

## THE INTERSTITIAL MODE OF SABAH TELEMOVIE PRODUCTION

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Sabah telemovie production has started in the year 2002. One of the challenges facing by Sabah filmmakers since then is funding. This situation has led the local filmmakers to apply an alternative method of producing telemovie. By referring to Hamid Naficy's accented cinema theory, this paper examines the similarity between Sabah telemovie production mode and the interstitial mode of production, an aspect in accented cinema that defines filmmakers' engagement in production and distribution practices that are either "interstitial", "artisanal" or "collective" and in turn, the films they produce give rise to alternate modes of consumption (Naficy, 2001, p. 40). This paper also suggests several methods to improve the current Sabah telemovie production.

**Keywords:** Sabah telemovie production; Sabah filmmaker, alternative mode of production; interstitial mode of production

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sabah telemovie production began in 2002 with the production of *'Proton Saga Kelabu'* by Jawat Pelangi. The telemovie is distributed by Sky-Laser Enterprise. Since then, Sabahan native-born director starting to emerge and began to produce telemovie with Sabah local content. Sabah filmmaker like Abu Bakar Allah, Tony Francis Gitom and Ramli Ahmad are some of the prominent names in Sabah telemovie production in the early 2000. Each of them have produced telemovies that represent the Sabah local culture by using local cast, language and scene background. However, in this recent year, Sabahan filmmakers are facing difficulties in term of funding and the 'captive market' for their telemovies. This situation has cause Sabahan filmmaker only able to produce low budget telemovie until today. This has led Sabahan filmmaker to adapt and apply an alternative method within the limited resources to produce new telemovie. An example of the alternative mode adapted by Sabahan filmmaker is the production of *'Home of Hope'* (2015) by Marc Abbas. His telemovie were self-funded and occasionally he received donation from friends and family. He minimized the production cost by hiring amateur cast and crew among the local Sabahan. He only used basic filming equipment. Marc Abbas had to play multiple roles by involving as a producer, director, scriptwriter, cinematographer and actor for his telemovie (Sibangan, personal communication 6 December, 2018). The telemovie are fully in Malay speaking with Sabahan accent. Similar production method can be detected with other Sabahan filmmakers such as Alfred Ujin's *'Kobilangan'* (2010) and Tony Francis Gitom's *'Orang Bilang Ah Chong'* (2011). Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the mode of Sabah telemovie production by emphasize on Tony Francis Gitom's film workshop (*Perkampungan Filem*) and the similarity with the characteristic of Naficy's interstitial mode of production in term of funding, language, the nationalities of cast and crew, filmmakers perform multiple functions..

## 2. BACKGROUND

In 2019, Sabahan telemovie production has increased vibrantly as more newcomers participated in the production of telemovies. However, Sabahan filmmakers are currently facing difficulties especially in terms of funding. This has significantly restrained their capabilities to produce telemovies that conform to the standard of Malaysian mainstream cinema. Nonetheless, it does not deter the passion of Sabahan filmmakers to produce more telemovies. Instead, they adapt to the difficult situation by exercising an alternative mode of production and funding the production from their own saving. Since 2005, Sabahan filmmaker such as Tony Francis Gitom has financed and organized a number of telemovie workshops (or *Perkampungan Filem*) to provide training in all aspects of filmmaking such as acting and film equipment operation. The workshops are predominantly participated by local amateur filmmakers. In the production of telemovies, the producer and director consistently play multiple roles in order to reduce the production cost and to exert control over the production. Sabahan telemovie production shares many of the characteristics associated with Hamid Naficy's notion of interstitial mode production (2001). This research aims to establish a framework within Naficy's interstitial mode of production to explain the activities of telemovies production in Sabah.

### 3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the effort to improve the production value of telemovie in Sabah, the impediment of telemovie production is fundamentally linked to lack of funding. This problem has negatively affected the production value and potential market of the telemovies produced. The possible causes of this problem are the lack of attention from the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) and the 'captive market' that derived from limited consumption and reception. Thus, an investigation on the telemovie production through Naficy's interstitial mode of production may help to understand the activities of Sabahan telemovie production and potential market of the creative output.

