

In the Minds of Philippine Audiences: Constructions of Malaysian Culture from Two TV Soap Operas

Aleli A. Quirante and Victorio N. Sugbo

Prolonged exposure to specific media programs has been observed to develop certain perceptions, attitudes and particular constructions of reality. As a powerful medium that captures the attention of a wide range of audiences, television (TV) soap operas shape and reshape the latter's values and beliefs.

This paper aims to determine what information co-productions of Philippine and Malaysian TV companies provide Filipino viewers in terms of knowledge constructions about Malaysia and its culture. Two TV soap operas, otherwise known as *telenovela* or *teleserye*, formed the bases of the investigation. Data were gathered from 80 discussants through Focus Group Discussions.

Findings reveal that much of the mediated constructions of Malaysia and its culture have been limited to what the narrative yarns of the TV soap operas provide. Since the TV soap operas were so structured as to tell stories about cultural conflicts and human struggles, viewers' constructions of Malaysia and its culture revolved mainly around interracial relations, arranged marriages, the practice of Islam, landmarks of Malaysia and the Chinese presence in that country.

Key words: TV soap opera, mediated communication, narrative, media exposure

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded on August 8, 1967, believes in the creation of “a community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage, and bound by a common regional identity” (ASEAN Primer, n.d.). It intends to realize this objective by 2020. ASEAN has established functional committees to harness cooperation in areas such as education, social welfare, health and nutrition, culture and information, drugs and narcotics, and others (Social Welfare and Development, 2009).

Several projects and programs have been formulated and launched to ensure that the objectives of the organization are met, especially with regard to the cultivation of a regional identity. In this light, the Network of East Asia Think Tanks (NEAT) Working Group on Media held a meeting in June 2008 in Seoul, Korea, where a total of 19 participants from 12 ASEAN Plus Three (APT)¹ countries attended the workshop. The policy recommendations of

the working group involved TV drama and film co-productions among some countries (NEAT Working Group on Media Report, 2008).

The idea of TV and film co-productions has been of interest to the ASEAN because, more than being vehicles to make the organization known to the members, these cooperative efforts foster the development of a regional identity and encourage political understanding. Ordinary citizens in these countries know little about one another's political organization, economic system and culture. In the Philippines, Malaysia rises to prominence whenever the Philippine media report about Malaysia's popular political oppositionist, Anwar Ibrahim, the Ramadan, and the country's beautiful and multicultural landscape.

Similarly, Thailand becomes of central interest in the Philippine media whenever it faces a political upheaval like a nationwide unrest or a military takeover. It is for this reason that the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Committee and the NEAT Working Group on Media have thought of the social and cultural potential of TV and film co-productions.

In the Philippines, the most popular TV genre is the soap opera. Often referred to as *teleserye*, this term has been derived from television (*tele*) and *serye* (series). In the 1990s, foreign soap operas, particularly Mexican *telenovelas*, invaded Philippine television and made Latin American actress, Thalia, popular in the country. It was touted that "her visit was surpassed only by Pope John Paul II's visit a year earlier in 1995" (Philippine Entertainment Portal, 2007). In 2003, *Meteor Garden*, a Taiwanese soap opera, was introduced to Philippine audiences and this started the trend in featuring dramas called "Asianovelas" from Korea (Koreanovela) and Japan, but which were dubbed in Filipino (Vinculado, 2006).

In 2007, GMA Network Inc. pioneered the co-production of the television soap opera *Muli* (international title: *In Love Again*) with Malaysian firm Cre-Asian Sbn. Bhd. It starred Filipino actors Alfred Vargas and Marian Rivera and Malaysia's Carrie Lee. Not to be left behind, ABS-CBN ventured with Malaysia's Double Vision in the making of *Kahit Isang Saglit (A Time for Us)* which starred Jericho Rosales and Malaysian actress Carmen Soo. The soap opera was aired in the Philippines in the last quarter of 2008, and in Malaysia in January 2009.

Despite being commercial endeavors, have the two teleseryes contributed to the awareness and knowledge of another ASEAN member-country's culture? What is the Philippine audience's constructions of Malaysia, its culture and people as a result of viewing the teleseryes?

Exposure to media influences audiences' perception of reality. In fact, prolonged exposure to a similar fare of programs in television fosters social learning, creating in the minds of an audience meanings, values and beliefs. These, in turn, become part of a cognitive frame that they use in viewing and interpreting the world and physical reality. People essentially give importance to such programs by spending time watching them. Often they talk about programs to confirm and reassure themselves that what they have derived from viewing is socially shared and culturally coherent.

