

Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

Reintegrating Kadazandusun Identity Fragmentation through Sabah Indigenous Filmmaking

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Reintegrating Kadazandusun Identity Fragmentation through Sabah Indigenous Filmmaking

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A thesis submitted

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

……

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Kadazandusun telemovies in fostering cultural cohesion, resisting assimilation, preserving indigenous identity within Malaysia's broader multicultural framework. The Kadazandusun community, with its 45 sub-ethnic groups, has historically struggled to consolidate a unified identity due to socio-political, linguistic, and cultural fragmentation. Compounded by Malaysia's dominant Malay-centric narrative, these challenges necessitate alternative avenues for cultural preservation. This research addresses the limited academic focus on Kadazandusun filmmaking, proposing that these telemovies serve as both artistic expressions and strategic tools for unification. By applying the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, this study evaluates the works of prominent Kadazandusun filmmakers—Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas—analysing themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition. Using Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema theoretical frameworks, it explores how these films construct an imagined Kadazandusun identity and assert cultural sovereignty. The research objectives are: (1) to evaluate the thematic content of selected telemovies through the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, (2) to explore the representation of Kadazandusun identity within the Imagined Community, and (3) to assess the role of filmmaking in preserving storytelling authority through Fourth Cinema. Findings reveal that Kadazandusun telemovies reinforce collective identity, facilitate intra-community dialogue, and safeguard cultural memory amidst modernisation. This research contributes to indigenous media studies by highlighting cinema's potential in sustaining and strengthening Kadazandusun identity.

Keywords: *Kadazandusun, telemovies, cultural cohesion, indigenous identity, Kadazandusun filmmakers*

Penyatuan Semula Identiti Kadazandusun melalui Perfilemen Orang Asal Sabah

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana telemovie Kadazandusun membantu mengekalkan budaya, menolak pengaruh luar, dan mengukuhkan identiti mereka dalam masyarakat majmuk Malaysia. Masyarakat Kadazandusun, yang terdiri daripada 45 sub-etnik, telah lama berhadapan dengan cabaran dalam mengekalkan identiti bersama akibat daripada perbezaan sosio-politk, bahasa dan budaya. Selain itu, penekanan Malaysia terhadap identiti kebangsaan berpusatkan budaya Melayu menjadikan usaha pemeliharaan warisan masyarakat Orang Asal semakin mencabar. Memandangkan terdapat kekurangan kajian akademik mengenai produksi filem Kadazandusun, kajian ini meneroka fungsi telemovie bukan hanya dalam konteks hiburan, tetapi juga mampu menjadi alat penting dalam mempertahankan budaya dan menyatukan komuniti Orang Asal. Dengan melakukan penelitian terhadap karya-karya pengarah Kadazandusun—Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, dan Marc Abbas—kajian ini mengenal pasti tema utama dalam filem mereka, iaitu mencabar/perundingan (contest/ negotiation), ketabahan (perseverance), dan pendefinisian diri (self-definition). Sehubungan dengan itu, kajian ini mengaplikasikan teori seperti Imagined Community oleh Benedict Anderson dan Fourth Cinema oleh Barry Barclay, untuk menyelidik bagaimana filem-filem ini dapat membentuk suatu identiti Kadazandusun dan menuntut hak mereka dalam autonomi budaya. Objektif kajian ini adalah: menganalisis tema utama di dalam telemovie melalui Indigenous Film Analysis Framework (1), (2) mengkaji representasi identiti Kadazandusun menggunakan kerangka teori Imagined Community, dan (3) menilai peranan penghasilan filem dalam pelestarian penceritaan Orang Asal melalui Fourth Cinema. Hasil dari dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa telemovie Kadazandusun mampu memainkan peranan penting dalam menyatukan

komuniti Orang Asal, mewujudkan dialog di dalam komuniti, dan memelihara tradisi mereka walaupun menghadapi perubahan zaman. Kajian ini turut menyumbang kepada bidang pembelajaran media Orang Asal dengan menunjukkan bagaimana filem berpotensi menjadi alat yang berkesan dalam memelihara dan mengukuhkan warisan Kadazandusun.

Kata kunci: *Kadazandusun, telemovie, Kesatuan budaya, Identiti Orang Asal, Penghasil filem Kadazandusun*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCD	Charged-Coupled Device
DSLR	Digital Single-Lens Reflex
DVD	Digital Video Disc
NCP	National Culture Policy
NEP	National Economic Policy
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
VCD	Video Compact Disc

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Overview

This research critically examines the role of Kadazandusun telemovies as a medium for fostering cultural cohesion and preserving indigenous identity amidst the challenges of fragmentation within the Kadazandusun ethnic group in Sabah, Malaysia. Focusing on eight telemovies by four prominent Kadazandusun filmmakers—Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas—this study employs the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework alongside Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema theoretical frameworks. By exploring themes such as contest/negotiation, perseverance and self-definition through these three frameworks, the research investigates how these films represent fragmented identities while contributing to a collective cultural image. It further assesses the role of filmmaking in sustaining storytelling authority and resisting cultural erasure within Malaysia's Malay-centric national framework. The study underlines the transformative potential of Kadazandusun telemovies as tools for cultural preservation, unification, and the assertion of indigenous identity in a multicultural and globalised context.

1.2 Aim and Justification

This thesis examines indigenous Kadazandusun films and telemovies produced between 2009 and 2015, focusing on their exploration of the challenges of unification within the ethnic group. These challenges arise from prolonged, unresolved issues in reaching a unified consensus, particularly between the Kadazan and Dusun subgroups (Reid, 1997). Political and social factors are central to these issues (Yamamoto, 2012), but the core contention lies in disagreements over defining Kadazandusun cultural identity. Certain ethnic groups are unwilling to align under the Kadazandusun umbrella, further complicating unification efforts (Tangit, 2017).

One prominent example of this challenge is the debate surrounding the official Kadazandusun dialect. Scholars such as Trixie Tangit have argued that this dialect has fall short to serve as a unifying linguistic medium for Sabah's 45 indigenous ethnic groups. Perceived bias towards the Dusun subgroup has alienated many Kadazan individuals, exacerbating existing divisions (Tangit, 2017). These linguistic tensions have deep historical roots, predating Sabah's incorporation into the Malaysian Federation. During this period, figures like Tun Fuad Stephens championed the nationalisation of Sabah's indigenous communities under the Kadazan identity (Barlocco, 2013). While the term Kadazan as an ethnic group was widely accepted by the Kadazan educated elite, it created disagreement among traditional chiefs' leaders who wished to retain the term Dusun (Reid, 1997).

Beyond linguistic challenges, the preservation of oral traditions and the lack of literary works promoting the official Kadazandusun dialect further hinder unity (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2000). While the annual Kaamatan harvest festival symbolises unity among the Kadazandusun community, its infrequency limits its impact on fostering sustained cultural exchange. Recent studies by Jeannet Stephen and Ruzasman Hussin, titled *For the Greater*

Good: Resolving Differences in Opinion Standard Indigenous Language in Sabah, reveal that the standardised Kadazandusun language is positively received by non-Kadazan and non-Dusun groups, such as the Rungus and Murut. These groups have embraced the language while recognising the potential loss of their own linguistic heritage. However, the Kadazan and Dusun remain hesitant about fully adopting the standardised language (Stephen et al., 2022).

Although there has been some progress in promoting shared culture across the Kadazandusun ethnic group, there are still considerable gaps that need to be addressed. The Kaamatan festival, celebrated only once a year, and the slow adoption of the official language since its inception in 1995 (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2004) illustrate the ongoing challenges in creating a stronger cultural bond. Moreover, Anthony Reid highlights the growing risk of cultural erosion, as younger generations increasingly favour Malay and English for their practical use in official and professional contexts, threatening the preservation of indigenous languages and traditions (Reid, 1997).

In this context, Kadazandusun filmmaking emerges as a potential cultural bridge. In the digital age, films can be easily and widely accessed through various platforms, making them an effective tool for sharing and preserving cultural narratives (Chen, 2023) & (Gill & Tiwari, 2023). Films play a significant role in modern culture-making, allowing audiences to engage with and share cultural identity (Adaeze, 2024).

Sabah's indigenous filmmaking movement began in the early 2000s with the production of *Orang Kita*, a telemovie that laid the foundation for continuous indigenous filmmaking. Its success paved the way for Kadazandusun filmmakers such as Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas. These filmmakers have actively worked to represent Kadazandusun culture and identity in their works. By 2023, these efforts

culminated in significant achievements, with Kadazandusun films gaining screenings in cinemas.

Table 1.1: List of film produced by Kadazandusun from 2020–2023 screened in cinema

Date	Title	Production Studio
01.10.2020	*Avakas*	New Breed Prodcution Sdn. Bhd
25.05.2023	*Tribesman*	FTV Production. Sdn Bhd
12.01.2023	*Silence of the 177*	New Breed Prodcution Sdn. Bhd
28.12.2023	*Namatai: Kinabalu With Love*	Bye Bye Go Sdn. Bhd

Source: Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia (2025)

Kadazandusun filmmaking has grown significantly over the decades, showcasing substantial progress and global reach. By 2024, Netflix acquired the rights to screen *Sinakagon: Bloodline* (Dinesh, 2024), directed by Timothy Stephen, highlighting the rise of Kadazandusun films on international streaming platforms. This achievement aligns with the digital era's advancements, enabling Kadazandusun films to reach wider audiences. Moreover, Kadazandusun films have the potential to address critical issues, such as the oral preservation of the Kadazandusun official language (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2000) For instance, Alfred Ujin's telemovie *Kobilangan 3* incorporates indigenous languages from the Kadazandusun linguistic family (Dusun and Murut), showcasing their relevance and vitality.

The concept of Kadazandusun telemovies is rooted in representing and prioritising the Kadazandusun image in film. These telemovies reflect the people, cultures, traditions, and languages within the Kadazandusun family. Kadazandusun telemovies possess immense

potential to define a shared cultural image by telling stories associated with local indigenous communities and performed by indigenous actors. They also highlight the diversity within the Kadazandusun umbrella by showcasing the distinct cultures, languages, and traditions practiced by its sub-ethnic groups. For example, Alfred Ujin's *Kobilangan* prominently uses the Dusun dialect, while Marc Abbas' *Home of Hope* employs the Kadazan dialect. Both directors utilise their respective dialects to authentically represent their communities.

It is noteworthy that none of the telemovies produced by these four prominent Kadazandusun directors—Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas—use the standardised Kadazandusun language. However, this is consistent with the Kadazandusun official language framework, which incorporates ten Dusunic family languages, including Kadazan and Dusun (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2004). Consequently, their telemovies are still categorised as Kadazandusun films. The diversity portrayed in these indigenous telemovies fosters cultural exchange and understanding among the Kadazandusun community and strengthening cultural ties. While each telemovie represents a fragment of Kadazandusun identity, collectively, they provide a comprehensive image of the broader Kadazandusun cultural identity.

In addition to language, Kadazandusun directors incorporate other cultural dimensions into their films. Ramli Ahmad, for instance, explores different religious backgrounds in his storytelling. *Esther Esthera* portrays the struggles of a Kadazandusun Christian family, while *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* focuses on a Muslim Kadazandusun community in a rural setting. These examples demonstrate that Kadazandusun filmmakers base their narratives on communities they are closely connected to, drawing on their experiences to tell authentic stories.

This thesis will further explore the issue of Kadazandusun identity fragmentation through indigenous filmmaking using the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework as well as two theoretical frameworks of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema to analyse the works of Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, Marc Abbas.

