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Constructing interpretive ethnicity in between two nations: television and diasporic discourses of identity in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the interpretation of television in relation to ethnic identity embraced by the female members of Javanese diaspora in Malaysia. The Javanese diaspora in this context refers to the descendants of the colonial Javanese migrants from Indonesia. In contemporary Malaysia, they are considered as Malays, but essentially they retain some cultural identifications of Javanese ethnicity, especially the language. As Malaysia becomes one of the destinations for Indonesian migrant labour and popular culture, the Javanese diaspora are certainly exposed to manifold images of their ethnic origin. Through the audience ethnography in a Javanese community of Selangor, this article reveals that the Malaysian Javanese women negotiate both representative and distant images of Javanese identity on television. Their interpretation of ethnic identity from television represents the notion of ‘interpretive ethnicity’.

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Television; ethnic identity; interpretive ethnicity; Javanese; Malaysia; Indonesia

Introduction: the Javanese identity in Malaysia

This article explores the way the Malaysian Javanese construct their ethnic identity based on television viewing. The Malaysian Javanese in this context refer to the offspring of the Javanese migrants from Indonesia who migrated to the Malay Peninsula before and during the colonial era. Some previous studies point out that the Malaysian Javanese prefer to be associated more with colonial Javanese migrants than the modern Indonesian migrants (Khattab 2010; Miyazaki 2000; Spaan, Van Naerssen, and Kohl 2001). Constitutionally, they are part of the Malay society who deserve the citizenship status and ethnic privileges of ‘being’ Malay (Mohamed 2001; Sekimoto 1994). However, in their everyday lives they retain some semblance of Javanese
cultural identifications, especially the language and traditions (Mohamed 2001; Mohd Yasin 1996; Sekimoto 1994; Tamrin and Bohari 1980).

We have two reasons for studying the construction of Javanese ethnic identity in Malaysia from the perspective of media and cultural studies. First, previous studies on Malaysian Javanese focus on the migration trajectories (see e.g. Bahrin 1967; Spaan 1994; Tamrin 1984; Tamrin and Bohari 1980) and the cultural and economic life (Miyazaki 2000; Mohamed 2001; Mohd Yasin 1996; Sekimoto 1994). Second, considering the presence of modern Indonesian migrant labours (Abdul-Rahman et al. 2012; Kassim 1997; Kaur 2004) and popular culture on Malaysian television (Abdul Wahab, Wang, and Syed Baharuddin 2013; Md Syed 2011), we argue that the Malaysian Javanese have space to observing their ethnic origin.

The contemporary Malaysian Javanese appears to be a ‘branch’ of the Malay race (Milner 2002). As the Malaysian definition of race is determined by ‘customs and religion’ (Milner 2002, 68), the Javanese descendants in Malaysia consider themselves as Malays because they share the same religion and have similar physical appearance as well as cultural characteristics. According to the Federal Constitution, a Malay refers to someone who practices Islam as a religion, habitually speaks Malay and follows Malay adat (Andaya and Andaya 2001; Kahn 2006; Vickers 2004). In addition, the Malay adat (traditional customs) which originated from pre-Islamic culture seems to be a mixture of Malay and Javanese styles (Vickers 2004, 41), that the Javanese can identify with.

In reality, the Malaysian Javanese found mostly in Johor and Selangor choose to live within their own communities and still practice their cultural traditions and customs (Miyazaki 2000; Mohamed 2001; Mohd Yasin 1996; Sekimoto 1994; Tamrin and Bohari 1980). The Javanese in Johor are perceived to have strong attachments to the Javanese culture by preserving some Javanese traditional elements such as barongan (masked dance), kuda kepang (horse dance), wayang kulit (shadow puppet play), tarqat (Javanese Sufism), and magical practices of remedy (Miyazaki 2000; Tamrin and Bohari 1980). In contrast, the Javanese in Selangor seem to exercise less kejawen (Javanism) but they retain some Javanese traditional components including nasil ambeng (Javanese-styled mixed rice), rewang (the practice of cooperation), and guyub or the spirit of togetherness (Mohamed 2001; Sekimoto 1994).

Considering their ethnic attachments, we argue that the Malaysian Javanese tend to use their human agency and adopted social structures (Giddens 1984) to interpret the images of ‘Javaneness’ on television. The evidence from the audience ethnography in Kampung Paitusulem, Selangor, shows that the female members of the community negotiate the representative images and distance from the unrepresentative ones in the process of constructing interpretive Javanese ethnicity. In this way, we suggest the notion of ‘interpretive ethnicity’ as the conceptual framework for
understanding the construction of ethnic identity derived from the consumption of television.

**The Javanese/Indonesian images on Malaysian television**

Colonial Malaya was one of the primary destinations for Indonesian migrant labour. Prior to the independence of Malaysia, migrant workers from Java along with the others from other parts of Indonesia were imported by the British administrators in Malaya to work in the agricultural sectors (Kaur 2004; Spaan 1994). When independent Malaysia experienced a labour shortage in the 1970s and 1980s, the need to recruit Indonesian labours re-emerged, and continue till now (Kaur 2004, 2008). According to the 2010 data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, Indonesians make up some 80% of the migrant workers who primarily work in construction sectors (Abdul-Rahman et al. 2012). Despite solving the labour shortage, the presence of Indonesian migrant workers along with the other foreign workers creates a number of problems, including the ‘increment in criminal activities or social problems’ and the emergence of illegal workers (Abdul-Rahman et al. 2012, 440).

The existence of foreign workers indeed contributes to the increase in the rate of crime in Malaysia (Abdul-Rahman et al. 2012; Sidhu 2005). The Indonesians who in fact constitute the largest percentage of migrant labours commit the most number of crimes, involving violence and robbery (Sidhu 2005, 22). The increasing number of illegal migrants also creates a serious problem. Apparently, the existence of illegal migrants, particularly from Indonesia, had been detected since the 1980s and they were identified as ‘aliens’ who became involved in crimes, causing public outcry (Kassim 1987, 1997). It is argued that the public social anxiety and political contentions were mainly triggered by media reports (Kassim 1987). Precisely, media (including television) contribute to the construction of negative opinions about Indonesian workers (Ismail 2007; Liow 2003).

Apart from the demand for labour, Malaysia also imports television contents from Indonesia. Indonesian popular culture, which ranges from religious-themed serials to romantic soap operas, gains high viewership in the local television channels (Abdul Wahab, Wang, and Syed Baharuddin 2013; Md Syed 2011). Media reported that folkloric fantasy drama *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* received an average of four million viewers per episode, while religious series like *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* and *Mutia Hati* enjoyed viewership of about 1.1 million and 1.6 million, respectively (Abdul Wahab, Wang, and Syed Baharuddin 2013; Md Syed 2011). Indonesian soap operas even become regular shows on some local channels. The free-to-air channels TV3 and TV9 dedicate *Azalea* and *Mutia Hati* slots, respectively, for the Indonesian soaps. The satellite television provider, ASTRO, offers *Indopek*