According to Granello (1997) in his reception study involving a young female audience's perception of a television program (*Beverly Hills*), the interpretation of a text is not only subjective but also intersubjective. The text or program is decoded and interpreted in terms of the viewers' social and life experiences. There is a variety of reasons why people watch television and soap operas, in particular. Common among these are information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment (McQuail, 1987: 73). Similarly, Kilborne (1992: 75-84) says people watch TV soap operas because these form a "regular part of domestic routine and (constitute) entertaining reward for work, (a) launch pad for social and personal interaction, and identification and involvement with characters." Clearly, the use of media and the gratification obtained from it vary depending on social or psychological needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

Research Objectives and Methods

It was within this purview that this research was conducted. Originally, the aim was to study the viewers of GMA7's *Muli*, but this was expanded to include *Kahit Isang Saglit* when it was aired by ABS-CBN. The objective here was not to compare the two teleseryes' technical merits but to draw from avid viewers what they had constructed about Malaysia and its culture.

The two teleseryes were viewed to track down the stories and to find out what information about Malaysia was being presented. Data were obtained in two batches of focus group discussions (FGDs). The first was on *Muli* in early 2008, and the second, after the airing of *Kahit Isang Saglit*, in late 2008. Each batch was composed of two groups of younger participants (20-35 years old) and two groups of older participants (36-above) from eight FGDs for a total of 80 discussants among avid viewers of the shows in Metro Manila. The FGDs determined the discussants' use of the TV soaps, their prior knowledge about Malaysia, and their constructions about Malaysia and its culture.

Four FGDs were done on *Muli* while the other four were on *Kahit Isang Saglit*. The referral method or snowball technique was used in the selection of

the discussants. A discussant, who was referred by a previous one, became part of the FGD because the latter knew who among his associates avidly viewed the telenovelas. The FGDs were transcribed and used as text in the analysis. The text was studied independently of the production context.

More than two-thirds (68) of the total 80 discussants in the FGD were women, more than half (49) of whom were married. An almost equal number belonged to the younger groups (39) and older groups (41). While 8 claimed to have an average monthly income of P5,000 and below (approximately US\$100), a little more than a fifth (21) claimed an income of P15,001-20,000 (approximately US\$300 to 400).

Housewives and househusbands comprised 28 discussants, and of this number, 10 were unemployed. Others were retired government and private company employees, entrepreneurs, vendors and professionals. The biggest number (23) had some college education, while 13 were college graduates. Eighteen were high school grades while 3 only had some elementary education. All discussants were residents of Metro Manila.

The Teleserye Narratives

Kahit Isang Saglit

The story of *Kahit Isang Saglit* revolved around Rocky Santillan (Jericho Rosales) whose father was murdered when Rocky was a child. A law enforcer, Rocky is assigned to look for a criminal, Ronaldo Dimaandal (Albert Martinez), who has been hiding in Malaysia. While carrying out this mission, he also searches for his father's killers, and in the process bumps into Margaret/Garie (Carmen Soo). Garie is an heiress of a fishing company whose Filipino father had gone back for unknown reasons to the Philippines when she was young.

Through twists and turns in the story, the father of Garie gets reunited with his Malaysian wife, Eunice (Soosan Ho). The former has not been



Figure 1. *Kahit Isang Saglit* poster. Retrieved January 23, 2009 from <http://kahitisansaglit.blogspot.com>

favored by Garie's rich grandmother (Louisa Chong) who now wants Garie to marry a Malaysian businessman (Awal Ashaari). Flashbacks reveal that Rocky's godfather is formerly a corrupt military officer named Anthony Mondragon (Christopher de Leon), who has caused the death of Rocky's father. Even at this time, Mondragon is still very much in love with Garie's mother despite his marriage to another woman, with whom he has a daughter named Alona (Christine Reyes). Alona falls for Rocky, but Rocky treats her more like a sister since he is in love with Garie.

Garie later learns that her real father is Anthony, the man who has raped Eunice. This fact Ronaldo had known even before he married Eunice. Eunice becomes more considerate towards Ronaldo and Rocky and eventually she dies of cancer.

Both Anthony and Ronaldo die in separate shooting incidents. Alona and Garie accept each other as sisters. The ending implies that Garie and Rocky will give each other time to heal past hurts and that they will be together again.