1.3 Kadazandusun as a Hegemonic Identity

The term Kadazandusun has complex and difficult history regarding the labelling of various indigenous sub-ethnic in Sabah, which each having their own languages but with noticeable similarity (Pugh-Kitingan, 2015). However, many of the Kadazandusun political leaders and Kadazandusun in general, seen the need of a single political unit to achieve common goal and preserve their identity from being overwhelmed by the dominant Malay identity (Tangit, 2017). According to the Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association Sabah, listed 45 sub-ethnics place within the Kadazandusun identity. The table below listed the details of all the sub-ethnics:

Table 1.2: The definition of Kadazandusun by the KDCA organisation

According to the KDCA constitution, Article 6 (1), the organisation defines Kadazandusun as the definitive indigenous peoples of Sabah encompassing the following dialectic ethnic groups:			
Bagahak	Kuijau	Paitan	Tatana
Bisaya	Lingkabau	Pingas	Tidong
Bonggi	Liwan	Rumanau	Tidong
Bundu	Lobu	Rungus	Tindal
Dumpas	Lotud	Sinobu	Tobilung
Gana	Lundayo	Sinopuru	Tolinting
Garo	Makiang	Sonsogon	Tombonuo
Gobukon	Malapi	Subpan	Tuhawon
Idaan	Mangkaak	Sukang	Tutung
Kadayan	Minokok	Sungai	
Kimaragang	Murut	Tagahas	
Kolobuan	Ngabai	Tangara	

Source: Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association Sabah (2024)

The table above shown the numbers of sub-ethnic places within Kadazandusun identity, which give the perspective of the challenges to unite all the 45 indigenous groups. However, all of them shares similar languages, beliefs, traditions, and cultures. Centuries

worth of knowledge and wisdom pass down to the current generation of Kadazandusun, ranging from agriculture (Noviatin, 2016), medicine (Porodong, 2001), arts , (Kiting et al., 2016) and many more. Some Kadazandusun leaders have highlighted the similarities of the cultures rather than the differences (Tangit, 2017). This in hand reinforced the idea of the Kadazandusun identity and its value, even amid rapid 'Malaynisation' or 'Malayness' after joining the Malaysia federation in 1963 (Ationg, 2018).

1.4 The Kadazan/Kadazandusun Nationalism

It is important to note that prior to the joining of Sabah in the Malaysia federation in 1963. There was a movement occurred among the Kadazan/ Kadazandusun to form into a singular identity. This movement started with the effort of the Catholic missionary to document the Kadazan language, this effort was credited to Father Antonissen for his effort to produce a dictionary of the Kadazan language (Tangit, 2017). In 1950s, Father Antonissen's Kadazan dictionary was able to be published. Around that time as well, the Catholic missionary was able to build 40 schools and responsible in producing the first generation of Kadazandusun that fluent in English and their native language as well (Tangit, 2017). Furthermore, a standardised Kadazan language was established to educate the indigenous population and foster linguistic unity among the various ethnic groups in Sabah.

After post-World War 2, this movement was followed by the effort of the early Kadazandusun leader. Specifically, Donald Stephens, through his wishes to unite the indigenous in Sabah into a collective identity (Reid, 1997), which labelled at that time as the Kadazan. However, this initiative frequently encounters resistance, particularly from the Dusun community, as many ethnic groups in Sabah prefer to represent their distinct identities rather than being subsumed under a single identity. They argue that adopting a singular

identity would erase their unique heritage, as they do not speak the Kadazan language and do not identify themselves as Kadazan.

1.5 Unification via "Momogun" Term and the Perspective of Future Filmmaking

In 2024, a significant proposal was put forward to adopt the term '*Momogun'* (meaning native) as the official label for the Kadazandusun community. This proposal was driven by the desire to replace the label *'lain-lain'* (meaning 'the others') used in the national ethnicity database, which has long been seen as marginalising and reducing the visibility of the Kadazandusun people. The move aims to emulate the approach taken by their Sarawakian neighbours, where the unified label of '*Dayak*' has been successfully adopted to represent various indigenous groups collectively (JP Munang, 2024).

If the proposed implementation of the label *Momogun* succeeds, it could significantly contribute to the development of a standardised cultural identity for the Kadazandusun, facilitated by the consensus on a unified ethnic group label. This initiative could also bring substantial benefits to Kadazandusun filmmaking, serving as a powerful medium to represent and promote a cohesive indigenous culture, with particular focus on the official Kadazandusun dialect. By leveraging filmmaking as a tool for cultural preservation and promotion, this effort would not only encourage the use of the language but also strengthen the bonds among the Kadazandusun/Momogun community through the celebration and reinforcement of their shared cultural identity.

1.6 History of Sabah and Malaysia

Sabah, one of the 16 states of Malaysia, is renowned for its unique cultural and racial diversity. It is the second-largest state after Sarawak, occupying 75,000 square kilometres

on the northern part of Borneo Island. According to the 2020 Malaysian census, Sabah's population was 3.4 million, representing 10.5% of the national population (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2022). Notably, Sabah hosts over 50 ethnic groups with their own languages, including 32 from the Dusunic, Murut, and Paitanic Austronesian language families (Pugh-Kitingan, 2015).

Sabah's history reflects a rich tapestry of governance transitions prior to joining the Malaysian Federation in 1963. In November 1861, the North Borneo Chartered Company (NBCC), an entity under the British Empire, took control of the region to exploit its natural resources (Mohamad, 2017). The indigenous population, including the Kadazandusun, was affected by the foreign policies implemented by the North Borneo Chartered Company (NBCC). Sir Alfred Dent, head of NBCC and an appointee of the Sultan of Brunei, enforced governance over North Borneo, treating it as a British enterprise rather than fully integrating it into the Empire (Evans, 2007). NBCC's administration lasted until the onset of World War II.

The Japanese invasion in 1941 marked a drastic shift in governance. Unable to resist Japanese forces, Sabah fell under occupation until 1945. This period saw attempts by the Japanese to replace European-centric influences with Japanese culture, introducing their language and traditions to the indigenous communities (Evans, 2007).

After the Japanese surrender, Sabah became a British colony on 15 July 1946. Edward Francis Twining was appointed as governor, and developments such as the establishment of a local radio station helped foster a Sabahan identity among the indigenous population (Ken, 2015). On 31 August 1963, Sabah briefly gained independence before federating with Malaya, Sarawak, and Singapore on 16 September 1963 under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63). Despite being recognised as a '*bumiputera*' (indigenous),

Kadazandusun community have expressed concerns over unequal treatment compared to their peninsular counterparts (Ongkili, 2003).

Relations between Sabah and the federal government have faced tensions, partly due to religious and cultural dynamics. Muslim indigenous groups in Sabah have been categorised as Malay, raising concerns within the Christian Kadazandusun community over the influence of Malay cultural norms. Christianity has played a significant role in preserving Kadazandusun heritage, with Catholic missionaries documenting their language and using church facilities to promote education (Reid, 1997).

Sabah once enjoyed administrative autonomy, including control over its immigration policies, which allowed compulsory permits for non-indigenous workers. However, federal interventions in recent decades have reduced this autonomy (Yamamoto, 2012).

Throughout Malaysian history, Sabah's indigenous people have steadfastly maintained their connection to their land and cultural roots, resisting full assimilation into the national identity. This assertion of identity has recently gained prominence in film, as indigenous Sabahans increasingly tell their own stories rather than relying on external narratives. This has significantly enriched Malaysian cinema, with Sabah's indigenous films and telemovies offering distinct perspectives that stand apart from the mainstream content.

1.7 The Rise of Telemovie Production in Sabah

The production of telemovies featuring indigenous people of Sabah began in the early 2000s with the release of *Proton Saga Kelabu*, the first telemovie of its kind. Initially intended for VCD format, also known as Direct-to-Television (DTV) or Straight-to-VCD/DVD, the telemovie incorporated dialogues in Kadazandusun, Bahasa Melayu, and local dialects. The casts were drawn exclusively from Sabah's indigenous population, with

notable actors including Abu Bakar Ellah, Ramli Ahmad, and Alfred Ujin. These actors later ventured into directing their own telemovies. Directed by Zuzela Mohd (Ela Sabah), the production of *Proton Saga Kelabu* was entirely based in Sabah. However, post-production delays (Sibangan, personal communication, 3 March 2013) caused the telemovie to be released later than anticipated, lagging behind another concurrent project.

Following *Proton Saga Kelabu*, Mohd Haji Salleh (Om) collaborated with Abu Bakar Ellah, a renowned Kadazandusun artist, to create *Orang Kita*. Inspired by a previous music single of the same title by Abu Bakar Ellah, the screenplay was developed in partnership with his wife, Aisah Abdullah, who served as the scriptwriter. Abu Bakar Ellah secured the support of Sky-Laser Enterprise, led by chairman C.K. Seah, as the producer and publisher. Despite the novelty of the concept and the associated market risks, Sky-Laser Enterprise provided a modest budget of RM 10,000, significantly lower than the typical production costs in mainstream Malaysian cinema. Both Abu Bakar Ellah and Mohd Haji Salleh mitigated financial constraints by reducing expenditures and working without guaranteed remuneration (Sibangan, personal communication, 3 March 2013).

The main casts included Abu Bakar Ellah as the protagonist Ampal, Mohd Haji Salleh as the supporting character Om, and Zuzela Mohd as the lead actress Ela. Due to her prior experience with *Proton Saga Kelabu*, Zuzela Mohd was hired by Sky-Laser Enterprise to direct *Orang Kita*. Limited resources required crew members to adopt multiple roles during the production. Filmed in Sabah, the production utilised locations in Kinabatangan, Ranau, and Kota Kinabalu. Despite its constrained budget, *Orang Kita* exemplified the creativity and resilience of Sabah's indigenous filmmaking community, contributing to the development of this unique cultural expression.

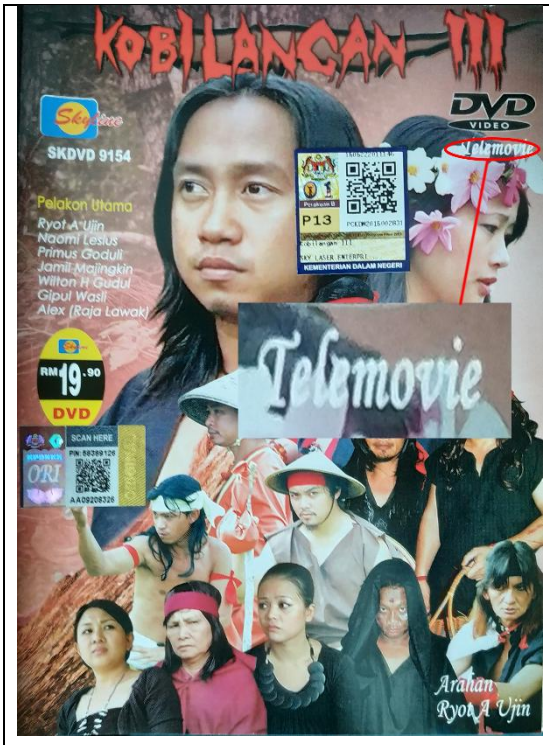
1.8 The Concept of the Telemovie according to Kadazandusun Filmmakers

Telemovies are feature-length films designed specifically for television, typically ranging between 60 to 120 minutes in runtime. The term combines “tele” and “movie” to denote a single, cohesive viewing experience, distinct from episodic television series (Wiseman, 2011). In comparison to cinema, telemovies have distinct production and format characteristics, including lower production costs and screen formats optimised for television rather than cinema (Drouyn, 2020).

