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Studying a Television Audience in Malaysia: A Practice of Audience Ethnography in Kampung Papitusulem, Sabak Bernam, Selangor

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the ethnographic nature of audience studies and the practices of audience ethnography in Kampung Papitusulem, Sabak Bernam. Although ethnography has been adopted in the studies of media reception worldwide, it is not a popular methodological tradition among the media and communication researchers in Malaysia. However, considering the multicultural nature of the Malaysian population and media, audience ethnography should be considered as one of the practical methodologies in media and communication research in the country. Based on the empirical ethnographic research involving a group of Malay-Javanese women in Kampung Papitusulem, Sabak Bernam, this article presents the methodological issues of an ethnographic approach in studying Malaysian television audiences. The practice of audience ethnography in the *kampung* indicates that the methodology would likely be applicable in media audience research in rural Malaysia by considering practical data collection techniques including partial immersion of fieldwork, conversational interviews, and selected participant observation.

Keywords: Audience ethnography, qualitative research, identity, television, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to discuss the methodological issues in conducting audience ethnography and shed light on understanding this research approach using an empirical example from an ethnographic fieldwork in Kampung Papitusulem, district of Sabak Bernam, Selangor, Malaysia. The growing popularity of audience ethnography

captivates global anthropologists to shift their research interest from traditional culture to popular culture —which has become the key subjects in media research — and move the study locus from the North Atlantic heartland to the global South (Peterson, 2003). At the same time, ethnographic approach to audience research has come to existence among the researchers in the field of media and cultural studies since the 1980s (Gray, 2003; Seiter, 2004; Hermes, 2010). The tradition of the anthropology-inspired methodological approach which started in Europe and North America is popular among media anthropologists and reception researchers in non-Western countries. For example, they adopt this approach to study television consumption and identity politics (Abu-Lughod, 1995; Mankekar, 1999; Scrase, 2002; Shetty, 2008), media and nation building (Postill, 2008; Blondheim & Liebes, 2009), and soap opera reception and modernity (Thompson, 2000; La Pastina, 2004; Idah, 2006; Machado-Borges, 2007; Syed, 2011). Yet, audience ethnography has not been developed as a popular intellectual tradition in Malaysia because most of the local researchers focus on quantitative-based phenomenological research topics (for example Wang, 2004; Firdaus, 2006; Abdul Wahab, Wang, & Baharuddin, 2013).

Very few audience ethnographies have been conducted in Malaysia. However, there are some ethnographic studies of Malaysian media audiences that can be considered as significant contributions to the current literature. For example, Syed's (2011) exploration of Malay women watching imported television serials gives a plausible explanation about the audience interpretive engagement of transnational modernity in Malaysia. Similar to Syed (2011) who studies the Malay audience in rural and urban settings, Thompson (2000) captures communal television viewing between *kampung* Sungai Siputeh and Kuala Lumpur. While both Syed (2011) and Thompson (2000) focus on television audiences in Malaysian Peninsula, John Postill (2008) searches for the audience interpretation of collective identities in East Malaysia. Investigating the negotiation of ethnic and national identities among the Ibanese, Postill (2008) discovers that media, especially television, plays primary roles in modernising them through "cultural standardisation under conditions of rapid economic growth" (p. 5).

As Malaysian television audiences become more fragmented, casual and at some point inattentive, audience ethnography should be seen as an optional methodology. Radway (1988) argues that researchers should seek to explore "the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it" (p. 366). Therefore, an ethnographic approach to audience research should be considered as one of the alternative ways to study multicultural audiences especially in Malaysia. At the same time, the resistance to conduct audience ethnography is perhaps caused by some methodological issues. The present article addresses some issues pertaining to the ethnographic approach

to studying television audiences and contributes to the understanding of audience ethnography.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that requires a researcher to spend a period of time with the community under study, observing and recording their lives in natural settings (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007; Gobo, 2008; Fetterman, 2010). This methodological mechanism has long been adopted in the study of media audiences. According to Moores (1996), audience ethnography refers to a methodological practice for "investigating the social world of actual audiences, using qualitative techniques—most notably the extended period of participant observation 'in the field' and the unstructured conversational interview with informants" (p. 3). The main objective of audience ethnography is to understand the media consumption "from the virtual standpoint of actual audiences" (Ang, 2005, p. 136). In addition, it serves as an instrumental purpose for understanding "the media practices, and meanings people attach to media, and as a way to document everyday media practices in detail" (Perala, Helle, & Johnson, 2012, p. 12).