Muli

Muli is about Lukas (Alfred Vargas), an overseas Filipino worker who works in Malaysia as a software engineer for a well-known businessman, Zul (Tony Eusoff). During his absence, his pregnant wife Racquel (Marian Rivera) lives with his Aunt Ason (Odette Khan).

Cheryl (Carrie Lee) is the daughter of a conservative Chinese-Malaysian family. Although she has a fiancé, Zulqarnain Asha'ari (Tony Eusoff), she is to contract an arranged marriage with Lim Soon Huat (Daniel Tan). She and Zul plan to elope, but he backs out because of problems in his family's business. He asks his employee, Lukas (Alfred Vargas) to inform Cheryl that he is not eloping with her. Cheryl turns to Lukas for comfort. Lukas and Cheryl become close friends, with Lukas helping her get over Zul. He falls in love with her but does not reveal his feelings because he has a wife and child in the Philippines.

The plot thickens when Lukas's scheming Aunt Ason reports to him that his wife is seeing her former boyfriend. In the meantime, Cheryl becomes a target of assassins sent by Soon Huat and develops amnesia as a result of an accident. Lukas' wife, Racquel, meanwhile dies of lung cancer. Joshua (Renz Valerio), Racquel's son, joins his



Figure 2. ***Muli*** poster. Retrieved January 23, 2009 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muli_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muli_(TV_series))

father in Malaysia and treats Cheryl as his mother. Zul later returns to Cheryl's life and proposes, but she realizes she loves Lukas more. In the end, she goes to the Philippines with Lukas and Joshua.

TV Uses and Gratification

Television has been used by the discussants for a number of reasons. Some use it as a companion at home. Its soap operas have particularly developed among the discussants a routine. For others, it has served to entertain and has turned them into fans who identified with the characters and actors and actresses.

Companionship

While preparing breakfast, discussants for *Muli*, would, as a matter of habit, turn on the TV in the early morning to watch *Unang Hirit*, a morning show. Those who remain home would either switch off the TV after *Unang Hirit* to do some housework or listen to a radio talk program. After lunch, they would watch TV again until mid-afternoon. In this particular instance, viewing would be done not only for entertainment but also to provide them company while doing other things.

Norma, a discussant from the older group, affirmed:

Ginagamit ko ring orasan ang mga palabas sa TV.
(I also watch TV shows to tell time).

Lyn, from the younger group, said:

Para rin akong may kasama sa bahay pag umalis na ang mga tao.
(It's like having a companion at home after household members have left.)

Routine

Television viewing for the *Kahit Isang Saglit* audiences followed a behavior pattern wherein dinner would be served before the start of the show. This was especially true among those who have children and those who have arrived from work.

Sheila narrated:

I prepare dinner early. Bago mag-six (6) p.m., nagluluto na ako, kasi dating na 'yong asawa ko at kailangan ko ring pakainin ang mga bata. Tapos papatulugin ko na sila para makapanood (ako) ng drama.

(I prepare dinner early. I cook before 6 p.m. since my husband would be coming and I have to feed the children. I put them to sleep so that I could watch the drama).

A trend found in all the FGDs is that, whenever viewers missed an episode, they would make it a point to ask household members, neighbors, friends, or co-workers about what had transpired. This was so because serials followed a chronological unraveling of the story. The cliffhanger ending would keep the viewers in suspense and the re-telling of what was missed provided an agenda for conversations and interaction between individuals who shared the same interest.

Entertainment

Since *Muli* would be aired in the early afternoon, those at home would have already taken their lunch or a nap. Unlike in the morning when attention would be divided between television and housework, TV viewing tended to be more focused in the early afternoon. Discussants in the younger and older groups looked forward to watching *Muli*, saying they found it engrossing and relaxing.

Bert, from the older group, admitted:

Hindi ako natutulog sa tanghali kaya pahinga talaga ang manood ng TV.

(I don't take a nap after lunch. Watching TV is my way of relaxing).

Rosanna, from the younger group, said:

Pagkakain, wala na talaga akong trabaho. Pahinga naman 'no. Umpisa na naman ng bandang mga alas-kuwatro pag malapit nang dumating ang mga bata galing sa eskuwela.

(I have no more work after lunch. So I rest. I start working again at 4 p.m. before my children arrive from school.)