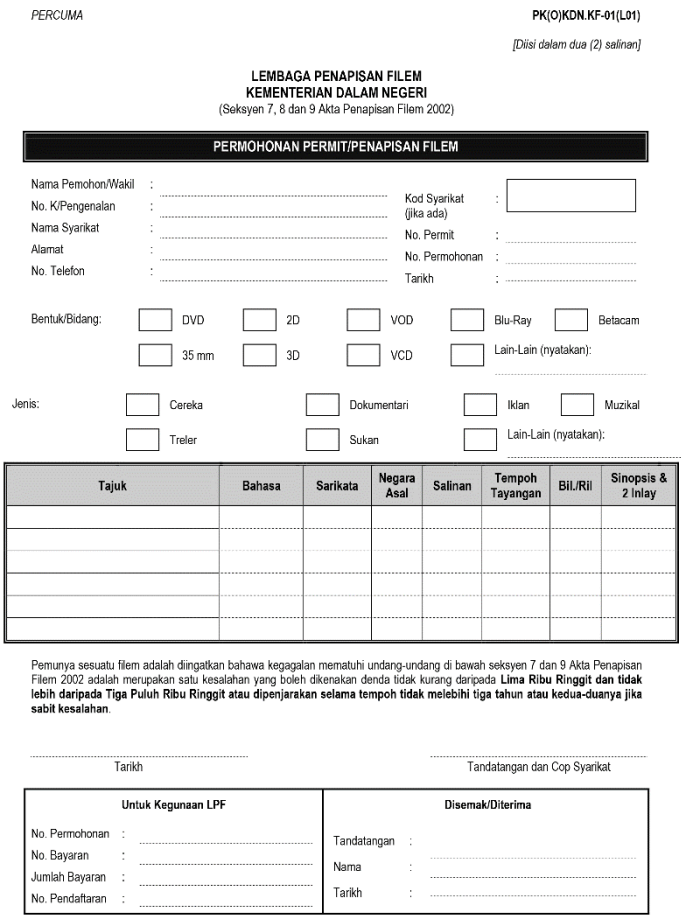
However, Kadazandusun filmmakers have developed a unique interpretation of the term “telemovie.” In 2013, Abu Bakar Ellah defined it as any feature-length film not produced for cinema (Sibangan, personal communication, October 14, 2013). This interpretation was subsequently adopted by other Sabah filmmakers, who began using “telemovie” to describe films that fall outside traditional cinema or television distribution (Sibangan, personal communication, December 29, 2018). Among Sabah’s indigenous filmmakers, the term has evolved further, referring specifically to films distributed directly via VCD or DVD formats, bypassing both cinema screenings and television broadcasts (Sibangan, personal communication, December 29, 2018). This adaptation reflects the practical realities and distribution methods prevalent among Kadazandusun filmmakers, distinguishing their use of the term from its conventional understanding.

Table 1.3: Example of the usage of "telemovie" by Kadazandusun filmmaker

(Produced and Directed by Onn & Zuzela, 2003)  	Example of the word "telemovie" printed on the cover of *Proton Saga Kelabu*. This was among the earliest published Sabah's indigenous film.
(Produced and Directed by Gitom, 2013)  	Example of DVD cover placing the word 'Sabah Telemovie' by Tony Francis Gitom. The word 'Sabah Telemovie' was also included in several of Tony Francis Gitom's telemovie such as *Atukoi Mokirayou* (2011), *Atukoi Mokirayou 2* (2011) and *Atukoi Mokirayou 3* (2012).
(Produced & Directed by Seah & Ujin, 2012)	DVD cover for Alfred Ujin's *Kobilangan 3* which included the word 'telemovie' below the

	DVD logo. The placement of the word "telemovie" was done by Alfred Ujin himself to categorised the film as direct-to-video release.

Further evidence supporting the Sabah indigenous filmmakers' classification of their works as telemovies can be seen in the regulatory processes required for their distribution. To market a telemovie, filmmakers must obtain approval from the Film Censorship Board, as mandated by the Ministry of Home Affairs (*Kementerian Dalam Negeri*) in Sabah. The forms required for this process explicitly label these films as telemovies, reflecting the formal recognition of the term within the context of Sabah's indigenous filmmaking.



PERCUMA **PK(O)KDN.KF-01(L01)**

[Diisi dalam dua (2) salinan]

LEMBAGA PENAPISAN FILEM
KEMENTERIAN DALAM NEGERI
(Seksyen 7, 8 dan 9 Akta Penapisan Filem 2002)

PERMOHONAN PERMIT/PENAPISAN FILEM

Nama Pemohon/Wakil :
No. K/Pengenalan :
Nama Syarikat :
Alamat :
No. Telefon :
Kod Syarikat (jika ada) :
No. Permit :
No. Permohonan :
Tarikh :

Bentuk/Bidang: ☐ DVD ☐ 2D ☐ VOD ☐ Blu-Ray ☐ Betacam ☐ 35 mm ☐ 3D ☐ VCD ☐ Lain-Lain (nyatakan):

Jenis: ☐ Cereka ☐ Dokumentari ☐ Iklan ☐ Muzikal ☐ Treler ☐ Sukan ☐ Lain-Lain (nyatakan):

Tajuk	Bahasa	Sarikata	Negara Asal	Salinan	Tempoh Tayangan	Bil./Ril	Sinopsis & 2 Inlay

Pemunya sesuatu filem adalah diingatkan bahawa kegagalan mematuhi undang-undang di bawah seksyen 7 dan 9 Akta Penapisan Filem 2002 adalah merupakan satu kesalahan yang boleh dikenakan denda tidak kurang daripada **Lima Ribu Ringgit dan tidak lebih daripada Tiga Puluh Ribu Ringgit atau dipenjarakan selama tempoh tidak melebihi tiga tahun atau kedua-duanya jika sabit kesalahan**.

Tarikh

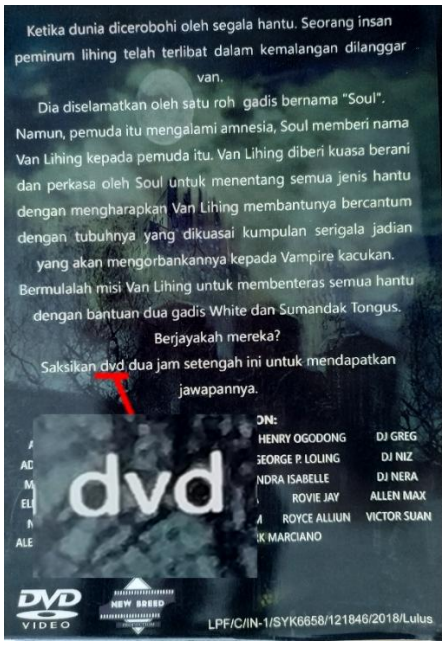
Tandatangan dan Cop Syarikat

Untuk Kegunaan LPF		**Disemak/Diterima**	
No. Permohonan :		Tandatangan :	
No. Bayaran :		Nama :	
Jumlah Bayaran :		Tarikh :	
No. Pendaftaran :			

Figure 1.1: Picture of the film censorship form PK(O)KDN.KF-01(L01) obtained from the Malaysia Ministry of Home Affairs website (Source: Kementerian Dalam Negeri, 2025)

From the Malaysia film censorship form, there is no mention of the format telemovie but there are several selections of other format available especially the VCD and DVD format. However, it is also significant to note that not all Sabah indigenous filmmakers categorised their films as telemovies. Some labelled their films as DVD films or simply DVD. This can be referred to film produced by *Van Lihing* (2018) by Marc Abbas.

Table 1.4: Example of using alternative word for Kadazandusun telemovie

(Produced & Directed by Abbas, 2018)  	The synopsis of Marc Abbas' *Van Lihing* produced in 2018. He referred his film as DVD and not a telemovie.

In the Kadazandusun context, the term 'telemovie' is broadly understood to refer to films produced for non-theatrical release. This distinction is reinforced by the framing ratios often used in such productions, such as 4:3 or 16:9, which are suited to television formats rather than the cinematic standards of 1.85:1 or 2.39:1. These technical choices reflect the resource constraints and the intended viewing platforms for these films, differentiating them from mainstream cinema.

Kadazandusun telemovies were exclusively distributed via VCD (Video Compact Disc) and DVD (Digital Video Disc) formats, with no intent to target television audiences. Instead, the films were marketed directly to consumers, who purchased physical copies to view at home using VCD or DVD players. Notable examples of these telemovies include Tony Francis Gitom's *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* (2013) and *Assanggup Minta Puji* (2015);

Esther Esthera (2007) and *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* (2009) by Ramli Ahmad; *Kobilangan 2* (2011) and *Kobilangan 3* (2012) by Alfred Ujin; *Home of Hope* (2011), and *Van Lihing* (2018) by Marc Abbas. These films were not broadcast on television networks, highlighting their distinctive production and distribution approach.

The decision to use VCD and DVD formats was largely driven by the limited resources and options available to Kadazandusun filmmakers. Most productions were either independently financed or supported by small media publishing companies, which lacked the financial means to secure exhibition venues such as cinemas or cineplexes. The advent of digital technologies, however, provided an affordable and accessible alternative. VCDs and DVDs enabled filmmakers to bypass the high costs of traditional distribution channels and connect directly with local audiences, ensuring their stories to be shared and appreciated despite economic constraints.

While VCDs and DVDs have historically defined Kadazandusun telemovie distribution, recent advancements have allowed some filmmakers to screen their work in cinemas, marking a significant milestone in their creative journey. Nonetheless, the reliance on physical media formats remains as a vital part of Kadazandusun filmmaking history. It reflects the resilience and ingenuity of these filmmakers, who have navigated numerous challenges to bring indigenous stories to life and maintain a connection with their communities.

1.9 Problem Statement

The Kadazandusun community of Sabah, with its rich history and 45 sub-ethnic groups, faces ongoing challenges in consolidating a unified cultural identity. Initiatives to achieve this unification, which commenced well before Sabah's integration into the

Malaysian Federation in 1963, have continually faced challenges. The complexity of creating a homogeneous identity lies in integrating diverse cultural, social, political, and historical contexts into a cohesive framework (Anderson, 2006). Compounding this challenge is the dominance of Malaysia's Malay-centric cultural narrative, which risks overwhelming the distinct identity of the Kadazandusun people (Tangit, 2017). This research seeks to explore the potential of Kadazandusun telemovies as a medium for fostering cultural cohesion, resisting assimilation, and preserving their unique heritage.

The significance of this research lies in addressing the limited academic focus on Kadazandusun filmmaking as a tool for cultural preservation. Kadazandusun telemovies offer more than entertainment; they represent an opportunity to unify fragmented sub-ethnic groups under a shared cultural narrative. These films offer a way to preserve Kadazandusun culture while representing their perspectives within the context of Malaysia's national culture. By exploring the role of cinema in fostering cultural dialogue and cohesion, this research aims to shed light on the transformative potential of Kadazandusun telemovies in safeguarding and revitalising indigenous identity.

Existing scholarship on Kadazandusun identity and filmmaking is both limited and fragmented. While Hiroyuki Yamamoto's *'Our People': Telemovies, Bangsa and Nationalism 3.0 in Sabah* acknowledges the role of indigenous telemovies in promoting harmony in Sabah's multi-ethnic society, it primarily focuses on constructing a hegemonic "*bangsa* Sabahan" identity rather than the specific cultural cohesion of the Kadazandusun. Furthermore, existing studies neglect the potential of cinema as a unifying force among the Kadazandusun sub-ethnic groups. This scholarly gap highlights the insufficient focus on the role of indigenous filmmaking in cultural preservation, resulting in critical questions about the potential of Kadazandusun cinema remaining unanswered.