The anthropological based approach emerged in the early 1980s within the British Cultural Studies (BCS) community (Hermes, 2010). It started with Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" thesis (1980) which significantly inspired a number of other researchers in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham and the rest of the world. Some of the notable pioneers in television audience ethnographies include Dorothy Hobson's study of British Soap Opera (1982), Ien Ang's Dutch *Dallas* study (1985), David Morley's Family Television (1986), Charlotte Brunsdon's study of woman television audience (1986), and Ann Gray's study of feminine Video Cassette Recorder (1987). However, these studies explore the audience's decoding of certain television programmes simply through qualitative interviews and textual analysis. The lack of time that media researchers spend in the field is an issue for some anthropologists (Spitulnik, 1993; Gray, 2003; Seiter, 2004). Spitulnik (1993) notes that critics raise the important points missing in ethnography of media audience such as detailed participant observation and actual immersion in audience's life.

Despite these critiques, media audience researchers continue to use the term ethnography to label their study even though the procedures do not necessarily meet the nature of traditional ethnography. For example, Marie Gillespie's study of British Punjabi youth's television culture (1995) and Chris Barker's exploration of soap talks among the British Asian girls (1997) combine participant observation with qualitative surveys and focus group discussion respectively. However, the ethnography of media audience has been expanded to the study of online culture and communities, such as "CMC (Computer-

Mediated Communication) ethnography" or "virtual ethnography" (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Hine, 2000), "netnography" (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Becham, 2005) and "network ethnography" (Howard, 2002). These new forms of ethnography allow media researchers to conduct observation of textual discourse that arise from virtual communities' activities, in non-territorial field site.

In point of fact, there are some excellent contemporary media research studies that are conducted in accordance with the proper practices of ethnography. For example, Vicki Mayer's two-year fieldwork in San Antonio (2003) explores the Mexican American's reception of telenovela through interviews and participant observation that includes field notes and television co-watching. Similarly, Thais Machado-Borges (2007) adds complementary methods such as structured conversation and essays along with the other primary approach to understand Brazilian youth's telenovelas consumption. Another telenovela study that can be considered as proper ethnography is La Pastina's study of audiences in rural Brazil (2004). Through a year-long study in the field, Antonio C. La Pastina (2004) carries out triangulation of in-depth interviews, surveys, focus group discussion, archival readings and participant observation to explore rural Brazilians' engagement in popular telenovelas. Notwithstanding the disciplines, some anthropologists such as Abu-Lughod (1997), Mankekar (1999), and Shetty (2008) apply ethnographic approaches in their television audience

research and shed light upon understanding of television audiences and politics of identity.

Essentially, audience ethnography is the salient trend in the second and third generation of media reception research, underlying the studies of the relationships between media, culture and communities (Alasuutari, 1999). While the earlier generation embraces the critical inquiries of identity politics, the contextual use of media and the role of media in everyday life; the latter suggests to "bring the media back to media studies", by which both content and audience interpretation are critically analysed (Alasuutari, 1999, p.7). In the beginning, ethnography offers an instrumental mechanism which enables media researchers to "overcome the artificiality of mass communication research based on naturally occurring data" (Ruddock, 2001, p. 128).