Personal Identity

Like the *Muli* viewers, discussants for the *Kahit Isang Saglit* groups were loyal not only to the TV station (ABS-CBN Channel 2) that aired the soap opera but also to the stars of the network. They did not watch any other channel. In other households, members who switched to other channels were the young children and the father or husband. Most often, the men would also watch the

same TV soap and, after viewing it, would switch to a cable channel to watch sports, news or movies in English.

Weng confirms:

*Suwerte ko, nanunood din ang asawa ko ng **Kahit...** May crush kasi siya kay Garie. Pagkatapos na ng mga dramang pinapanood ko, saka siya manunood sa cable.*

(I'm lucky my husband also watches **Kahit...** because he has a crush on Garie. He watches cable programs after the drama).

Previous Knowledge About Malaysia

It is interesting to note that the younger groups of viewers of the two soap operas were more aware of Malaysia than their older counterparts. This was because they had taken subjects in high school and college that touched on Malaysia.

Mel, a discussant from the younger group and a viewer of **Muli**, said:

Sa Social Studies yata 'yon, History. Basta ang natatandaan ko, sa isang stock lang tayo nanggaling, pati mga Indonesians.

(I think it was in Social Studies, History. What I remember is that we come from the same [racial] stock, including the Indonesians).

Meanwhile, Jojo, also from the younger group who watched **Kahit Isang Saglit** recalled:

Maphilindo'Yun. Maphilindo. Malaysia, Philippines at Indonesia. Tsaka ASEAN. Sa Asian History 'yun. Ayan, natatandaan ko pa.

(Maphilindo. That's it. Maphilindo. Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. And in ASEAN. That's in Asian history. I can still remember.)

Discussants among the older age groups heard about Malaysia from friends or relatives whose family members worked there. Stories shared by overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) also gave them a glimpse of Malaysia.

Bebang shares:

May pinsan akong nagtrabaho sa Malaysia. Sobra raw anghang ng pagkain dun kaya 'di siya masyadong makakain. Kasi 'di pa niya alam noon kung saan may ibang pagkain. Kaya ayun, Chinese food daw ang mada-las niyang kinakain kung 'di siya makapagluto sa tinutuluyan niya.

(I have a cousin who worked in Malaysia. He said food there is so spicy that he could not eat well. He didn't know then where he could buy food. So he often ate Chinese food if he could not find time to cook).

Occasional news about ASEAN, specifically about ministerial meetings and summits, were also a source of information. The information would be limited to names of Malaysians who attended the meetings. The discussants could not recall specific names because these were perceived to be long and, admittedly, they were not paying attention to the news.

Mely, belonging to the older group and a *Kahit Isang Saglit* viewer, had this to say:

Mahirap tandaan ang mga pangalan kasi marami at 'di mo alam kung alin ang first name at last name.

(It's difficult to remember names because they have many names and you don't know which is their first name and which is their last name).

Emma, a discussant from the older group and a *Muli* viewer, revealed:

Minsan naririnig ko tungkol sa mga meeting pero 'di ko masyadong pinapansin.

(Sometimes I heard [news] about the meetings but I didn't pay much attention.)

Islam, the dominant religion in Malaysia, was one aspect that the discussants knew about very well. They got this piece of information from their relatives or friends who worked there. The "azan" (call for prayers) and Ramadan were part of the stories told by OFWs. Fasting as practiced there was compared to fasting among Catholics in the Philippines.

Estrella, from the younger group, said this about the religion portrayed in *Kahit*:

Biro n'yo kung ilang araw silang hindi kumakain? Fasting talaga pag sikat ng araw hanggang sa paglubog. Totoo kaya 'yun – di rin sila umiinom? 'Di kaya ng powers ko'yun.

(Imagine, they don't eat for days? They fast from sunrise to sunset. Is it true they don't also drink [water]? I can't bear that).

On the other hand, Myrna, a focus group discussant belonging to the younger group and who watches *Muli*, said:

Dito, 'di lahat nagfa-fast pag Holy Week. 'Di nga yata 'yun sinusunod. 'Yung matatanda lang yata. Pero 'yung pagngingilin mas sinusunod dito sa pagkaalam ko.

(Here, not everyone fasts during Holy Week. I'm not sure if it is followed. I think only old persons do it. But as far as I know, not eating meat on Fridays of Lent is observed here).

In the end, Philippine TV audiences constructed their own ideas of Malaysia out of the information they get from various sources: school, media news, friends and family members who are OFWs. Along this line, their knowledge about Malaysia and its culture was fragmentary, pieces of information they need to figure out for themselves in order to see the whole.