To address this gap, this research proposes to examine the role of Kadazandusun telemovies in shaping a shared cultural identity. By analysing the works of contemporary Kadazandusun filmmakers such as Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas, this study will explore how these films serve as cultural artefacts that bridge division among sub-ethnic groups. These filmmakers, through their commitment to indigenous storytelling, offering a platform for cultural dialogue and unity. This study posits that Kadazandusun telemovies can serve as a tool to foster cultural cohesion and asserting indigenous identity within Malaysia's broader multicultural framework.

This research will critically examine eight selected Kadazandusun telemovies by implementing the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework focusing on the three main themes such as contest/negotiation, perseverance, self-definition. By highlighting the works of key Kadazandusun filmmakers, this study aims to demonstrate the role of indigenous cinema in fostering cultural cohesion and resisting cultural assimilation. The findings will underscore the importance of Kadazandusun filmmakers retaining control over their narratives to ensure authenticity and cultural relevance. This research does not only seek to fill the scholarly gap in Kadazandusun studies but also to contribute to broader discourses on the role of indigenous media in cultural preservation and identity formation. By doing so, it aims to reaffirm the value of Kadazandusun telemovies as a medium for unification and resilience.

The two theoretical frameworks used in this research draws upon Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's principles of Fourth Cinema. Anderson's Imagined Community framework elucidates how shared cultural artefacts, foster a sense of unity among diverse groups. Similarly, Barclay's Fourth Cinema advocates for cultural sovereignty, enabling indigenous communities to assert authority over their narratives. Kadazandusun telemovies utilised both frameworks and create a symbolic

space where various sub-ethnic groups can negotiate and affirm their shared identity, while also retaining control over their cultural narratives. These films also have the potential to revitalise indigenous languages, addressing the issue of growing trend of Kadazandusun youth adopting Malay or English as their primary language (Reid, 1997).

1.10 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework to Analyse Kadazandusun Telemovie Content

This thesis adopts the design of the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework for the analysis of Kadazandusun telemovies, drawing upon researcher's insight by applying thematic analysis on previous indigenous cinema literatures. Two significant studies that have contributed to the development of this framework are Faye *Ginsburg's Indigenous media from u-matic to youtube: Media sovereignty in the digital age* and Huijser & Collins' *Shades of Indigenous Belonging in Samson & Delilah*. These studies have provided essential insights into the efforts and challenges faced by global indigenous ethnic groups in maintaining the authenticity of their representation in film and media. Faye Ginsburg argued that indigenous populations can express their right to self-representation, governance, and cultural autonomy by engaging in media production. This is a response to assimilationist practices that have been in place for many generations. Huijser and Collins' study examines the work of aboriginal filmmakers Tracey Moffatt and Warwick Thornton, presenting a different perspective that questions traditional Western ideas about the afterlife and spirituality. It fosters a feeling of awe, receptiveness, and comfort amid the uncertain limits between the living and the dead. This is the endeavour of a global indigenous group to utilise media as a forum for expressing their dissent towards the existing government and culture

in which they reside. The indigenous community is assuming the responsibility of creating media content that accurately portrays their experiences and represents their community.

Additional indigenous filmmaker studies such as Emiel Marten's *Maori on the Silver Screen: the evolution of indigenous feature filmmaking in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (2012). Stuart Murray's *Images of dignity: Barry Barclay and Fourth Cinema* (2008), and Christina Milligan's *Storytelling for Our Own People: A Reflection on Working with Māori Filmmaker Barry Barclay* (2017) has helped this thesis to identified three common themes discussed in indigenous film studies, namely "contest/negotiation", "perseverance", and "self-definition". These themes form the basis for the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework used to explore the content of selected Kadazandusun telemovies.

The decision to focus on four Kadazandusun filmmakers, namely Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas, stems from their foundational contributions to Kadazandusun and Sabahan filmmaking. This focus is particularly pertinent in light of the recent achievements of Kadazandusun filmmakers, who have succeeded in screening their films in cinemas at the national level. Tony Francis Gitom and Ramli Ahmad were instrumental as organisers and mentors of the *Perkampungan Filem* workshop, held in Penampang in 2005, while Alfred Ujin and Marc Abbas participated as mentees in this initiative. Each filmmaker subsequently produced telemovies that reflect their distinctive interpretations of Kadazandusun's identity. This diversity of approaches provides valuable insights into the directors' individual perspectives, collectively contributing to a deeper understanding of the Kadazandusun community's cultural image.

The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework is applied in this thesis to the selected telemovies through three methodological approaches:

1. **Narrative Analysis**

   This approach investigates the stories, themes, and character arcs within the telemovie (Parsa, 2004). It examines how they reflect Kadazandusun's cultural values, identity, and resilience

2. **Mise-en scene**

   This analysis focuses on the visual elements of the telemovies, including settings, costumes, lighting, and performance styles (Napat & Norsiah, 2017). It uncovers how cultural symbols and aesthetics unique to Kadazandusun identity are embedded within the films.

3. **Textual Analysis**

   Textual analysis examines the telemovies as a text (McKee, 2001). This method deciphers how the films engage with broader socio-political discourses and address issues relevant to Kadazandusun communities. It also evaluates how the textual elements articulate the themes of contest/ negotiation, perseverance and self-definition, enabling indigenous voices to be heard on their own terms.

By utilising the film analysis method incorporating the narrative, mise-en-scene, and textual analysis techniques, this thesis uncovers the depth and significance of the selected Kadazandusun telemovies. The film analysis method demonstrates how these films navigate complex themes such as contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition as well as its roles in asserting indigenous media sovereignty and authentic cultural representation.

1.11 First Theoretical Framework: Representation of Kadazandusun's Imagined Community (Shared Culture Concept) in their Telemovies

The concept of Kadazandusun as a collective image is rooted in the idea of unity through diversity—a singular image that represents a community bonded by familiarity, camaraderie, shared experiences, and culture. This idea resonates strongly with Benedict Anderson's notion of the Imagined Community, a "theoretical concept/framework" developed as a nation-building concept. Anderson highlights how this framework associates individuals from diverse backgrounds through shared borders and cultural practices, fostering a sense of belonging that transcends race, religion, and creed (Anderson, 2006). Calhoun further emphasises that this sense of belonging is crucial for individuals to establish identity and connection within a larger collective (Calhoun, 2016). Similarly, Barlocco extends this notion, defining Imagined Community as a shared cultural and experiential bond that generates comradeship among members of a society (Barlocco, 2013). This framework provides a valuable lens for examining the Imagined Community presented by Kadazandusun filmmakers.

Anderson (2006) highlights the necessity of shared culture in forming a unified society, crediting the printing press as an essential tool for disseminating information to diverse groups in a common language. This mechanism enabled the emergence of a hegemonic identity that transcended racial and religious divides. Over time, the dissemination of shared culture has expanded beyond print media to include other technologies, such as television and radio (Baumgärtel, 2011). The advent of the internet and digital technology has further revolutionized the way society consumes and shares information, multiplying the tools available for fostering shared culture. In the context of film, studies like *Film as a Cultural Artefact* (2021) argue that films play a pivotal role in

creating common cultural meanings by presenting narratives that audiences from diverse backgrounds interpret in similar ways (Machunwangliu, 2019). This shared interpretation fosters a sense of commonality, enabling film to function as a unifying cultural force and a medium for various agendas.

In Malaysia, film has historically been used as a tool for cultural unification. The government has employed cinema to promote shared culture among the country's multi-ethnic society (Asiah, 2006). However, this effort has sometimes been critiqued for its underlying agenda, such as the "Malaynisation" of cinema, as argued by Mahyuddin Ahmad and Lee (Mahyuddin & Lee, 2015). They note how Malay films have been utilised to assert Malay cultural dominance, raising concerns about the forced introduction of specific cultural narratives. For the Kadazandusun community, film offers a similar potential for creating a shared culture and reinforcing indigenous identity. Kadazandusun telemovies, for example, can serve as a platform for promoting the cultural unity of Sabah's indigenous ethnic groups, while also strengthening their unique identity.

The Kadazandusun telemovie embodies elements of the Imagined Community through its portrayal of homogeneity and temporal framing, which reflect the community's shared history and experiences. The use of indigenous Kadazandusun languages reinforces linguistic and cultural unity, positioning these films as cultural artefacts that strengthen the imagined identity of the Kadazandusun people. Such films not only consolidate cultural bonds but also preserve and promote the heritage of the community, serving as a vital medium for indigenous storytelling.

1.12 Second Theoretical Framework: Fourth Cinema and The Preservation of the Kadazandusun's Identity through Filmmaking

As the Kadazandusun community progressively represents themselves in film, it is crucial to maintain their autonomy over the narrative and ensure that the storytelling authority remains firmly within their hands. This is vital for safeguarding their culture and heritage in the face of external influences such as nationalism and globalisation. The concept of indigenous filmmaking, extensively discussed since the 1980s with the emergence of Fourth Cinema—a term coined by Barry Barclay—provides a theoretical framework for such efforts. Fourth Cinema is rooted in the idea of empowering indigenous communities globally to retain sovereignty over their cultural narratives. Barclay's principle, as cited by Christina Milligan in *Sites of Exuberance: Barry Barclay and Fourth Cinema, Ten Years on* (2015), asserts that the control of indigenous image-making must reside with the indigenous people themselves (Milligan, 2015).

Fourth Cinema champions indigenous filmmaking that is led and controlled by the community, focusing on the components of "content," "production," and "reception" (Martens, 2012). In this context, Kadazandusun filmmaking aligns with the framework of Fourth Cinema by functioning as a form of cultural activism. It challenges the erasure and commodification of indigenous identities and offers a counter-narrative to dominant discourses. Through their films, the Kadazandusun assert cultural sovereignty, articulating their unique identity while balancing tradition and progress. This act of self-representation resists the pressures of assimilation and homogenisation that often accompany nationalism and globalisation (Bristowe, 2017).

The principles of Fourth Cinema also illuminate the broader significance of Kadazandusun's filmmaking. It positions film not only as a cultural artefact but also as a

powerful medium for intergenerational dialogue and cross-cultural understanding. By fostering connections between indigenous and non-indigenous audiences, Kadazandusun films demonstrate the transformative power of storytelling (Bristowe, 2017). This medium serves as a repository of cultural knowledge, ensuring the preservation of traditions while empowering the community to navigate modern challenges. The act of filmmaking becomes an assertion of resilience and agency, with storytelling as a tool for maintaining cultural authenticity.

Kadazandusun telemovies exemplify the key concepts of Fourth Cinema, particularly in their emphasis on cultural sovereignty and authenticity (Milligan, 2015). These films provide a platform for the Kadazandusun to assert their authority over their narratives, resist cultural erasure, and promote language revitalisation (Murray, 2008). By incorporating the Kadazandusun's language and cultural practices, these films ensure that their stories remain true to the community's lived experiences. This is especially significant given their status as a minority group within Malaysia, where dominant cultural forces often overshadow indigenous identities.

In this regard, the Kadazandusun use of filmmaking as a method to sustain their identity highlight the importance of retaining control over their stories. The Fourth Cinema framework offers not only theoretical support but also practical strategies for leveraging film as a medium for cultural preservation and empowerment. By maintaining authority over their storytelling, the Kadazandusun can resist external cultural impositions, strengthen their heritage, and ensure that their voices remain central in the representation of their community. This approach highlights the necessity of indigenous-led filmmaking as a means of asserting cultural identity and fostering resilience in a multicultural and globalised world.

1.13 Advancing Kadazandusun Cultural Identity Through Filmmaking in Malaysia: An Exploration of Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema Theoretical Frameworks

The conceptualisation of the Imagined Community framework within the context of Malaysia is critical to understanding and rationalising Kadazandusun filmmaking as a distinct cultural expression. This form of filmmaking represents the Kadazandusun people's unique history, language, and cultural identity, positioning it as a counterbalance to dominant narratives within the Malaysian film industry. At the same time, Fourth Cinema emerges as a pivotal framework to strengthen and safeguard the cultural autonomy of the Kadazandusun people. Together, these two frameworks offer a pathway for the progression of Kadazandusun filmmaking within the Malaysian context.