The importance of ethnography as a methodology in media and cultural researches lies in its core principle that acknowledges audiences as active consumers of media texts. David Morley (1992) argues that media audience research needs to be diverted from the "pessimistic mass society thesis" to shifting between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" paradigms. Furthermore, Morley (1992) suggests that communication researchers should consider "the dimensions of power and influence through which the powerful (leader and communicators) were connected to the powerless (ordinary people, audiences)" (pp. 50-51). In this way, both content of messages that have effects on

audience and the social meanings which audiences produce from the negotiation with the message can be analysed in symmetrical and simultaneous manners. Likewise, contemporary audience ethnography offers the best of both worlds, encompassing the media-based and audience-based research through which media programmes are analysed and discussed by both audiences and researchers, while experiencing them live in the field.

LIVING FIELDWORK

The fieldwork on which this study is based took place at Kampung Papitusulem in the district of Sabak Bernam, Selangor. According to the headman, some ninety percent of the residents in the *kampung* are the descendants of Javanese migrants who established the *kampung* in 1935. As of 2010, the *kampung* had a population of 1,440 dispersed into some 288 households. The fieldwork began in April 2013 for three months followed by the secondary fieldwork between March and September 2014. During the fieldwork, the researchers engaged in "partial immersion" (Delamont, 2004) in which time was allotted between the research site and university due to some academic and professional requirements. This time constraint is among several challenges that audience ethnographers encounter during their study (Abu-Lughod, 2000; Fetterman, 2010). Therefore, audience ethnography allows non-continuous, short-term contact with the community under study (Alasuutari, 1999; Seiter, 2004).

The researchers' first arrival in the *kampung* was in 2011 when they joined a homestay programme and encountered a group of women who claimed to enjoy *Sinetron* (Indonesian soap operas) as part of their everyday culture. From this short visit the researchers developed relationships with the societal elements of the community, especially their host family. For example, they assisted access to the community mainly in terms of identifying the subjects for the study. The housewife from the host family was selected to be the initial informant in the study's snowballing sampling procedure. This method of sampling allows selection of informants within their network and it is convenient particularly when studying sub-cultures that have "certain attributes in common" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.114). The initial informant subsequently introduced the researchers to the other twenty informants who were selected by using the "judgmental sampling" technique (Fetterman, 2010). This sampling technique refers to a way of selecting informants in which "ethnographers rely on their judgment to select the most appropriate members of the subculture or unit based on the research question" (Fetterman, 2010, p. 35).

Gaining access to the field and community is an integral part of ethnographic fieldwork. However, positioning the researchers in the community is quite crucial too. Alasuutari (1999) points out that audience ethnographers can act as an "insider" because they study their own culture and have already acquired what Geertz (1983) refers to as "local

knowledge". Nevertheless, it is not as simple as it is in practice. The experience in Kampung Papitusulem provides a different scenario. Although the researchers are culturally and politically proximate to the Javanese community, their academic and professional backgrounds create a boundary to the informants. Syed (2011) mentioned that his education background makes the informants feel uncomfortable and awkward. This educational gap also generates the discourse of "us versus others" (Mankekar, 2002; Gaines, 2005), separating the world between the researcher and the researched. Therefore, building a healthy rapport with the components of the community under study is important in order to gain their trust. In the present case, the researchers presented themselves as "clausal acquaintances" to the community members and this presence appears to be instrumentally helpful in conducting interviews with the informants.

INTERVIEWING LAY AUDIENCE

Interview is the most effective data collection tool in audience ethnography. Giampietro Gobo (2008) argues that ethnographic interviews "… reveal the cultural meanings used by actors, and to investigate aspects of the culture observed" that can provide a clearer picture for the researcher's observation (p. 191). Most of the time, interview is instrumental to "break the ice" between the researcher and the researched in the beginning of fieldwork (Gobo, 2008; Fetterman, 2010).