### 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory of accented cinema theory was introduced by Hamid Naficy in 2001 as a method to study films content that has a correlation to exilic or diaspora. He introduces a framework on ways to identify and analyze the certain film to be consider as an accented film. An accented film is by Naficy's definition an accented film that has exilic and diasporic content by the filmmaker. The varied types of method of identifying an accented film or filmmaker are significant because the experience of exilic or diasporic differs from one person to another (Naficy, 2001). Naficy's ways of identifying accented cinema film are by situating the characteristic of the filmmaker, geography mapping, the stylistic approach, and the accented style. In the context of productions, he presented several methods to approach the subject. Those are the Post-industrial, Accented, and Interstitial. This paper applied the interstitial mode of production as a conceptual framework to study further the Sabahan filmmaker alternative method of producing a film. The reason of the application of Naficy's framework because of Sabahan filmmaker operate within the interstitial space. The interstitial space are utilized by Sabahan filmmaker as a space to presents their ethnicity, gender, and class. As said by Naficy, the filmmaker operate within and astride from the crack of the system (Naficy, 2001). Therefore, by referring to Naficy's interstitial mode of production, this framework analyze Sabah telemovie production through its funding source, this is the crucial part of the interstitial mode. Accented filmmaker usually self-invest for their own film, raising funds and work within the constraint of their resources. Other than that, this paper analyze the other essential characteristic of interstitial mode such as the use of language, the origin of cast and crew. Lastly is the multi-role function performed by the filmmaker.

The application of accented cinema theory can be referred to the article journal wrote by Asumen Suner titled Outside in: 'Accented Cinema' at Large. She argued that the accented cinema has a broader application in film studies as she applied the method of interstitial mode of production to analyze three non-exilic or diaspora filmmaker and their film, namely Bahman Ghobadi's *A Time for Drunken Horses* (1999), Wong Kar Wai's *Happy Together* (1997), and *Distant* by Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Although all of the selected films or filmmaker in a sense not exilic or diaspora, but all the films exhibit the thematic and styles which fit into the interstitial production mode within the accented cinema theory (Suner, 2016). Therefore, Asumen Suner broadens the application of the accented cinema in film studies.

The significance of Asumen Suner work is interstitial mode of production can be applied to non-exilic or diaspora film. The Sabah telemovie does not exhibit the characteristic of exile and diaspora. However, Sabah telemovie has the thematic and style within the interstitial mode of production.

Asumen Suner identified the similarity in the context of finance and multiple roles of talents in Bahman Ghobadi, Wong Kar-Wai, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan films. Asumen Sumner concluded that all of the film's finance were small part because it was a self-financed project. The films also exhibit the use of multiple roles for talents. The reasons for multiple roles were the intent of the filmmaker to hold the authorship of the films. Therefore, the films made entirely by the vision and the perspectives of the filmmaker alone (Suner, 2016).