The Imagined Community framework highlights the importance of Kadazandusun telemovies in articulating a distinct identity for the community. By grounding these films in the cultural and historical realities of the Kadazandusun, filmmakers can illuminate the aspirations of Sabah's indigenous peoples to preserve their identity while participating in the broader Malaysian society. This balance between cultural specificity and national belonging underscores the potential of Imagined Community in fostering a shared understanding among the Kadazandusun. Films rooted in these concepts serve as a bridge that connects members of the community, reinforcing their collective identity in a rapidly globalising world.

Fourth Cinema complements this framework by emphasising the authority of Kadazandusun storytelling. By ensuring that the control of cultural narratives remains within the indigenous community, Fourth Cinema advocates for the authenticity and integrity of Kadazandusun representation in film. This approach ensures that filmmaking is always beneficial to the Kadazandusun people, preserving their traditions and providing a platform

for their voices in a multicultural nation. This is particularly significant for indigenous communities, whose stories often risk being misrepresented or diluted in dominant cultural discourses.

The interplay between the Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema frameworks offers a compelling method for representing Kadazandusun identity within Malaysia. Through the work of indigenous filmmakers, these frameworks highlight the challenges and negotiations inherent in asserting a minority identity within a national context. They provide a roadmap for ensuring that the Kadazandusun image in film remains authentic and honest to the community it represents. This is crucial for maintaining the integrity of indigenous narratives while fostering a broader understanding of the Kadazandusun experience within Malaysia.

Furthermore, the accessibility of film as a medium enables the continuous dissemination of shared culture among the Kadazandusun. This creates opportunities for fostering unity and mutual understanding within the community, particularly among younger generations. By presenting narratives that reflect Kadazandusun values, traditions, and experiences, filmmakers can ensure that future generations remain connected to their cultural roots. This is especially important in the face of modernisation and external cultural influences, which can pose challenges to the preservation of indigenous identities.

In conclusion, the Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema frameworks work synergistically to empower Kadazandusun filmmaking as a tool for cultural preservation and progression. By embracing these concepts, Kadazandusun filmmakers can assert their cultural sovereignty, foster unity within their community, and create films that serve as a testament to their enduring identity within Malaysia's multicultural fabric. This approach

not only safeguards the Kadazandusun heritage but also contributes to the broader discourse on the importance of indigenous storytelling in contemporary cinema.

1.14 The Intersection of Kadazandusun Filmmaking and Malaysian National Cinema

The Kadazandusun's identity and filmmaking occupy a unique and complex position within Malaysia's multicultural framework. This is largely due to the establishment of Malaysia's National Culture in 1971, which was designed to project and foster Malay culture as the dominant culture within the nation (Asiah, 2006). This policy prioritises Malay culture while also permitting the inclusion of other cultural elements that align with the national agenda (Sumit, 2008). However, this policy creates a potential tension between the interests of Malaysia's national cinema and the objectives of Kadazandusun filmmaking, as both strive to serve their respective cultural priorities. This is where the Imagined Community framework becomes essential in addressing the dynamics of dominant and minority identities.

According to Putri, it is rational for groups to imagine themselves as belonging simultaneously to both a smaller, distinct community and a larger, overarching one, while maintaining their unique identity (Putri et al., 2018). This duality suggests a constant negotiation between asserting a minority identity and participating in a collective national identity. For the Kadazandusun, this negotiation involves balancing the preservation of their indigenous identity with the expectations of being part of Malaysia's broader cultural framework. The Imagined Community framework illuminates how this balance can be achieved, offering a theoretical lens for understanding how distinct identities coexist within a pluralistic society.

Similarly, Fourth Cinema provides a complementary framework for Kadazandusun filmmaking, focusing on the importance of cultural sovereignty and self-representation. While Fourth Cinema prioritises placing cultural authority in the hands of indigenous communities, it also acknowledges the possibility of collaboration with outsiders. *Indigenising the Screen, Navigating the Currents of Change, a Vision of Fourth Cinema* by Joseph Curtis Bristowe suggest that such collaborations can occur, provided that non-indigenous participants respect and adhere to the methodologies, standards, and cultural practices of indigenous filmmakers.

Bristowe proposes an innovative framework aimed at fostering collaboration between Māori and non-Māori communities in the context of film production. This approach emphasises the importance of integrating novel ideas, particularly those contributed by non-indigenous individuals, into indigenous filmmaking practices. Crucially, the framework ensures that such integration occurs without compromising the authenticity and integrity of Māori cultural identity, thereby facilitating a mutually beneficial exchange of creative and cultural perspectives. This flexibility underlines the potential for Kadazandusun filmmakers to engage in partnerships while retaining control over the authenticity and integrity of their cultural narratives.

The reality for the Kadazandusun lies in navigating this dual identity—solidifying and reinforcing their indigenous identity while also practising the authority-defined national identity. The frameworks of Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema provide critical tools for understanding and addressing this dynamic. Imagined Community offers a means of conceptualising Kadazandusun identity represented by the indigenous filmmaker, while Fourth Cinema ensures that indigenous cultural narratives remain authentic and self-determined.

In the broader context of Kadazandusun filmmaking, these frameworks serve as a foundation for preserving and enhancing their cultural identity for future generations. They highlight the importance of fostering indigenous storytelling that is honest to the community's experiences and traditions, while also recognising the broader socio-political context in which these stories are told. By leveraging these concepts, Kadazandusun filmmakers can ensure that their work not only preserves their heritage but also contributes meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue about identity, representation, and cultural sovereignty in Malaysia's diverse society.

1.15 Research Questions

i. How do Kadazandusun telemovies portray their cultural identity through the themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition?

ii. How do the fragmented representations of Kadazandusun identity in telemovies contribute to constructing a collective ethnic identity?

iii. Why does filmmaking play a pivotal role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kadazandusun ethnic group, enabling them to sustain and reinforce a cohesive and unified sense of identity?

1.16 Research Objectives

i. To examine the portrayal of Kadazandusun cultural identity in telemovies through the themes and their roles in shaping the Kadazandusun identity within indigenous filmmaking.

ii. To explore the representation of Kadazandusun identity in the mentioned telemovies and highlight the shared cultural elements employed by the

filmmakers to project an imagined Kadazandusun identity as part of an Imagined Community concept. This involves critically analysing the components of the Imagined Community framework such as imagined, sovereign, limited and community.

iii. To assess the significance of filmmaking in preserving the storytelling authority essential for maintaining the indigenous Kadazandusun identity through the Fourth Cinema Framework. This involves structuring critical discourses on content, production, and reception in relation to the content of Kadazandusun telemovies.

1.17 Research Limitation

This thesis analyses Kadazandusun telemovies distributed on VCD and DVD between 2009 and 2018, directed and produced by Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas. Data is collected through director interviews, participation in film workshops, and literature analysis. The selected telemovies highlight indigenous participation in filmmaking, employing local crews and incorporating cultural narratives. The directors were chosen for their extensive experience as Kadazandusun filmmakers, having produced multiple telemovies throughout their careers. Additionally, they participated in and organised Tony Francis Gitom's film workshop, which trained them in low-budget filmmaking. This experience enabled them to create telemovies that reflect their artistic vision and cultural values despite limited resources. Future research may explore other Sabah ethnic groups, as well as documentaries, short films, music videos, and RTM-supported television films produced by Sabah's diverse indigenous communities.

1.18 Research Significance

The primary objective of this study is to critically and systematically analyse how indigenous Kadazandusun filmmakers of Sabah portray indigenous identity in their films. Kadazandusun filmmakers have made significant contributions by using filmmaking as a medium to highlight indigenous storytelling. These films provide a platform for representing the indigenous perspective while fostering unity among the diverse ethnic groups encompassed within the Kadazandusun community. By prioritising Kadazandusun identity in the content, production, and distribution of their films, these filmmakers demonstrate how film can serve as a powerful tool for cultural preservation. Furthermore, a united Kadazandusun identity could enhance engagement with Malaysia's broader national identity, contributing to a more inclusive and representative understanding of the nation's cultural diversity.

1.19 Research Method Overview

This research will be conducted as a primary research. Presently, there is limited information available on Kadazandusun telemovies. Therefore, sources such as books, social media, digital media sharing platforms, magazines, previous studies, and interviews will be utilised as the primary references to emphasise indigenous theories and filmmaking. Additionally, the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework and the two theoretical frameworks such as Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema, will be explored in detail. An exploratory approach will be taken to obtain a more profound understanding of the proposed research project.

Exploratory study methodology

1. **Primary data**

   Interview

   The research includes in-depth interviews with four Kadazandusun telemovie directors from Sabah. The data collected through these interviews will offer valuable insights into the stories, experiences, and creative processes of Kadazandusun filmmakers, contributing to a deeper understanding of their telemovies and the cultural narratives they represent. This also follow with the researcher participating in the *Perkampungan Filem* (film workshop) organised by Tony Francis Gitom in 2018.

2. **Secondary data**

   The research will also utilised existing resources, including film reviews, magazines, social media, digital media sharing platforms, academic journals, and both statistical and non-statistical data from the Malaysian film agency FINAS. These resources provide additional context and support for analysing Kadazandusun telemovies and the broader landscape of Malaysian filmmaking.

3. **Data analysis**

   The data analysis for this thesis involves the application of Indigenous Film Analysis Framework as well as the two theoretical frameworks, which are Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema.

Table 1.5: List of Telemovies for Analysis

Tony Francis Gitom (Penampang Studio)	Ramli Ahmad	Alfred Ujin (Kinabalu Motion Pictures)	Marc Abbas (New Breed Production)
Orang Bilang Ah Chong (2013) ***Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji*** **(**2015)	***Esther Esthera*** (2007) ***Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*** (2009)	***Kobilangan*** *2* (2011) ***Kobilangan*** *3* (2012)	***Home of Hope*** (2011) ***Van Lihing*** **(**2018)

1.20 Chapter Outlines

The first chapter is a general outline of the studies. A brief overview to the central issue of the fragmented Kadazandusun indigenous identity in this thesis, and the potential solution by using film to spread shared culture and to sustain the indigenous identity. Furthermore, this chapter introduces the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework and the two conceptual frameworks applied in this study to analyse the content of the Kadazandusun telemovies.

Chapter 2 explores the formation of Malaysia as a nation, the incorporation of Sabah and Sarawak, and the historical development of Malaysian cinema, with a focus on filmmaking and film cultures in the Kadazandusun community. It examines the paradox between Malaysia's established national cinema, which often presents as a homogenised narrative aligned with the state ideologies, and the independent filmmakers who provide alternative representations of the nation. This tension highlights the disparity between the

centralised national narrative and the diverse cultural realities of Malaysia, particularly the unique contributions and perspectives of filmmakers from the Kadazandusun community.

Chapter 3 is a review on existing literatures on global indigenous film studies to establish the two conceptual frameworks used in this research. It examines the key scholarly works related to Benedict Anderson's concept of the Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema. The integration of these frameworks provides a comprehensive lens to analyse how indigenous filmmakers represent identity, community, and cultural narratives within their works, offering insights into the interplay between global indigenous cinema and the specific context of Kadazandusun filmmaking in Sabah.

The methodology section of this thesis is covered in Chapter 4. This explains the approach, data collection, and data analysis method. This chapter provides a detailed account of how the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework is employed to analyse the selected telemovies. It also explores how this analysis is connected to the application of two theoretical frameworks, which are Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema.