Interviews in ethnography are divided into several types. Fetterman (2010) suggests that an ethnographer can choose to deliver a structured or semi-structured interview if he or she wishes to gain comprehensive information about the community being researched from the insider's point of view. However, a couple of sessions of informal interviews seems to be technically feasible because it allows a healthy rapport to be established through "a mixture of conversation and embedded question" (Fatterman, 2010, p.41). Moreover, conversational interviews in a less formal ambience enable the ethnographer to share reflective insights with the interviewees (Gray, 2003; Murphy, 2008).

Most audience ethnographers employ in-depth interviews which are followed with thorough analysis. Alasuutari (1999) suggests that audience ethnography usually involves qualitative interviews with not more than twenty informants for its deep and extensive investigation. For example, Katz and Liebes' report on interview with *Dallas* audience represents their "analytical procedure as a whole" that gives readers more comprehensive insights (Alasuutari, 1999, p.52). Some notable audience researchers who also employ qualitative interviewing techniques include Radway (1984), Katz and Liebes (1984, 1990) Ang (1985), Morley (1986) and Gray (1987, 1992). Although they do not purposely conduct an ethnographic study, their work is generally conceived of as prominent examples of audience ethnography due to the insightful cultural meanings they

generate from the audience's interpretation of media use (Seiter, 2004).

In the present study, ten informants were interviewed during the preliminary fieldwork and twenty informants (including the previous ten) in the next fieldwork. The majority of the informants were non-professional rural women, aged between 44 and 72 years old, whose main daily activities were centred on the domestic sphere. They were divided into two categories: the second generation and the third generation of Javanese migrants. Nearly all informants from the former category speak Javanese while the latter generation shifts between *Bahasa Malaysia* and Javanese in their daily conversations. In fact, almost half of the informants chose to answer in Javanese, but it was decided to interview them in *Bahasa Malaysia* and allow them to respond in Javanese. This is more practical because the Javanese spoken in Kampung Papitusulem is *Ngoko* language. It is the colloquial language which serves as the basic level in the Javanese language system. Although *Ngoko* language is acceptable in Malaysian Javanese society (Mohamed, 2001), the researchers preferred to converse in *Bahasa Malaysia* during the interview sessions because it is not polite to speak *Ngoko* language to older people in Javanese society.

The interviews were conducted informally within two to three hours in the informants' house for their convenience. A set of questions were prepared that comprised three sections: television viewing patterns, life history, and civic engagement. In practice, the interview began with questions from any one of the section, depending on the informants' awareness of the current issues. For example, in the aftermath of the MH370 incident[1], one informant sympathetically asked how many Indonesians were missing with the rest of passengers on board, right after inviting the interviewers to sit. She was completely aware of the incident in particular and even expressed her sympathy to the Indonesian fellow researcher. This scenario depicts the view that it is more effective to encourage informants to express an honest opinion on any issues discussed without being influenced by the sentiment in the interview questions. Other than semi-structured interviews, interviewers also engaged in conversational interviews with the informants during participant observation. For example, when joining with the informants during their television viewing, the interviewers asked several questions pertaining to the respondents' interpretation of the television programmes they were viewing.

It is suggested that as an ethnographer, one should also drop his or her status as an interviewer and present themselves as a casual acquaintance. As Maria Bakardjieva (2005) suggests, researchers can play a role as a "welcome visitor" in order to be accepted in the private lives of the research subjects (p.79). It is believed that this method allows the informants to act naturally and give genuine responses on their own accord. For example, in an interview with a 72-year-old living-alone informant, the researchers deliberately acted

as the respondent's TV-watching companion and strategically embedded the interview questions in casual, friendly conversations. As a result, she could openly respond with unaffected and reflexive information. This was different to the preliminary interview where the respondent seemed to make up answers to meet her perceptions of the researchers' expectations while humbly regarded herself as an illiterate.