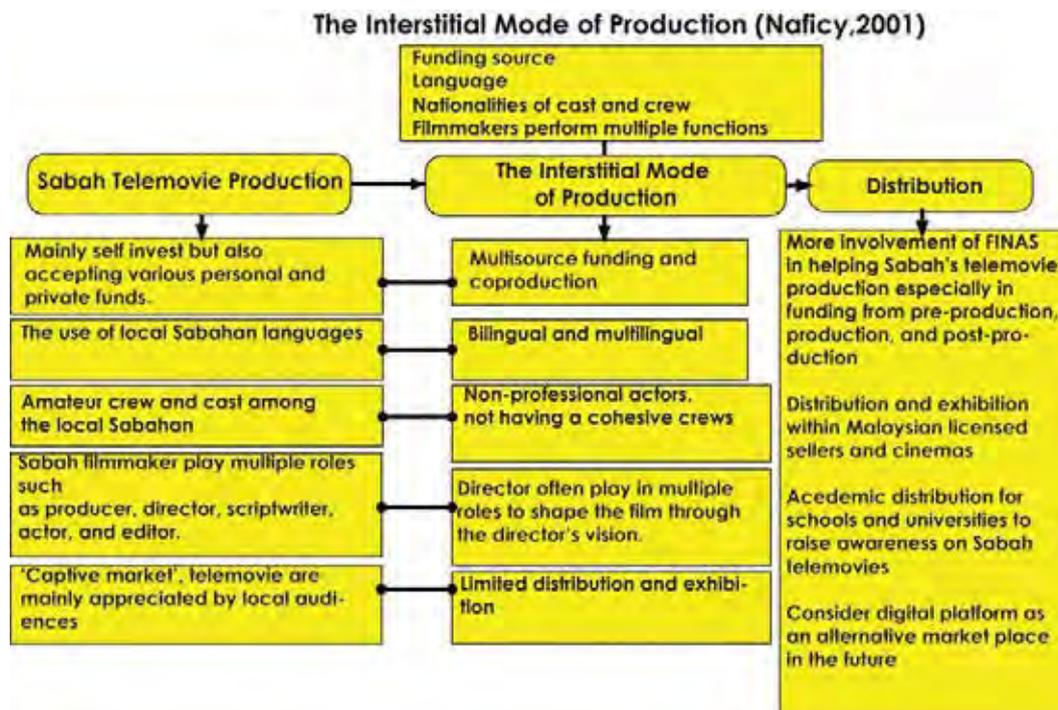
Another paper that discussed about the Naficy's interstitial mode of production was in Arezou Zalipour's *Interstitial and Collective Filmmaking in New Zealand: The Case of Asian New Zealand film*. Zalipour examines the mode of production by searching for similarity with Naficy's interstitial mode of production with diasporic filmmaker such as Stephen Kang with his film *'Dream'* (2005). Zalipour stated that the film were made with the 'one-man production' method. This meant the producer are the cinematographer, the editor and asking his or her friends for assistance. Zalipour explained this method were meant to reduce the spending of a film production and the producer remain as the main author of his or her film. The situation of Stephen Kang are similar with Sabahan filmmaker that they have to produce telemovie within a limited resources by filmmaker perform multi-task in the production and accepting assistance from the local Sabah communities.

The characteristics of interstitial mode highlight the funding source of the production, the use of language, the origin of cast and crew, multi-role function performed by the filmmaker. Although Naficy's emphasised on exilic and diaspora film, Asumen Suner has broaden the application of interstitial mode framework to non-exilic and diasporic film. Sabah telemovie productions shared many characteristics of Naficy's interstitial mode of production. The characteristics that are significantly observed in Sabah telemovie production are self-finance telemovie; the emphasis of using local Sabah language; the cast and crew consist of local Sabahan; the producer performed multiple-tasks as to reduce expenditure and to maintain as the main author of the telemovie.

Furthermore, Zalipour explained diasporic filmmaker in New Zealand experienced challenges because of the cultural constraint. Therefore, the diasporic filmmaker only able to produce a small number of films. Zalipour statement also represents the situation of audiences in Malaysia. According to the study of *Malaysian Film Industry in Transformation: Challenges and Potential in 2014*, the mainstream audience in Malaysia belong to the lower and middle-class of Malay ethnicity (Aziz, Hashim, & Ibrahim, 2014). This presents a difficult situation for Sabahan filmmaker because their telemovies represent Sabah local culture that is distinct with the culture of mainstream Malaysia. Therefore, Sabah telemovie market is in a 'captive' state because the main consumer for the telemovie are local Sabahan audiences.

The state of 'captive market' of Sabah telemovie production is not something new in Malaysia. Similar with the situation of Malay cinema during the 1960's. The downfall of the Malay film industry has led major studios to search an alternative market for their film to be consume. Rather than exploring new potential for a wider audience, the Malay film industry decided to focus on the Malay as the main audience (Gray, 2010). However, the 'captive market' has caused the limitation imposed on Malay-language film in term of expansion and improvement. The similarity between Malay film industry in 1960's and Sabah telemovie production is the restriction experienced by the filmmaker caused by the 'captive market'. Therefore, Sabah filmmakers have to adapt and devise an alternative method produce film by reducing expenditure, the use of amateur cast and crew, use of basic film production equipment, and film producer perform multiple tasks. One of the example of Sabah alternative method of producing telemovie is the '*Perkampungan Filem*' organized by Tony Francis Gitom a local Sabahan filmmaker.