TV-mediated Constructions of Malaysia and Its Culture

The data suggest that although television as a source of mediated experience can play a vital role in projecting the characteristics of a group or culture like Malaysia, it has not always been the case, particularly when the intent of its program is something else. While *Muli* and *Kahit Isang Saglit* dealt with families of mixed marriage and romantic relations involving Malaysians and Filipinos, the reality is that as co-productions they were designed not so much to showcase Malaysia or Philippine culture but to depict human problems and suffering, the resolutions to which audiences can relate to.

The two teleseryes showed that they were structured to entertain and to tell a story about cultural conflicts, family discord, murder, social problems and love between two people of different cultures. Their intent was not propaganda. Inferring from the experiences of countries where capitalist media organizations put out productions for profit, the authors observe that uppermost in the producers' minds was the potential of greater return of their investment. Thus, the concern to promote understanding of Malaysia and its culture was only incidental. If ever snatches of Malaysian culture were shown, that was so because the portrayal of the Malaysian characters must have verisimilitude. The behavior of the characters must be true to the society and culture they represent. They cannot be otherwise.

The depiction of Malaysia in the two teleserye programs was shown in the delineation of culture and behavior intrinsic to the character living in Malaysia.

In this case, the character becomes an embodiment of an aspect of Malaysia. Since the two teleserye programs focus on the development of the characters and the narrative, knowledge about Malaysia and its culture had to evolve around what their respective narratives could reveal. In this case, the television narratives themselves limited Philippine viewers to what the former could take into account. For this reason, they were confined to watching only certain facets of Malaysian culture such as the arranged marriage, interracial relations, a slice of Islam, the language, inter-government cooperation, Malaysian landmarks and the presence of the Chinese. It is these depictions that perilously lead the viewers to form their own viewpoints and cause the fragmentation of their perspectives.

Taking off from Granello's (1997) observation, Philippine audiences tend to view other cultures by using as frame of reference their own culture. Confirmed by the responses of the discussants, the authors observe and assert that one of the multi-faceted and layered situations of the two soap operas is that of the arranged marriage. The discussants considered arranged marriage as conservative and traditional. In both soap operas, female lead characters were married to men who were chosen by their parents (Cheryl) or a grandparent (Garie). Although the discussants knew that certain cultures like those of the Chinese and the Muslims (in the Philippines) follow the custom of betrothal, they believed that women should be given the right to choose whoever they wish to marry. At another point, they realized that cultures differ in social perspectives and practices.

Linda, a discussant from the older group, referred to *Muli* as she says:

Makaluma na 'yun. Ganun din yata dito pero noon pa 'yun. Siyempre, 'di mo maaalis sa magulang na mamili kung sino ang mapapangasawa ng anak niya.

(That's old-fashioned. I think it was like that here, too, but that was in the past. Of course, you can't take it away from parents to choose who they want for their daughter/son.)

Mercy, from the older group watching *Kahit Isang Saglit*, observed that:

Sa mga Chinese, alam ko, may pinagkakasundo pa, pero 'di lahat. Sa Muslim din sa Mindanao.

(I know that among the Chinese, arranged marriage is still practiced, but not by everyone. The same goes for Muslims in Mindanao.)

JC from the younger group of discussants and a viewer of *Kahit Isang Saglit* declared:

E, anong magagawa kung ganun sa kanila [Malaysia]? Kanya-kanya lang naman 'yan. Mahirap humusga.

(What can we do if it's like that in Malaysia? To each his own. It's hard to judge.)

That Malaysia is a multicultural society was not well-known among the discussants. In both teleserye programs, the use of Chinese actors gave the impression that Malaysia is mainly populated by the Chinese. This confused the viewers who wondered why the Malaysians in the two programs were mostly Chinese, looked Chinese or had Chinese names.

Flor, from the older group, asked:

Akala ko kamukha natin sila. Pero bakit puro Intsik ang mga artista?

(I thought they looked like us. But why are the actors all Chinese?)

Pitang, from the older group, referred to *Kahit* as he said:

Ang gulo nga, e. 'Yung pamilya ni Garie, Intsik. 'Yung mga tauhan, kamukha natin at 'yung iba parang Bombay.

(It's confusing. Garie's family is Chinese. Workers look like us and others look like Indians.)