Interview in research is always conceived of as a formal engagement between interviewers and interviewees, especially if the interview uses structured questions (Fetterman, 2010). Usually, both parties tend to show standard attitudes of decency and respect towards each other, probably due to the difference of age, social status and academic backgrounds. In many societies, it is a mark of moral standards for younger persons to look up to the older ones for their longer life experiences . Even though the interviewer may have a higher level of education, he or she should exhibit good manners to interviewees who are older than them. Visual appearance also contributes to creating formal ambience in interviews. An interviewer wearing an attractive urban outfit may alienate the interviewees and lead to an awkward situation about which the respondent may not be comfortable. Most commonly, educational background may become a dividing line between the interviewers and the interviewees because the ones with lower educational qualifications may be hesitant about what they should be saying.

In general, interviewing lay members of audiences requires fundamental humanistic approaches to enhance the level of mutual respect between interviewers and interviewees. This process, according to Seiter (2013), can be achieved by being cognisant of at least two process issues. The first is to be aware that rigid control over the interview can discourage sincere feedback. The second is the need to be aware that intimate proximity can result in the researchers becoming too deeply involved in the informants' private lives. In certain communities, gender can also contribute to the gap between researchers and the respondents. For example, as a male researcher, Syed (2011) faced challenges interviewing middle-aged Malay women regarding their consumption of non-Western soap operas without the assistance from a mutual acquaintance. In addition, the gender difference also restricts Malay women from discussing sensitive issues especially on televised romance. Therefore, it is essential to provide a gender-friendly atmosphere by considering the cultural and social norms pertaining to man-women physical proximity. At the same time, genuine audience ethnography should combine interviews and participant observation that enable researcher immersion in the research setting in order to overcome limitations and difficulties (Alasuutari, 1999; Ritson and Elliott, 1999).

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation is the key method of ethnography that complements interviews. Hamersley and Atkinson (2007) point out that the feedback given by the interviewee

may depict basic descriptions that lead to observations. As Morley (1989) contends:

> *Should you wish to understand what I am doing, it would probably be as well to ask me. I may well, of course, lie to you or otherwise misrepresent my thoughts or feelings, for any number of purposes, but at least, through my verbal responses, you will begin to get some access to the kind of language, the criteria of distinction and the types of categorizations, through which I construct my (conscious) world* (p. 25).

Morley's argument shows the importance of participant observation as part of the audience ethnography approach to studying media audiences. Gray (2003,) indicates that participant observation may bring media and cultural studies closer to "proper ethnographies" as touted by critics (p. 16). The application of this approach can be seen in many studies such as Marie Gillespie's study of Punjabi youth in Southall (1995), Ritson and Elliott's investigation of adolescent advertising audiences (1999), Abu-Lughod's ethnographic study of Arab-speaking women's television use (2000), and La Pastina's case study of media engagement in rural Brazil (2005). La Pastina (2005) argues that audience ethnography should return to its traditional practice that includes fieldwork and in-depth immersion with the data in order to establish thorough understanding, self-reflexivity,

and rapport between the researchers and the subject.

Participant observation involves collecting field notes, tallies, drawings, photographs and other forms of material evidence (Crang & Cook, 2007). In Kampung Papitusulem, the current study used a voice recorder to record every encounter and participated in the community events such as *rewang* (mutual cooperation), *ngaji Jumaat* (Friday congregations) and also the informants' television viewing. Sometimes photos and films were taken and field notes were written using smartphones when the time and place was appropriate. Using photography devices or jotting down notes on a notebook to capture the everyday life of the informants can create an awkward situation and violate the informants' privacy. It can also encourage them to act in a certain way that does not represent their actual concerns and feelings. Therefore, the ethnographer must show common courtesy to deal with the ethical issues in every situation encountered in the field.

