasting system have been widely discussed in relation to the political power (Abd-Ghani, 2008; Mutalib, 1993; Muzaffar, 1986), and the effects of the campaign on Malay society have been mentioned in several literatures (Nagata, 1980; Ong, 1995; Siverson, 2006). However, as the Malay society is derived from different ethnic origins in which non-Islamic elements might be influential during the pre-Islamic period, it is important to explore their negotiation of the influence of Islamic resurgence in projecting Malay identity. For instance, the Javanese descendants who have been granted Malaysian citizenship live within the social construction of Malay identity and culture while maintaining some semblance of...
Javanese customs and traditions (Miyazaki, 2000; Mohamed, 2001; Mohd-Yasin, 1996; Sekimoto, 1994).

The debates of Malay identity construction can be understood within two contexts: ‘authority-defined’ and ‘everyday-defined’ social realities (Shamsul, 1996). The former represents the ruling government’s project of Malay and bumiputera (sons of the soil) identity (Shamsul, 1996, 2001; Tan, 2000) and the colonial-invented definition of Malay racial entity (Kahn, 2006; Reid, 2004; Vickers, 2004). The latter refers to the rural convention of Malayness, encompassing Islam and adat (traditional customs) as the cultural underpinnings (Nagata, 1974; Ong, 1995). While the socio-political scholars discuss the construction of the ‘more Islamic’ Malayness in relation to state power, we seek to revisit the omnipotence of television as a cultural source for the members of Malay society to imagine and redefine their identity in the context of everyday lives. Apparently, the ramification of popular media consumption among the Malay audiences has raised public debates mainly on to what extent Islamic identifications on Malay identity have been challenged (Rahim & Pawanth, 2010; Shamshudin & Morris, 2014; Syed, 2012). Therefore, this research seeks to fill the gap in the study of the correlations between popular consumption and Malay identity construction in Malaysia with the focus on Islamic television viewing among the sub-ethnic women in the Malay society.

This study adopts an ethnographic approach in audience studies with critical thematic analysis into the subjects’ interpretations of Islamic television content. Drawing upon the conceptual framework of the ‘interpretive identity practices’, this study reveals that the Javanese female descendants engage in Islamic viewing to imagine the redefinition of Malay identity in which the reinforcement of Islamic values and norms take place. Their engagement in Islamic television content somewhat portrays the attempts to bridge the cultural gap between their Javanese and Malay identities.

**Malaysian television and the state discourses on Islamic and Malay identity**

The Malaysian broadcasting system serves as a social agent to disseminate the state agenda in promoting national identity (Karthisiusu, 1986), which de facto includes the imposition of Malay identity. The notion of ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ (Malaysian nation) that supports Malaysian multiculturalism in which ‘the people should start accepting each other as they are, regardless of race and religion’, in fact concerns the political interests of the Malay to retain some Malay identifications (Tan, 2000, p. 469). The designation of *Bumiputera Malaysia* (which is actually the original language of the Malay populace) as the national language and the recognition of Islam as the religion of the Federation confirm the attempts to ‘Malayise’ the multicultural Malaysians (Arakald, 2004; Tan, 2000). Particularly, in reinforcing Islam as the appropriate ‘way of life’ for the Malaysian society, the ruling regime exercises its power over the broadcasting system.

The Islamisation of Malaysian television and radio began at the pitch of the Islamic resurgence in the 1970s–1980s. The campaign that was initiated by Western-educated Muslim Malays and politically endorsed by the opposition Pan Islamic Party (PAS or Parti Islam se-Malaysia) claimed to promote the dissemination of Islamic piety into the state’s social and political sphere (Camroux, 1996; Mutalib, 1993; Muzaffar, 1986). In response to the growing consciousness of Islamic fundamentalism among the urban
middle-class Malays, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) embraced the idea of ‘back to the Koran’ to maintain the political support of the Malays (Camroux, 1986; Muzaffar, 1986). The state manifested its initial move by airing the Azan (the call for Islamic prayers) on the state-run radio and television channels (Muzaffar, 1986). It was followed by broadcasting weekly Islamic themed programmes for the purpose of educating Muslims and non-Muslims alike about the pristine ideals of the religion’ (Muzaffar, 1986, p. 59).

In the early development of Malaysian television, sensitive issues pertaining to religion and race were not allowed to be discussed on television (Karbigesa, 1986), and Islamic programmes on the state-run Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) were relatively small (Abd-Ghani, 2008). Since the Islamic resurgence, RTM had added more Islamic broadcasts on its networks due to the pressure from the Islamic fundamentalists (Abd-Ghani, 2008, pp. 63–64). Interestingly, only Islamic religious programmes are permissible on the Malaysian broadcasting channels (Abd-Ghani, 2008; Barracough, 1983; Schumann, 1991), but non-Islamic contents in various genres, especially the ones that are imported are still allowed on television to cater for the multicultural and multilingual audiences (Yousif, 2004, p. 32). The allocation of special airtime to Islamic broadcasts indicates that the religion is given the status of symbolic prominence to be the ‘general moral code for all Malaysians’ (Barracough, 1983, p. 968).

Islam holds a very special position in the Malaysian constitution in which it also constitutes the definition of Malay identity. According to the 1963 Federal Constitution, a Malay refers to a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay adat (Abdullah, Martinez, & Radzi, 2010; Kahn, 2006; Nagata, 1974; Vickers, 2004). By this definition, the concept of Malayness becomes an ‘inclusive culture’ (Reid, 2004), which enables the Muslim migrants from pre-independent Indonesia, such as the Javanese, to be part of the inclusive Malay society. Apparently, the Javanese migrants who came to the Malay Peninsula prior to the independence of Malaysia were Muslims and shared the same set of orthodox customs or customary laws, which originated from the pre-Islamic culture, with the Malays (Vickers, 2004). As they integrated into the Malay society, the migrants gradually withdrew some non-Islamic elements from their culture (Miyazaki, 2000; Tarmir & Bohari, 1980) and observed the Malay adat, which has been adapted in accordance with the Islamic tenets (Abdullah et al., 2010).

In Malaysia, the acceptance of Islam is often misunderstood as one becoming Malay or masuk Melayu (Nagata, 1974; Nah, 2003; Tan, 2000). Nah (2003, p. 528) notes that the Islamisation of Orang Asli (indigenous groups) through dakwah (missionary activity) has turned them into Malays and blurred their ethnic attachment. In other words, once non-Malays decide to embrace Islam, they have to deal with the cultural and social expectations of becoming Malay. In addition, these expectations of Islamic identity expand beyond religious aspects if they are women.

Muslim women in Malaysia are heavily subject to the state-defined gender construction, affected by the implementation of the National Economic Policy and Islamic resurgence. Through these discourses, the government expected Malay women to be highly educated and involved in workplace, but at the same time, they needed to restrain themselves from transgressing the social and cultural norms set in adat and Islam (Nagata, 1997; 1980; Omar & Che Dun, 2007; Cng, 1995; Stevens, 2006). They have to represent the ‘Islamic femininity’ by adorning themselves with Islamic modest attire (Omar &