Chapter 5 employs the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework and the two conceptual frameworks (Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema) to systematically examine the selected telemovies of Kadazandusun filmmakers and presents the findings of the analysis. The first group of telemovies under review includes four telemovies: Tony Francis Gitom's *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* (2013) and *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* (2015), as well as Ramli Ahmad's *Esther Esthera* (2007) and *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* (2009). This chapter use Indigenous Film Analysis Framework to explore further on themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance and self-definition.

This chapter also involves analysing the telemovies using the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework alongside Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community concept. This

process critically analyses the telemovies contents into four key components: imagination, sovereignty, limitation, and community. By doing so, it highlights the shared culture of the Kadazandusun community as reflected in their telemovies, showcasing how these films serve as a medium to represent and preserve their collective identity and cultural narratives.

Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema conceptual framework is also applied alongside the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework to assess the telemovies content into three fundamental components such as content, production, and reception. This framework demonstrates how Kadazandusun filmmaking assert and sustain Kadazandusun identity, reinforcing the role of cinema as a critical medium for cultural preservation and self-representation in the context of Malaysia's diverse sociocultural landscape.

Chapter 6, similar to chapter 5 examines and presents the findings of the second group of telemovies. This includes four telemovies: Alfred Ujin's *Kobilangan 2* (2011) and *Kobilangan 3* (2012), alongside Marcellus Abbas' *Home of Hope* (2011) and *Van Lihing* (2018). This chapter applies the Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema theoretical concepts alongside the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework to analyse the telemovies contents with respect to their seven fundamental components as explored in chapter 5. This chapter explores components of imagination, sovereignty, limitation and community as part of the Imagined Community theoretical framework, highlighting the Kadazandusun cultural identity. It also investigates the content, production practices, and audience reception as part of the Fourth Cinema theoretical framework to demonstrate how these filmmakers employ cinema as a tool to assert Kadazandusun identity within the broader Malaysian context.

Chapter 7 concludes the research by summarising the findings and demonstrating how the research objectives have been achieved. This section provides recommendations for

enhancing the practices of Kadazandusun filmmakers, focusing on methods to strengthen the representation and preservation of Kadazandusun identity in film. Suggestions include fostering collaborative filmmaking practices to create a shared cultural narrative that unites the diverse subgroups within the Kadazandusun community. By emphasising shared cultural values and experiences, filmmakers can use their work to promote unity and solidarity among Kadazandusun ethnic groups.

Additionally, this chapter proposes potential areas for future research, including broader studies on Kadazandusun filmmaking and its contributions to cultural conservation. These recommendations aim to deepen the understanding of Kadazandusun cinema, promote its development, and support its role in preserving and reinforcing a collective identity, ultimately fostering unity within the Kadazandusun community.

CHAPTER 2

MALAYSIAN CINEMA AND NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITIES

2.1 Introduction

The previous Chapter 1 mentioned the establishment of national culture in Malaysia. Therefore, this chapter aims to explore the diverse identities in Malaysia and its complexity especially in relation to film representation. This begins with the tracing of the evolution of Malaysian cinema from its golden age to the emergence of independent filmmakers in the early 2000s, highlighting the representation of minorities and the cultural diversity of regional states in film. This includes a discussion on the National Culture Policy and its influence on Malaysia's diverse identities and the field of filmmaking.

The National Culture Policy (NCP) of Malaysia, introduced in 1971, was developed to foster unity in a multiracial nation following the ethnic riots in 1969. Its main objective was to establish Malay culture as the cornerstone of national identity, while also incorporating appropriate elements from other communities and emphasising Islam’s role in shaping cultural values. Although intended to foster harmony, the NCP has faced criticism for marginalizing minority communities by prioritising Malay cultural dominance. This approach has significantly influenced various sectors such as education, arts, and filmmaking, raising concerns about inclusivity and representation in a country renowned for its cultural diversity.

In filmmaking, the NCP’s impact has led to a strong focus on Malay-centric narratives, often at the expense of other ethnic identities. While the policy sought to build cohesion, it has also perpetuated cultural hegemony, limiting the creative freedom of minority filmmakers. For instance, Kadazandusun filmmakers from Sabah encounter

numerous obstacles, such as insufficient funding, strict censorship aligned with Malay-Islamic values, and a national cinema landscape that marginalises their narratives. These systemic barriers have frequently compelled them to adapt their films to conform to national norms, undermining the authenticity of their cultural storytelling.

For the Kadazandusun community, consisting of various subgroups with unique languages and traditions, the NCP's homogenising framework has led to significant cultural implications. Kadazandusun filmmakers, dedicated to preserving and celebrating their heritage, often find themselves conflicted between maintaining their cultural identity and navigating the limitations imposed by the national film industry. Despite these challenges, independent filmmaking and digital platforms have offered avenues to amplify their voices, challenge stereotypes, and foster unity within their community. By using storytelling as a means of cultural preservation and negotiation, Kadazandusun filmmakers have the potential to reshape their representation within Malaysia's evolving cultural narrative and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable national identity.

2.2 Malaysia as a Nation

Malaysia is a unique nation comprising of Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. While much of the population resides in the peninsular region, the nation's ethnic composition is a defining feature of its identity. In 2020, the population consisted predominantly of Malays (57.3%), followed by Chinese (24.5%) and Indians (7.3%), with other indigenous groups accounting for 10.1% of the population (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2022). This demographic diversity is not merely a statistical characteristic but a fundamental aspect of Malaysia's identity, shaping various domains such as politics, education, and social cohesion (Qismullah et al., 2018).

The multiracial context of Malaysia presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly in fostering a unified national identity. Diversity serves as a source of strength, fostering a society that values openness and cultural acceptance. This openness enhances mutual understanding and respect among ethnic groups, contributing to social harmony. However, disparities in cultural dominance can lead to contestation and feelings of marginalisation among certain ethnic communities, potentially undermining national unity. Recognising the importance of societal cohesion, the Malaysian government introduced the National Culture Policy in 1971. This policy sought to leverage culture as a unifying mechanism within the multiracial society. By promoting shared cultural values and fostering interethnic understanding, the policy aimed to mitigate tensions and build stronger bonds among Malaysia's diverse communities.

2.3 National Culture Policy and its Impact on the Malaysia's Film Industry

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society frequently described as a cultural melting pot (Razaleigh et al., 2012). However, the journey towards establishing a cohesive Malaysian identity has not been without challenges. The ethnic riots of May 13, 1969, marked a critical juncture, compelling the nation and its leaders to seek solutions to prevent future unrest (Sumit, 2008). This led to the enactment of the National Culture Policy (NCP) in 1971. The NCP sought to foster a shared cultural identity among Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups, aiming to cultivate a sense of belonging for all Malaysians (Sarena & Siti, 2019). This initiative also contributed to a vibrant arts scene where traditional local cultures are celebrated and integrated into contemporary expressions, creating a unique Malaysian cultural identity (Salehuddin et al., 2022).

The National Culture Policy holds significant importance for several reasons such as promoting national unity with incorporation of suitable elements from other cultures, cultural preservation and development, the role of Islam in shaping national culture as well as guiding filmmaking and arts by encouraging the representation of the nation's multiculturalism while adhering to its principles (Sumit, 2008).

Presently, Malaysia has shown remarkable resilience over the past six decades. Despite having no shared historical roots and being geographically divided by the South China Sea, this highlights the importance of cultural unity. Former Attorney General of Malaysia, Tommy Thomas, acknowledged this when discussing the relationship between Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak (Thein, 2024). This resilience has been made possible through the establishment of a national cultural framework that fosters bonds among Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. A centralised culture that provides a shared identity, promotes collective interests, and fosters a sense of belonging for all Malaysians, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds or beliefs.

The achievement of cultural hegemony is due to the NCP's ability to facilitate the establishment of cultural education programmes, such as the Malaysia Educational Blueprint 2012-2025, which was designed to instil an appreciation for Malaysia's multicultural heritage in younger generations (Noor et al., 2019). This educational programme plays a crucial role in nurturing national pride and unity while strengthening an appreciation of Malaysia's cultural diversity especially to the young generation.

Despite its strengths, the NCP has its limitations. The policy's criteria for shaping the national identity included prioritising the indigenous cultures of the region while selectively incorporating notable elements from other cultures. Islam was identified as a key component of the national culture (Sumit, 2008). Although this framework allowed for the

inclusion of other cultural elements, study such as *The Revival of Chineseness as a Cultural Identity in Malaysia*, reveal perceptions of favouritism, particularly towards Malay culture (Saiful, 2016). These perceptions have caused discontent among non-Malay communities, who often feel marginalised by the policy's emphasis on Malay cultural dominance.

Furthermore, inconsistencies arise, particularly regarding the interpretation issues due to the lack of a clear definition of 'national culture' and the policy gaps in implementing cohesive cultural initiatives across various levels of government. This has undermined opportunities for collaboration and integration among Malaysia's diverse cultural groups (Ales, 2010). This lack of coordination has, at times, hindered efforts to create a truly inclusive national identity. Additionally, the rise of digital technology poses new challenges, as younger generations increasingly engaging with dominant global cultures, potentially diluting local identities (Phan et al., 2013).

The strengths and weaknesses of the NCP also extend to the Malaysian film industry. On the one hand, there is a pressing need for films that foster cultural cohesion among Malaysia's multi-ethnic society (Asiah, 2006). On the other hand, the perception of cultural favouritism in the NCP (Saiful, 2016) has a direct influence on the representation of identities in Malaysian cinema. The predominance of Malay-centric films has led to contestation among filmmakers over the representation of local identities.

The prioritisation of Malay culture, language, and Islamic values under the NCP has shaped Malaysian cinema into a Malay-centric narrative, resulting in cultural marginalisation. State-sponsored initiatives such as the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS), and strict censorship policies aligned with the NCP further consolidated the focus on Malay culture, side-lining stories that deviated from this framework.

2.3.1 National Culture Policy Impact on the Kadazandusun Community and Filmmaking

For Kadazandusun filmmakers, this contestation is particularly significant. The cultural dominance caused a stifling effect on the representation of Malaysia's multicultural society. The Kadazandusun community, which comprises of many distinct ethnic groups with their own languages, traditions, and beliefs, faces unique challenges under the NCP's homogenising framework. The policy's emphasis on a singular national identity falls short in accommodating the pluralistic realities of Malaysia, particularly in Sabah, where cultural practices differ significantly from those in the peninsular.

The nationalisation policy in Sabah has greatly affected the Kadazandusun community, especially when Sabah's leadership began following the Malay-Muslim leadership in the late 1960s (Reid, 1997). Chief Minister Tun Mustapha introduced a 'one language, one culture, one religion' policy to align Sabah with the national standards. This led to the Kadazandusun language being removed from schools after Malay was made as a national language in 1967 (Asiah, 2006). In 1973, Islam was declared as the state religion, and by 1974, radio broadcasts were limited to Malay and English (Reid, 1997). These changes happened after the National Culture Policy was introduced in 1971.

For Kadazandusun Christians, the declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1973 was particularly troubling. It went against the Malaysia Agreement of 1963, which had promised that Sabah would not have an official religion. The government also encouraged conversions to Islam, which caused anger and dissatisfaction among Kadazandusun Christians (Reid, 1997). The situation worsened when Christian missionaries were removed during Mustapha's rule. This led to frustration within the community, and in the 1975

elections, Kadazandusun Christians came together to vote out Mustapha's government, replacing it with Donald Stephen and the Berjaya party (Reid, 1997).

This history highlights the tension between Kadazandusun Christians and the official national religion. Despite facing discrimination and challenges, they remained firm in their beliefs. Interestingly, some churches saw a positive side to the situation, as it united Kadazandusun Christians, which made them more self-reliant, and strengthened their identity. According to Reid, these struggles helped the community become more active, dynamic, and open while still being part of Malaysia's diverse society.