Basically, participant observation allows an ethnographer to discover additional information that cannot be provided by the informants in interviews. During the fieldwork, researchers happened to be involved in *rewang* several times in which it was learned that the Javanese-styled cultural practice of mutual cooperation nourishes the sense of belonging to the community among the society members, including the informants. In the *rewang*, people casually speak Javanese and mark their social circle as to have only Javanese

descendants or other *kampung* residents who marry into a Javanese family. It shows that the cultural tradition which they inherit from their Javanese migrant ancestors plays a significant role in maintaining their Javanese identity. While *rewang* allows the informants to gather and meet their fellow communions to exchange the current updates on their family and personal matters, it also serves as an engaging platform for the informants to discuss their experiences with television programmes. In one occasion of *rewang* which the researchers participated, informants were observed joining a group of women to casually talk about the episodes of a *Sinetron* that they were currently following. They also shared some knowledge they acquired from watching Ustaz Kazim Ilyas' *Kalau Dah Jodoh*, an Astro channel's television format of an Islamic sermon.

Certainly, participant observation has provided comprehensive information that enriches and strengthens the feedback from interviews. As mentioned earlier, informants who may not be able to speak openly during the interview due to its formal nature (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010; Seiter et al., 2013), would probably be more outspoken in their private domain. In the present investigation, one informant was deliberately chosen to be the "key actor" (Fetterman, 2010) in the research setting mainly in terms of accompanying researchers for interview sessions and helping to convince the other potential informant to speak up. Although this particular informant had difficulties

expressing her thoughts in the interviews, she was able to converse effectively during everyday television viewing by commenting on particular issues. For example, when observed watching a documentary that depicted the life of Indonesia's *Sasak*[2] tribal community, she mistakenly identified the women who dressed up in *kain batik*[3] on television as Javanese due to the similarity of the traditional clothes. This situation gives the researchers the idea that this particular informant's interactions with television images reinforced her identity and belonging. In fact, participant observation assisted the researchers to discover that some community gatherings appear to be a "public sphere" (Habermas, 1962) for television conversations among the Malay-Javanese women in this study.

While previous audience ethnographic studies only conduct in-depth interviews (for example Katz & Liebes, 1984, 1990; Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985; Morley, 1986; Gray, 1987, 1992), the current audience ethnographies embrace the traditional practice that obligates the researchers to live with the community. Selected participant observation can help the ethnographer to capture certain aspects of culture that audiences deal with in their everyday lives. The ethnographer may select to participate in particular events in the society under study, depending on their research questions and aims. It is different from traditional ethnography which encourages the fieldworker to actively join practically every occurrence and build a grounded theory from every encounter in the field.

Precisely, participant observation can also serve to justify the "ethnographic validity" (Roldan, 2002) and it can be achieved by employing several procedures, including triangulation (Maxwell & Miller, 2000; Maxwell, 2012; Hamersly, 2014). In this way, this study has addressed a very fundamental methodological issue of audience ethnography through in-depth interview and participant observation in partially immersed long-term fieldwork.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF MALAYSIAN JAVANESE DIASPORA IDENTITY AND TELEVISION

The ethnography in Kampung Papitusulem, as presented in this article, is the exploration of television-based interpretive identity practices among the diaspora of Javanese women in rural Malaysia. According to Umi M. Khattab (2010), the Indonesian migrants, including Javanese, and their descendants are considered as diaspora that constitute Malay cultural hybrid identities. As Malaysian citizens of the Malay racial group and of Indonesian descent, these women are exposed to various images of identity practices that represent both Malaysian and Indonesian culture on a regular basis. The early observation that leads to this study shows that the Kampung Papitusulem women enjoy Indonesian soap operas that serve as reminiscent of homeland. They are proud of their Javanese roots and retain that pride by sustaining the Javanese cultural customs and traditions.

This study has so far discovered that the Javanese women of Papitusulem identify reflective images of identity in the Indonesian soaps and hold on to the political allegiance and religious morality through the interpretation of local television news and realities respectively. They acquaint themselves with the indoctrination of UMNO[4] about the national and economic security as well as the religious freedom which they conceive of as the fundamental constituents of Malaysian pride. As members of the Malay society, they comply with the Malay cultural norms and values as prescribed by the UMNO leaders through television. At the same time, they search for the "narrative of us" that represents them as Javanese/Malay and Muslim in the local dramas, realities, and more importantly, the imported Indonesian soaps. Through lifetime social cognitive experiences, their efforts of experiential verification and evaluative self-consciousness convince them to embrace the "interpretive identity practices" of their existence.