## 5. FINDINGS



**Figure 1:** Framework of Naficy's interstitial mode of production and Sabah Telemovie Production

Figure 1 shows the relationship between Sabah Telemovie Production, the Interstitial Mode of Production and the Distribution channels that are adapted from Naficy (2001) Interstitial Mode of Production model.

### 5.1 Funding

According to Tony Francis Gitom, a telemovie production cost must be limited under RM 10 000 to ensure profits. Therefore, the '*Perkampungan Filem*' helps to reduce cost by using a small number of cast and crew. This method also allow him to produce film that represents

his view of Sabah culture without intervention from other parties. However, Tony Francis Gitom still welcome support from various personal either private or government organisation. "I'm not worried because I'm not a government servant. I don't have importance elsewhere. I can do my own independent filming here. If I don't have any film project going on, I still can do other work here in my village and I have no problem with that. I don't really approach FINAS for their fund. If they don't approve funding for me, it's fine with me. Let me do this on my own (*Perkampungan Filem*), because from the year 2005 until now I have been using the same method. There's no mention that FINAS would help if they want to help that's fine, if they don't, it's okay too". (Sibangan, personal communication, 8 December 2018).

Tony Francis Gitom statement above explained that through his own experiences, film is mainly financed by himself. Participant voluntarily shares their resources during the film workshop and it helps to reduce the amount of expenditure because Sabah telemovie production rarely received financial aid (Sibangan, personal communication, 8 December 2018). Other than that, Sabah filmmaker accepted the private donation from non-participant. The '*Perkampungan Filem*' and donation from various personal is an alternate method for a Sabahan filmmaker to produce film. Thus, the method of Sabahan filmmaker to fund their film is similar with Naficy's interstitial mode. Naficy explained that filmmaker often have to invest and be creative in raising funds for their film (Naficy, 2001).



**Figure 2:** Example of donation during the '*Perkampungan Filem*' for the production of '*Komando Pencen*' by Tony Francis Gitom (Gitom, Komando Pencen, 2019).

The 'captive market' situation experienced by Sabahan filmmaker has caused most of Sabahan telemovie production in small scale. This is to ensure profits when the telemovie are available in the market. According to Tony Francis Gitom, his production can't afford to use a large scale production equipment as it will increase the amount of expenditure in term of rent and hiring professional crew (Sibangan, personal communication, 8 December 2018).

## **5.2 Language**

The telemovies produced through the '*Perkampungan filem*' were all in Malay and local Sabahan language. Therefore, Tony Francis Gitom's telemovie mostly multilingual. Example of telemovies such as '*Atukoi Mokirayou*' (2006), '*Atukoi Mokirayou 2*' (2007), and '*Atukoi*

*Mokirayou 3'* (2006). Tony Francis Gitom believe that language is an essential substance in his telemovie to show Sabahan identity. Tony Francis Gitom said, "If we talk about Sabah content, we include our essence, our language, our culture, our life hood" (Sibangan, personal communication, 8 December 2018). Tony Francis Gitom explained the use of Sabah local language in his film as an essential part of represents authentic local Sabah character and situation in his film. The use of Sabah local language as an important tool in storytelling also agreed by other Sabahan filmmakers such as Alfred Ujin (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018) and Marc Abbas (Sibangan, personal communication, 6 December 2018). They too agreed that Sabahan local language can make their film distinct from other films especially the mainstream Malaysia cinema. Furthermore, Tony Francis Gitom use Sabah local language in his telemovie as a method to represent and uphold his own culture. This is similar to Naficy's interstitial mode of production that multilingual in a film has impact on the reception and serve the communities represents in the film (Naficy, 2001).