The Malaysia Agreement of 1963 had promised Sabah's indigenous people the same rights as Malays (Chin, 2019). However, the biases in the NCP often left the Kadazandusun community neglected, especially in terms of economic opportunities and cultural identity. Educated Kadazandusun people complained about limited career options, as public service jobs in Sabah were increasingly reserved for Muslims (Reid, 1997).

In the 1970s, scholars like James Ongkili observed that many Kadazandusun individuals were opposed to being classified as *bumiputera* (native). This classification grouped them with Malay-Muslims, which they felt undermined their unique identity (Ongkili, 2003). The Kadazandusun saw themselves as the 'definitive' people of Sabah (Tangit, 2017) and felt that they were treated unfairly compared to Malays, especially in economic matters. This led to feelings of being treated as second-class citizens. Ongkili argued that the *bumiputera* status given to the Kadazandusun was mostly symbolic and offered little real benefits (Ongkili, 2003).

Presently, Kadazandusun filmmakers face significant barriers, including limited funding and institutional support. In 2025, the Sabah state government urged FINAS to allocate more funding for Sabahan filmmakers who have achieved success both domestically

and internationally. This was exemplified by the joint venture film project *Red Lion 2*, a collaboration between local Sabah filmmakers and a Chinese production. The success of this project demonstrates the potential of Sabahan filmmakers to thrive both locally and globally. Nevertheless, the Sabahan filmmaking industry urgently requires additional funding to expand and produce more films.

Non-Muslim Kadazandusun filmmakers, particularly Christians, also face challenges navigating censorship regulations that prioritise Malay-Islamic values. These restrictions often force filmmakers to modify their works to align with national norms, diluting their ability to authentically represent their culture and beliefs. For Kadazandusun Christian filmmakers, expressing religious identity through film becomes especially challenging, as any deviation from these norms is at risk of drawing negative national attention. Tailoring films for broader audiences may prevent controversy but often compromises the authenticity of Kadazandusun storytelling.

Additionally, the relatively small Kadazandusun population presents significant challenges for its filmmakers. Films produced entirely in the Kadazandusun language often face difficulties competing beyond Sabah, as audiences outside the state may lack familiarity with Kadazandusun culture and language. This issue is further exacerbated by the limited recognition of Kadazandusun actors and the general lack of interest in Kadazandusun films among mainstream audiences. As a result, filmmakers may feel pressured to modify their narratives to align with authority-defined cultural norms, striving to achieve broader appeal. However, such alterations often deviate from the filmmakers' original vision and risk alienating Kadazandusun audiences who value authentic representation of their culture and identity.

Moreover, the idea of Kadazandusun films as a unifying tool for the indigenous community raises concerns in the broader public sphere. Some might perceive such efforts as promoting Kadazandusun nationalism, potentially challenging Malaysia's national unity. While such an outcome is highly unlikely due to its extreme nature, filmmakers must exercise caution to ensure their work avoids any rhetoric that could be misinterpreted as divisive.

Without more flexible platforms to showcase their stories, Kadazandusun filmmakers face a real risk of cultural marginalisation. Many Kadazandusun filmmakers struggle to secure government funding or approval for national screenings, further limiting their opportunities to share their narratives. Addressing these challenges is essential to preserving and amplify the voices of the Kadazandusun community in Malaysia's national narrative.

Nevertheless, the inconsistency of the NCP in promoting a multicultural approach has led to the rise of independent filmmaking and digital technology, providing Kadazandusun filmmakers with opportunities to assert their cultural narratives. By focusing on indigenous storytelling, they can challenge stereotypes, preserve their heritage, and foster a collective identity within their community. For instance, the short YouTube video *God Bless Our Home* (2020) by Sundu Films portrays a Kadazandusun protagonist who finds spiritual strength in Christianity during the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic (Sundu Films Official, 2020). Moreover, telemovies by directors like Abu Bakar Ellah have successfully highlighted the diversity of Sabah's indigenous cultures, albeit on a limited scale (Yamamoto, 2012).

The future of Kadazandusun filmmakers remains a subject of ongoing discussion, particularly with the increasing exhibition of Kadazandusun films in recent years. There is

hope that the Malaysian government might adopt a more lenient stance toward Kadazandusun filmmakers. However, given the small percentage of the Kadazandusun population compared to the other ethnic groups in Malaysia, these filmmakers face significant challenges. They must work harder to compete with more prominent ethnic groups, such as the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, in securing limited funding and cinema space. These groups also hold a competitive advantages in terms of professional expertise and filmmaking experience.

In conclusion, the National Culture Policy has played a central role in shaping Malaysia's hegemonic cultural framework through the promotion of shared cultural values. However, this has also placed the concept of 'Malaysian-ness' in a state of continuous contestation and negotiation. As Malaysia's identity evolves, it must strive for inclusiveness, ensuring a balanced representation of its diverse ethnic groups. The cultural and creative sectors, particularly filmmaking, remain pivotal in this endeavour, offering spaces for dialogue, representation, and the redefinition of what it means to be Malaysian.

2.4 Malaysia National Cinema

In the discourse surrounding Malaysian cinema, the concept of the 'mainstream' film holds pivotal significance. Defined by its alignment with the perspectives and cultural norms of Malaysia's Malay majority, mainstream cinema has historically served as a vehicle for the propagation of Malay values and traditions (Gray, 2010), thereby reflecting their pivotal role in the nation's socio-political fabric. This emphasis on representing Malay culture and ethos within cinematic narratives has been a recurrent motif throughout Malaysian film history.

To fully comprehend the emergence of Kadazandusun filmmakers within this broader cinematic landscape, it is imperative to contextualize their trajectory against the backdrop of Malaysia's cinematic evolution. Previous scholarly inquiries provide invaluable insights into this narrative, elucidating the analogies and divergences within Malaysian cinema that have paved the way for the rise of indigenous voices from Sabah.

2.5 History of Malay Cinema

The history of Malay/Malaysian cinema is a tapestry woven with diverse cultural influences and economic realities. In 1933, the nascent Malaysian cinema industry, then known as Malaya, took its maiden step with the release of *Leila Majnun* (Love Struck Leila), directed by B.S. Rajhans. This landmark production marked the industry's formal inauguration, fuelled by investments from Chinese entrepreneurs and the creative contributions of Indian and Malay talents. *Leila Majnun*'s success set the trajectory for Malay cinema for the ensuing seven decades, with subsequent films often drawing inspiration from the rich tapestry of Malay heritage, both historical and contemporary (Hassan, 2012).

However, by the late 1960s, the industry encountered formidable challenges. The influx of foreign films, notably from Hollywood, posed a significant threat to local productions, precipitating a decline in audience engagement and consumption rates (Abu, 2008). Concurrently, waning interest from Chinese and Indian demographics prompted local film producers to reassess their strategies. Faced with dwindling market share, producers pivoted towards tailoring their content to resonate exclusively with Malay audiences, particularly those from the lower and middle socioeconomic strata (Gray, 2010).

This shift in focus towards a "captive market" was exemplified in 1970s when Deddy M. Borhan, an entrepreneur from Sabah and owner of the Sabah Films production, ventured into film production with *Keluarga Comat* (Comat's Family), directed by Aziz Satar. While adhering to the stylistic conventions of the Golden Age of Malay cinema, *Keluarga Comat* adopted a more straightforward narrative devoid of overt social or political commentary. Nonetheless, its commercial success highlighted the viability of films catering to Malay sensibilities, laying the groundwork for subsequent mainstream productions (Gray, 2010).

The ascendancy of Sabah films played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Malay cinema, solidifying the dominance of Malay-language content within the industry. As Muthalib observes, Malay has remained the lingua franca of Malaysian cinema for over seven decades (Hassan, 2007). However, Gray contends that this steadfast commitment to Malay-centric narratives has stymied the diversification and expansion of the Malaysian cinema market, constraining its appeal to broader audiences (Gray, 2010).

In essence, the evolution of Malay/Malaysian cinema reflects a complex interplay of cultural identity, economic imperatives, and audience preferences, with the trajectory of Sabah films serving as a microcosm of broader industry trends and transformations.

2.6 Malaysia's National Cinema as a Representation of Shared Culture

The constitution of Malay cinema as Malaysia's mainstream cinema represents a complex interplay of cultural identity, policy frameworks, and societal aspirations. Various studies have delved into this multifaceted phenomenon, shedding light on the implications for national unity and cultural representation.

One such study by Asiah Sarji examined the dynamics of Malaysian national cinema and its role in shaping a collective identity. Asiah underlines the entrenched position of

Malay language films within the Malaysian film industry, a status enshrined in the FINAS act and underpinned by the National Culture Policy. However, Asiah also highlighted the contested nature of this policy, noting its imposition without democratic consensus and its purported aim of fostering unity across Malaysia's diverse ethnic landscape (Asiah, 2006).

The significance of the Malay language in Malaysian cinema is further point out by its official designation as the national language on March 3, 1967. Asiah argues that this linguistic policy reinforces Malay as a potent symbol of national identity, especially in contrast to other languages in Malaysia that may lack comparable international recognition. Additionally, Asiah explored the contentious terrain of film censorship laws, which while ostensibly aimed at preserving national culture, have sparked debates among artists and intellectuals regarding their efficacy in an era of globalized media consumption (Asiah, 2006).

Another study regarding Malaysia national cinema written by Abu Hasan Hasbullah (2008) showed a complementary perspective, focusing on the intersection of national identity, multiculturalism, and Malay's cinema. He contends that the discussions surrounding national cinema mirror broader national discourses, grappling with issues of cultural authenticity and sovereignty. Abu Hasan emphasises the unifying potential of Malaysian cinema in bridging ethnic division and safeguarding against the encroachment of Western cultural hegemony. However, he also acknowledges the inherent tensions within this narrative, cautioning against the pitfalls of constructing hegemonic identity that may marginalise minority groups and perpetuate divisive notions of "race" and "ethnic" identities (Abu, 2008).

In conclusion, these studies highlighted the intricate interplay between cinema, identity, and nation-building in Malaysia. They call for a nuanced understanding of

Malaysian national cinema that navigates the complexities of globalisation, cultural diversity, and domestic exigencies while remaining steadfast in the pursuit of a collective identity that transcends ethnic divisions and fosters unity.

2.7 Evolution of Film Censorship in Malaysia

The Malaysian government is actively involved in promoting the growth of the film industry, emphasising the need to protect mainstream contents produced and displayed in the country. According to Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud, Malaysia's censorship policy originated from the British administration during the pre-independence period. The government enforced these laws to ensure that the masses received entertainment deemed in their best interests. Until the arrival of films in Malaya, the British censored performances such as *bangsawan, wayang kulit*, and Chinese Mendu (Wan et al., 2011).

It is essential to understand the basis on which the authorities consider authorised film content. Wan Amizah mentioned that as part of the film evaluation, films violating Islamic law (Fatwa) are not allowed to be shown in public. This aspect of censorship policy prioritises the sensitivity of film content towards Islam, practiced by the majority of the Malay population. Furthermore, this Islamic-based film policy contrasts with Western film studios, which often emphasise values such as individualism, secularism, and materialism—values that paradoxically conflict with local Islamic practices that promote family, camaraderie, and respect for elders (Wan et al., 2011).

Aaron Rao's research highlighted that Malaysia has one of the world's strictest film policies and censorship practices. The Malaysian authorities have banned over 100 films in the name of protecting community morality, including those containing nudity, sex, violence, and religious sentiments, which were deemed unacceptable by the censorship

board (Rao, 2013). Rao explained the roles and necessity of the country's censorship board in protecting the interests of the government and the people.