Adopted from Gerson's identity practices (2001), this notion of interpretive identity practices refers to the routine actions and ways of thinking, interpreted from the representative images and texts on television, which enable members of a community to project collective identities. The actuation of this conceptual framework certainly requires a detailed investigation in which interviewing the television audience seems to be insufficient. Participant observation and actual immersion in the field must be undertaken to understand how television influences on identities are really exercised by the audience members in their natural settings.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the methodological issues pertaining to the practices of ethnography in audiences and media reception studies with an example of ethnographic practices in Kampung Papitusulem, Malaysia. Critics have identified important questions about how media and communication researchers use the term to designate a study that depends mainly on qualitative interviews in order to collect data. Some issues that are raised by the critics include lack of time spent in the field and the absence of participant observation (Spitulnik, 1993; Gray, 2003; Seiter, 2004). However, media scholars argue that audience ethnographers require less time to conduct their research because most of them study their own society and focus their research questions on an aspect of culture partially, not entirely (Morley, 1992; Alasuutari, 1999; Seiter, 2004).

Although classic ethnographic studies of audience and media reception (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Morley, 1986; Brunsdon, 1986; Gray, 1987) did not totally adopt the nature of traditional ethnography, contemporary audience ethnographies apply at least two basic ethnographic techniques of data collection: in-depth interview and participant observation. Drawing upon the current audience ethnography literature (Mayer, 2003; La Pastina, 2004; Machado-Borges, 2007) and the empirical fieldwork in Kampung Papitusulem, this article suggests three key methods of ethnographic data collection needed in the understanding of rural audiences in Malaysia. The methods include partial immersion of fieldwork, conversational interviews, and selected participant observation which particularly befit the social and cultural characteristics of the Malay-Javanese women in the *kampung*. This is due to the idea that they deal with both textual and contextual cultural identities through social experiences and television images.

From ethnographic experiences in the *kampung*, it can be concluded that television narratives play a substantial role in reinforcing cultural and political identity among Malay Javanese women. While cultural and social representatives in local and imported Indonesian soap operas influence their understanding of self-narrative as a member of the Javanese community, political discourses in mainstream news substantially reinforces their political identity as part of Malay society under UMNO hegemony. More importantly, these identifications with different kinds of identities appear in their everyday negotiation with social and cultural structures that define them as citizens of Malaysia. To understand television consumption and its influences on the construction of identity among a certain cultural community, one definitely needs to experience and live with them. Therefore, ethnography appears to be an appropriate research methodology for studying television audiences mainly in relation to the subject of identity.

Notes:

1. On 8 March 2014, the whole country was shocked by the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 (MH370) en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. The national carrier's jetliner with 239 people on board disappeared in the airspace between Malaysia and Vietnam and made national and international headlines bringing great grief to the entire nation. Among the missing passengers were seven Indonesians, the compatriots of one of the interviewers. At the point of completion of this article, the ill-fated aircraft was believed to have been lost in the Indian Ocean.

2. *Sasak* ethnic is one of the Indonesian ethnic groups that dwell in Nusa Tenggara Timur province. Despite the difference in culture, the *Sasak* look physically similar to the Javanese and the other traditional communities in Southeast Asia.

3. *Kain batik* refers to the traditional cloth worn to cover the lower part of the body that is synonymous with the rural women, especially in the Javanese community.

4. UMNO (United Malay Nation Organization) is the political base for the social, cultural and economic assurance designated to the Malay society. The dominant party component in the *Barisan National* coalition has governed the country, along with the other two components, namely MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC Malaysian Indian Congress),

since independence. Apparently, the institution plays a prominent role in shaping the Malay culture and politics particularly, and the Malaysian nation generally.

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