**Figure 3 :** Tony Francis Gitom's telemovies that use Malay and local Sabahan language.

### 5.3 Nationalities of Cast and Crew

The selection of cast and crew are mostly amateurs. However, all of them were selected among the local Sabahan. The use of Sabahan cast is to present the authenticity of the Sabah culture in Tony Francis Gitom's telemovie. Other than that, the use of local Sabah language also the main reason for casting local Sabahan talent. This will help to reduce the cost and simplified the film production because the talent doesn't require additional training to speak dialogue in Sabah language. Figure 4 shows the basic equipment used and small number of local amateur casts and crews.



**Figure 4:** Behind the scene during the '*Perkampungan Filem*'.

In the '*Perkampungan Filem*' usually, the cast is also the production crew. Therefore, most of the crew are amateur and only able to operate basic filming equipment.

#### **5.4 Filmmaker Perform Multiple Functions**

Tony Francis Gitom also performs multiple roles inside the production. He was as a producer, scriptwriter, cinematographer, director, and as a cast in his telemovie '*Orang Bilang Ah Chong*'. These as a method to lower the production cost and as a method to assert his control to the content in the telemovie. As mentioned by Naficy, the multiple task perform by the producer is essential for him or her as the main author of the film (Naficy, 2001). Therefore, the multi-roles taken by Tony Francis Gitom helps his film to remain authentic to his own intention and belief for his telemovie.

#### **5.5 Distribution and Suggestion**

The 'captive market' of Sabah telemovie production has caused significant effect to the Sabahan filmmaker. Therefore, Sabahan filmmaker could not compete with the mainstream cinema in Malaysia. As mentioned before, the main audiences in Malaysia belong to the lower and middle-class of Malay ethnicity (Aziz, Hashim, & Ibrahim, 2014).

Sabahan telemovie production can be improved by giving more flexibility for Sabahan filmmaker to distribute their film in Malaysian official sellers and exhibition within the national cinema. This flexibility can encourage more Sabahan filmmaker to be able to sell their product to a wider audience and larger market. Furthermore, this also could help to convince the investor to invest in the Sabah telemovie production.

Academic distribution is important as a method to help raise awareness especially among student in schools and universities about Sabah telemovies. By raising awareness, Sabah telemovie could be approach in academically. Therefore, a discussion about Sabahan telemovie could be more vibrant in term of findings problem and solution in improving the Sabah telemovie production. Other than that, by exposing student from schools and universities could inspire future local Sabahan filmmaker that would bring a new idea for Sabahan telemovie.

The Sabah telemovie producer can start to consider investing in digital platform (Youtube and Vimeo) as a new alternative market place for their product. Sabahan telemovie producer are fully aware by selling their product in DVD format won't be profitable in a long term. According to Tony Francis Gitom, he predict the DVD market only available or relevant for next five years. Thus, all of their future product probably will be in digital format (Sibangan, personal communication, 8 December 2018). Therefore, a digital platform might be suitable for future Sabah telemovie producers and the new platform could help them to reach wider audiences.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This paper aims to seek the similarity between Sabah telemovie production mode and Naficy's Interstitial mode of production. Therefore, this paper concludes there is a bridge in term of funding, language, the people involved and multi-roles of the filmmaker. As Naficy

suggest such production mode exist mainly affected by finance, Sabah telemovie producer applied an alternative method of producing film as to lower the cost of production by using a small local cast and talent; filmmaker performs multiple tasks in production; in the same time preserved the authenticity of Sabahan culture in the film.

As this moment, more Sabahan filmmakers started to participate in the telemovies industry. The telemovies they produced highlight the diversity of culture, language, and custom of Sabahan such as the Kadazandusun, Murut, Rungus, and Bajau. Sabah's telemovies are appreciated by the general populace of Sabah with some reproduced illicitly for the distribution in West Malaysia. Thus, an academic approach to study the telemovie production would help to appreciate, promote and market the telemovies for not only domestic but international reception.

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