
**CULTURE IS THE
WIDENING OF THE
MIND AND OF THE
SPIRIT.**

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**THE EMERGENCE
OF SABAHAN
TELEMOVIES
AND CULTURAL
REPRESENTATION**

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Abstract

The advent of digital technology in filmmaking has a tremendous effect on film production in the digital era. One of the advantages of digital filmmaking is lower production cost and a minimal workforce, and these have benefited many low-budget independent film production. In particular, Sabahan telemovies production has been benefited from technological advancement. The telemovie, *Proton Saga Kelabu* that produced in early 2000 marks the emergence of Sabahan telemovie production. In 2004, Sabahan telemovie director, Abu Bakar Ellah directed *Percintaan Tanpa Izin* (PTI) that depicts a profound sense of Sabahan cultural identity. This paper aims to examine the emergence of Sabah telemovie production and to discuss the Sabah cultural identity that represented in the telemovie PTI. Through a close analysis of the telemovie, the discussion focused on the representation of Sabah cultural identity in the aspects of shooting location, native language and traditional costume that emblemized in the telemovie.

Keywords: Sabahan telemovie; Abu Bakar Ellah; Sabahan cultural identity representation; Sabahan native language; Sabahan traditional costume

Introduction

The development of digital filmmaking has greatly benefited filmmakers in producing their film. It has eliminated most of the drawback that experienced in traditional filmmaking. Such as the drawback of storing film stock, which needs complicated methods in order to preserve the condition of the film. This means that film stock needs to be handled by a specific person with specific skills. Other than that, film stock needs to be stored in a specific type of room as the film is highly sensitive to light and dust. Therefore, the process of storing film stock will take time and resource. However, the arrival of digital technology solves much of that issue. Today, storing footages can be done digitally which only require a person with limited skills and can be stored to any hard drive (Culkin & Randle, 2003). Therefore, filmmaking becoming more flexible and user-friendly than ever before. In Malaysia, the digital filmmaking also helps to breed a new generation of independent filmmakers such as James Lee, Ho Yuhang, Tan Chui Mui, Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, and Deepak Kumaran Menon. In the beginning, all mentioned directors rely on digital technology because they do not have the resources to make film through conventional method (Ahmad, Beng, & Kim, 2017). As digital technology benefited filmmakers in West Malaysia, the East also takes notice as Sabahan filmmakers took the opportunity to tell their story by producing films using digital technology.

The impact of digital technology on Sabahan telemovie can be seen in the production of *'Orang Kita'* in 2003. The production consists of a small team with a budget of only RM10,000. The production greatly benefited from digital technology because of the minimal requirement for workforce and experience to operate essential equipment such as the camera. The inexpensive cost of digital technology also allows Sabahan filmmaker to experience trial and error with little effect on their production in the context of time and resources. The ability to experiment in filmmaking is crucial because the majority of Sabahan filmmakers in the early 2000 have none or limited knowledge in filmmaking. Therefore, the trial and error help the progression of Sabahan filmmakers to better the quality of their film. The valuable experience also helps Sabahan filmmakers to construct their own stories that are inspired by their cultural identity.

Until today, Sabahan filmmaking is still largely unexplored in the academic world. According to Anuar and Kim (1996, pp. 270-272) "Malay[sian] television dramas and films rarely represent non-Malay characters [...] and marginalise members of other ethnic groups". Their assertion reflects the scarcity of non-Malay and other ethnic group including Sabahan people and their stories on Malaysian screen. In some early Malaysian films directed by P. Ramlee, multi-ethnicity is depicted in the films such as *Sesudah Suboh* (1967) and *Gerimis* (1968). These films convey messages such as unity of multi-ethnic relationship in Malaysia (Wei, Pillai, & Liu, 2018). Nonetheless, the representation of Sabahan people since the inception of Malaysian films is rare. The fact is supported by Sabahan filmmaker, Nadira Ilana, as she states, "Malaysian film's narrative largely biases toward the peninsular" (N. Ilana, personal communication, August 18, 2017). Her statement points to a large gap of the untold stories and unexposed Sabahan people in Malaysian filmmaking. Thus, this leads to the questions, "What are the stories of Sabahan people in Sabahan telemovies?", and "How are they being represented in the telemovies?" One way to seek an explanation for these questions is to understand the story of Sabah people in the telemovies made by Sabahan filmmaker and to examine how their cultural identity is being represented in their films.

The Emergence of Sabahan Telemovies

Emerged in the era of digital filmmaking, Sabahan telemovie production began in early of the year 2000 with the first telemovie titled *Proton Saga Kelabu*. The telemovie was only meant to be released in Video Compact Disc (VCD) and Digital Video Disc (DVD) format which also known as DTV (Direct to Television) or Straight to VCD/DVD. The content of *Proton Saga Kelabu* consists of dialogue from Sabahan native language Dusun and Bahasa Melayu speaks in Sabahan accent. The casts of the telemovies selected from the local talents in Sabah. Two of the main casts in the telemovie are Abu Bakar Ellah and Ramli Ahmad (also known as Ramli Carlo); both eventually direct their telemovies. *Proton Saga Kelabu* was directed by Zuzela Mohd (also known as Ela Sabah), and the telemovie was shot in the state of Sabah. However, as Abu Bakar Ellah asserts, *'Proton Saga Kelabu'* had encountered some problems during the post-production that caused the telemovie to be halted and discontinued (A. B. Ellah, personal communication, March 16, 2013). At about the same time, Abu Bakar Ellah has also been working with another producer, Mohd Haji Salleh to co-produce