One of the functions of media, according to McQuail (1987), is to make audiences identify with others and gain a sense of belonging. Occasional Malay subtitles of the dialogues in Bahasa Melayu enabled the viewers to read terms that looked familiar. Although they did not remember what the terms were afterwards, they did recognize that some words sounded similar to Filipino or other Philippine languages. They derived pleasure from the recognition of words and felt an affinity with the Malaysians.

Maris, from the younger group observed:

Mabilis ang usapan pero nababasa kung ano ang sinasabi. Nakakatuwa kasi may mga salitang kapareho sa atin.

(The dialogues were fast but what was being said could be read. It's good to know that there are words which are the same as ours.)

Filipino was the main language used in the two soap operas but English was the medium between Malaysian and Filipino characters, with a few exchanges in Malay and Filipino. Viewers were very pleased when the Malaysian leading ladies of the soaps speak some lines in Filipino, and when the Filipino lead actors speak Malay. *Kahit Isang Saglit* viewers were thrilled when Carmen Soo or Garie, sang, '*Di Ko Kayang Tanggapin* (I Can't Bear to Accept), a song popularized by Filipino singer April Boy Regino. The scene was shot in the Cordilleras, northern Philippines.

Interracial relationships and marriage were viewed by the discussants as difficult but acceptable, provided the cultures were very similar. Love is the element that makes inter-racial relationships endure, as

exemplified by Cheryl and Lukas in *Muli*, and Eunice and Ronaldo, as well as Garie and Rocky in *Kahit Isang Saglit*. The couples' love for each other enables them to surmount problems, physical separation and family disapproval.

Comparisons were made between relationships of Filipinos with other Asian nationalities like Koreans and Japanese, whose cultures were considered generally different. As some discussants recalled what they knew about Malay culture and race, they could point out its similarities with Philippine culture and values. Despite low awareness of Malaysia's multi-cultural society, perception of cultural similarities based on the soaps prevailed.

Rits, a young discussant noticed that:

Parang magkapareho tayo ng Malaysia. Kumbaga sa ano, magkapatid. May pagkakaiba pero mas pareho. Tingin ko, mas pareho. E, si Carmen Soo nga mukhang Pilipina, ka-tipo ni Heart Evangelista, chinita lang. Gandang-ganda ako kay Carmen Soo.

(It seems that we are like the Malaysians. They are like our siblings. There are differences but there are more similarities. Carmen Soo looks like a Filipina, like Heart Evangelista who has Chinese eyes. I find Carmen Soo very beautiful.)



Figure 3. A scene from *Kahit Isang Saglit*. Retrieved January 23, 2009 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kahit_Isang_Saglit

Loreta, from the older group noted that:

Tingnan mo, magkasundo sina Cheryl at Lukas.
(Look, Cheryl and Lukas got along.)

Family loyalty was a value the discussants shared with Malaysians. Sacrifices were made for the family's welfare as illustrated by Lukas in *Muli*, where he had to work abroad and to give his family a better future. This echoes the reality that thousands of married Filipinos are forced to get employment overseas and, being lonely, they fall in love with someone from the host country. Like Lukas, they are torn between their families and their new-found loves, and they keep their feelings for the new-found love to themselves in order to keep the family peace back home.

In *Kahit Isang Saglit*, Ronaldo leaves his wife and young daughter to protect them from his pursuers. His wife, Eunice, remains faithful to him throughout the years of separation, and daughter Garie continues to look for her father, hopeful that one day the three of them will be reunited.

Close cooperation and coordination between the Philippines and Malaysia over smuggling and drug trafficking problems in Southern Philippines are depicted in *Kahit Isang Saglit*. Rocky, an agent of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), together with Malaysian authorities tracks smuggling activities in the two countries. This is a sub-plot which provides action and suspense to the teleserye. One such incident involves Garie who took the boat from Malaysia to look for her father. She is caught in the encounter between PDEA and the smugglers when the boat docks somewhere in Southern Philippines. Realizing that Garie was one of the passengers, Rocky shields her from the crossfire.

Through the soap operas, viewers were also given a visual treat. They became virtual tourists who were able to see some landmarks in Malaysia like the National Mosque, Petronas Towers, and modern buildings. In both teleserye programs, the Petronas Towers were shown when the male lead characters first arrived in Malaysia, Lukas as an OFW and Rocky as a law enforcer. Garie's and Rocky's favorite meeting place was a tower where they had a view of a mosque. Cheryl's and Lukas' own favorite was the park.

Ric, an older discussant and viewer of *Kahit Isang Saglit* said:

Ang ganda ng mga building. Para kang nasa Makati. Gusto ko ring mapuntahan 'yun, 'yung dalawang towers..at saka 'yung moske, 'yung malapit dun sa tagpuan nina Garie at Rocky.

(The buildings are beautiful. I want to see the two [Petronas] towers, and the mosque near the meeting place of Garie and Rocky).

Becka, another discussant, also observed:

'Yong buildings dun at mall, maganda, parang sa Makati o Ortigas. Yong park, ewan kung anong pangalan e maganda rin.

(The buildings and mall are nice like those in Makati or Ortigas. I don't know the name of the park but it's beautiful.)

In summary, TV-mediated knowledge about Malaysia reached Philippine audiences in small pieces because the soaps operas particularized Malaysian culture in the individual behavior and actions of the Malaysian character. What proceeded from the accounts of the Philippine TV viewers was spotty knowledge about Malaysian culture and their varied and fragmented constructions of Malaysia. This is no different from the knowledge about Malaysia that they obtained from school, media news, friends and relative OFWs.

Conclusion

The two soap operas provided opportunities, not only for constructing aspects of Malaysian culture but also for establishing moments of reflection and reflexivity. Many of the viewers' constructions about Malaysia revolved around its being traditional in cultural practices and values (marriage customs and family loyalty), the affinity of the Malaysian language to Philippine languages, Malaysia's tourist attractions, presence of the Chinese, and the collaborative effort of the two countries to quash smuggling and drug trafficking.

Accordingly, inevitable comparisons of beliefs, practices, values and even physical structures were made while viewing the teleserye programs. Recognition of cultural similarities such as language and values established cultural identity on two levels: among viewers of the same teleserye, and on the intercultural level. Viewers had little idea about the multicultural situation of Malaysia. Obviously, the soaps can unravel only slices of Malaysian life, government, and culture. In this case, knowledge about Malaysia reached the viewers in pieces and chunks. One can imagine at this point the range of perceptions and interpretations about Malaysia the Philippine viewers had constructed out of what they saw in the soaps.

Beyond the novelty of having Malaysian stars in the teleseryes, and having two countries as settings, there were informal cultural learnings which may or may not have been the intention of the teleseryes' producers even though

information about Malaysia, its culture and people was limited and superficial due to the nature of the genre. Viewers likewise became aware that there is cooperation between the governments of Malaysia and the Philippines when it comes to law enforcement and promotion of peace (*Kahit Isang Saglit*) and employment opportunities (*Muli*).

While soap operas show great potential for the dissemination of cultures, having captive audiences, this particular potential is constrained by technical demands of their narrative frames. As financial investments, co-produced soaps can only do so much to reveal facets of a country and its culture and promote regional understanding and identity. Using the genre's elements, some innovative measures through deliberate efforts by co-producers should be made to fill in the gaps stemming from the lack of education and/or information about other ASEAN countries. The development of identity, whether national or cultural, is a long process and a continuously evolving construction, shaped by information and knowledge.

Note

- 1 The 10 ASEAN countries include Brunei Darusalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The three other countries include Japan, Korea and China.

References

- ASEAN Primer (n.d.), Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines.
- ASEAN Vision 2020. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) website. Retrieved January 23, 2009 from <http://www.aseansec.org/1814.htm>
- Blumler J. G. & E. Katz (1974): *The uses of mass communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Granello, D.H. (1997). Using *Beverly Hills 90210* to explore developmental issues in female adolescents. *Youth & Society*, 29, 24-54. In Moran, K. C. (2003, Spring). A reception analysis: Latina teenagers talk about telenovelas, *Global Media Journal*, 2(2). Retrieved March 19, 2010 from <http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/sp03/gmj-sp03-moran.htm>
- Kilborn, R. (1992). *Television soaps*. London: Batsford.
- La Pastina, A. C., La, Rego, C. M., & Straubhaar, J. (2003, Spring) The centrality of telenovelas in Latin America's everyday life: Past tendencies, current knowledge and future research. *Global Media Journal*, 2(2). Retrieved March 16, 2010 from <http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/gmj-sp03-lapastina-rego-straubhaar.htm>
- McQuail, D. (1987). *Mass communication theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

- Moran, K. C. (2003, Spring). A reception analysis: Latina teenagers talk about telenovelas, *Global Media Journal*, 2(2). Retrieved March 16, 2010 from <http://lass.calument.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/sp03/gmj-sp03-moran.htm>
- Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT) Working Group on Media Report. (2008, June 14). Seoul, Korea.
- Philippine Entertainment Portal (PEP). (2007). Best-loved Thalia telenovelas. Retrieved February 2, 2009, from <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/62192/PEP-Best-loved-Thalia-telenovelas>
- Searle, J. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. New York: Free Press.
- Social welfare and development. (2009). Retrieved January 23, 2009 from <http://www.aseansec.org/8558.htm>
- Vinculado, J. O. (2006). Asia invades the Philippines: Asian soap operas and Philippine television programming. Paper presented at the Cultural Space and Public Space in Asia Conference, March 15-16, 2006, Seoul Korea.

DR. ALELI A. QUIRANTE is a retired faculty member of the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines Diliman (corresponding author: aleliq@yahoo.com), where she served as Chair of the Graduate Studies and the Communication Research Departments, and Director of Extension, Research and Publications. She has 30 years of experience in research, project development and implementation, and training. She was consultant of various local and international agencies like CHED, PopCom, Aus-Aid, ILO, WHO and USAID. **DR. VICTORIO N. SUGBO** is a professor of Communication and Literature at the University of the Philippines Visayas, Tacloban College, Philippines (corresponding author: humadapnon@yahoo.com). He holds a Ph.D. in Communication from U.P. Diliman. His poems in English have been included in national anthologies and journals. He has a number of articles published in reputable journals and has edited books published by the Philippine National Commission for the Culture and the Arts, and UP Press.

Annex

Table 1: Profile of Discussants, by Viewership

	VIEWERS OF MULI				VIEWERS OF <i>KAHIT ISANG SAGLIT</i>				TOTAL
	GRP 1	GRP 2	GRP 3	GRP 4	GRP 5	GRP 6	GRP 7	GRP 8	
	YOUNGER		OLDER		YOUNGER		OLDER		
SEX									
Male	2	0	1	2	0	4	2	1	12
Female	7	10	9	9	10	6	8	9	68
Total	9	10	10	11	10	10	10	10	80
AGE									
Younger group									
below 20	1	2			2	2			7
21-25	4	2			4	3			13
26-30	2	3			2	3			10
31-35	2	3			2	2			9
Sub-total	9	10			10	10			39
Older group									
36-40			3	2			2	1	8
41-45			2	4			3	3	12
46-50			3	2			3	3	11
51-above			2	3			2	3	10
Sub-total			10	11			10	10	41
Total	9	10	10	11	10	10	10	10	80
MARITAL STATUS									
Single	2	4	3	2	2	2	1	3	19
Married	4	4	5	7	7	8	7	7	49
Separated	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	4
Widow/widower	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	5
Living in	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	3
Total	9	10	10	11	10	10	10	10	80

	VIEWERS OF MULI				VIEWERS OF KAHIT ISANG SAGLIT				TOTAL
	GRP 1	GRP 2	GRP 3	GRP 4	GRP 5	GRP 6	GRP 7	GRP 8	
	YOUNGER		OLDER		YOUNGER		OLDER		
AVE. MO. HH INCOME*									
Php5,000-below	1	2	1	1	2	1	0	0	8
5,001-10,000	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	2	9
10,001-15,000	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	13
15,001-20,000	3	4	2	3	2	2	3	2	21
20,001-25,000	1	1	3	3	1	2	2	3	16
25,001-30,000	1	0	1	1	1	1	2	1	8
30,001-35,000	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	4
35,001-40,000	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
40,001-above	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	9	10	10	11	10	10	10	10	80

* Php 1=13 ringgit

OCCUPATION

Housewife/ househusband	4	2	4	5	4	4	4	1	28
Gov't employee	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	4
Private co. employee	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	3	6
Vendor	1	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	6
Entrepreneur	1	0	2	1	1	1	0	1	7
Professional	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Teacher/lawyer/ doctor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Domestic helper	1	2	1	0	2	1	0	1	8
Sewer	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	4
Retired	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	1	5
Unemployed	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	10
Total	9	10	10	11	10	10	10	10	80

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Some elementary	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	3
Elementary grad.	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	3
Some high school	3	2	3	1	2	2	1	2	16
High school grad.	1	3	2	3	3	3	1	2	18
Some college	2	3	3	3	2	3	4	3	23
College grad	2	1	0	2	3	1	2	2	13
Vocational	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	4
Total	9	10	10	11	10	10	10	10	80

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.