In Rao's study, 250 participants responded to questionnaires focusing on the applicability of film censorship and the need for stricter policies. The study concludes that film censorship remains necessary today to protect children from harmful content. Consequently, Rao advocates for greater public awareness of film censorship to improve understanding of the policy. He also suggests that the policy guidelines could be altered without compromising the authenticity of the story.

In the context of mainstream cinema, the statement that Malaysia is an Islamic country is pertinent to Rao's research. Therefore, films produced and exhibited in the country must adhere to guidelines aligned with Islamic principles (Wan et al., 2009). Rao acknowledges that Malaysian authorities are stringent regarding acceptable film contents, significantly impacting filmmakers whose films portray other facets of Malaysia that may not aligned with these standards.

2.8 Contesting Malaysia's National Cinema

Studies on the development of the Malaysian national film industry categorised national cinema into two periods: Malay cinema (1933-1962) and Malaysian film (1963-1989) (Fatimah & Nur, 2020). These studies indicate that national cinema is originated from Malay cinema and evolved into Malaysian cinema in later decades. During the Malay cinema era, prominent figures such as Naz Achnas, Haji Mahadi, P. Ramlee, Jamil Sulong, and Hussain Haniff were employed by foreign-owned film production companies. In 1963, notable names during the Malaysian film era including Omar Rajik, S. Kadarisman, M.

Amin, Jamil Sulong, and P. Ramlee were all well-known for producing Malay films throughout their careers.

The term "Malaysian film" emerged due to federal involvement and nationalisation efforts to strengthen the local film industry. Notably, during the Malaysian film era, only two directors of other ethnicities were recorded: Patrick Yeoh (Chinese ethnicity) with Kami (1982) and M. Raj (Indian background) with *Melati Putih* (1984). Despite their ethnic backgrounds, their films were in Malay, reflecting the longstanding dominance of Malay content in Malaysian cinema (Fatimah & Nur, 2020).

A study that emphasises the assertion of Malay authority in the nation through cinema such as Mahyuddin Ahmad and Lee Yuen Beng's work, *Negotiating Class, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The 'Malaynisation' of P. Ramlee and His Films*, argues that P. Ramlee's studies were primarily biographical, acknowledging his significant achievements in Malay film production. However, this study examined the political context of the Malay supremacy through P.Ramlee's films, which revealed the marginalisation of other ethnicities in Malaysia. The 'Malaynisation' process is aligns with the policies such as New Economic Policy and New Culture Policy, aimed at modernising and promoting Malay culture nationally.

P. Ramlee's films depict contemporary Malay culture that resonates widely with audiences, catering to the needs of Malay elitists. Despite some films questioning the status quo, they were considered non-threatening due to their subtle references to issues. Following P. Ramlee's death, his legacy became a project grounded in ideological foundations, making him an icon to project Malay greatness as the primary political, economic, and cultural authority in Malaysia. Thus, 'Malaynisation' greatly benefited from his status as a cultural artefact, presenting Malay bourgeois and middle-class ideals.

Mahyuddin and Lee conclude that P. Ramlee evolved into more than an individual artist, which is a cog in the 'Malaynisation' machine. This process consolidated the Malay's ruling position while marginalising and exploiting other societal members. Although P. Ramlee's later films attempted inclusivity in representing other ethnicities, these efforts played a minor role in the broader ideological debate (Mahyuddin & Lee, 2015).

Other studies, such as those by the Mediterranean Journal of Social Science, addressed the dominance of Malay culture in Malaysia. They highlight the country's multi-ethnic composition, inherited from British colonial divide-and-conquer strategies. Noraini and Esmaeil (2017) explained that most ethnic groups prefer practicing their language, culture, values, and religion within their communities. This segregation extends to education, where each ethnic group tends to send their children to schools associated with their background, leading to prejudicial mindsets between different ethnicities. The researchers noted government efforts to promote unity, such as the Vision School initiative, though concerns about prioritising Malay culture in teaching materials persist, causing dissatisfaction among Chinese and Indian communities.

The researchers advocate using multiple visual media, including television programs, advertisements, and films, to construct a cohesive Malaysian society. Noraini and Esmaeil asserted that since 1957, Malaysian authorities have enjoyed the privileges of television programming. However, due to the New Economic Policy, much programming has centred on representing and promoting Malay culture at the national level. This approach, they argue, is incorrect for fostering a tolerant, multicultural society, as it neglects other ethnic groups. They proposed balancing Islamic values, Malay values, and the composition of Chinese and Indian values to create a united society (Noraini & Esmaeil, 2017).

The emergence of independent filmmakers has helped to bridge ethnic relations by addressing multiculturalism differently. Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* (2004) exemplifies an approach representing Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. Yasmin emphasised an inter-ethnic romance between a Malay and a Chinese character, critiquing Malaysia's failure to create an equal society. Noraini and Esmaeil concluded by questioning the unity among Malaysia's multi-ethnic groups, suggesting that as long as Malay privileges persist, constructing a national identity representing multi-ethnic cultures will remain a myth.

In summary, two opposing school of thoughts has emerged in the Malaysian cinema discourse. The first suggests that a national cinema is necessary for unity, recognising the Malay as Malaysia's indigenous and dominant ethnic group. Studies like Asiah Sarji's *National Cinema in Crisis* claim that this decision was largely agreed upon, despite some disagreements, leading to significant political, economic, and social changes. Cinema became a crucial tool for extending the government's reach and spreading mainstream ideology.

Previous research highlighted the need for a national identity to counter Western influences, such as Hollywood, which significantly impacts popular culture (Asiah, 2006). The fear of Malaysians losing their identity reinforces the need to preserve local culture. Establishing a mainstream cinema requires safeguarding it through censorship, discouraging films that do not meet approved criteria. Studies by Wan Amizah and Rao confirm that Islamic rules must be followed in film evaluations, with other rules protecting national identity from undesirable ideas.

The second perspective views Malaysia's national cinema as a projection of Malay authority, using the platform to assert control over the national identity. This underrepresentation of other ethnicities in film does not sit well with them. Studies like

Negotiating Class, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The 'Malaynisation' of P. Ramlee and His Films address the supremacy of the Malay, suggesting that as long as one ethnic group dominates, the concept of a multicultural society will remain a myth (Mahyuddin & Lee, 2015).

It is significant to highlight the importance of the representation of national identity in film. For instance, Asiah (2006) emphasised the necessity of protecting national cinema amidst the forces of globalisation. She argues that without a robust cultural foundation within Malaysia, the nation's cultural identity could be supplanted by others, potentially leading to unforeseen consequences. Concurrently, independent filmmakers have sought to expand the representative image of Malaysia (Khoo, 2007). They have challenged the notion that Malaysian cinema should exclusively represent Malay culture, advocating for the inclusion of other minority cultures and diverse Malay cultural expressions in film.

Moreover, these independent filmmakers have diversified the narratives portrayed in Malaysian cinema. By addressing obscure and sometimes sensitive topics, they aim to represent the complex realities of Malaysian society and challenge prevailing public perceptions of Malaysian film.

It is important to note that extensive research on local films has been conducted over the past years. However, the study predominantly focuses on film productions in Peninsular Malaysia, specifically Malay films, while largely neglecting the films produced in Sabah and Sarawak. This oversight presents a significant gap in the overall discourse on Malaysian cinema, as the communities in Sabah and Sarawak are often underrepresented on the national screen. A considerable number of Kadazandusun films, which hold substantial cultural and political significance for the indigenous community, are often overlooked. These films are particularly crucial in narrating stories that are deeply associated with the Kadazandusun

people. Moreover, this gap highlights the importance of emphasising indigenous filmmaking, such as that of the Kadazandusun, to ensure their inclusion in the national film industry. This inclusion is vital for the development of a more comprehensive and representative Malaysian cinema.

2.9 Independent Filmmakers in Malaysia

The portrayal of the Malay majority as the defining image of Malaysia in terms of language and culture has profound implications for the country's film industry. The imposition of a singular national identity has led to societal resistance. Other groups can't help but feel neglected in their own country, feeling like they are perceived as the other, whether they belong to the Malay, Chinese, Indian, or indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. Homi Bhabha describes the other as a group of people, where their culture is differed and does not align with their coloniser (the dominant or authority-defined culture), and often regarded as barbaric and uncivilised (Bhabha, 2001). He commented such notion is shallow because the 'the other' is full of substance in term of their history and culture. Disregarding such complexity results in disdain towards people of different skin colours and genders. To put in context in Malaysia, cultures that do not align with the dominant culture often receive different treatments, particularly from authorities. Some individuals feel their cultures are treated as second class and not given equal recognition, despite being Malaysian citizens.

This has prompted a new generation of Malaysian filmmakers to use cinema to voice minority perspectives, offering insights into these dynamics. However, due to the nature of their work, these filmmakers often deviate from mainstream cinema conventions and are frequently marginalised as the 'other'.

By the year 2000, a new cohort of filmmakers emerged, creating content that diverged from the norms of Malaysian cinema (Mahyuddin et al., 2017). Government policies regarding film content deemed much of their works as sensitive, resulting in censorship or outright bans on films such as Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Gubra* (McKay & Ingawanij, 2012). The necessity to produce non-mainstream contents compelled these filmmakers to adopt alternative production methods. Mainstream Malaysian cinema is often characterised by formulaic contents, weak plots, and Hollywood emulation (Khoo, 2007).

According to Khoo Gaik Cheng, Amir Muhammad's *Lips to Lips* (2000) ignited interest in independent filmmaking in Malaysia (Khoo, 2007). Khoo describes Malaysian independent filmmakers as underground, low-budget, mostly non-profit, guerrilla filmmakers who produce films with the risk of heavy censorship and limited screening. Generally, Malaysian independent filmmakers are those who operate outside the studio system and maintain complete control over their film contents (Hassan, 2012). Khoo further notes that the primary objective of these filmmakers is to depict a version of Malaysia that embraces multiracialism and multiculturalism, making diversity a fundamental structural component of their storytellings.

The advent of independent filmmakers in Malaysia was significantly influenced by advancements in digital technology. The widespread acceptance of the internet facilitated rapid communication and the exchange of ideas. Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, initiated policies in 1981 that planted the seeds of technological advancement (Hassan, 2007). This policy had a substantial impact on local filmmakers, as mainstream cinema relied on traditional 35mm film. Consequently, many alternative filmmakers began incorporating new digital technology into their works, both commercially and in telemovies. The accessibility and affordability of digital technology provided a platform for new ideas,

enabling independent filmmakers to showcase their culture rather than conforming to the authority-defined national identity (Hassan, 2007).

The rise of digital technology allowed alternative filmmakers in Malaysia to break new ground. In previous decades, media was dominated by television stations owned or influenced by the government, such as RTM and TV3, which served government interests and disseminated its messages to society. Digital technology and the internet superseded these limitations, providing a platform to reach wider audiences. This technology proved invaluable for filmmakers with limited resources, creating opportunities for new perspectives that challenge the nation's media establishment on issues such as ethnicity, religion, gender, politics, and sexuality (Mahyuddin et al., 2017).

Independent filmmakers in Malaysia often share a common background, focusing on representing an inclusive society and the minority through their storytelling, which is primarily based on urban and city life. Khoo notes the concentration of independent filmmakers in Kuala Lumpur, describing it as a sophisticated, diverse metropolis (Khoo, 2007). These filmmakers typically have backgrounds of growing up in cities and receiving international education, exposing them to Western liberalism, free speech, and democratic ideologies (Mahyuddin et al., 2017). The use of various languages in their films is another element representing a multicultural society.

2.10 Representations of Ethnic Minorities in Cinema

The success of independent filmmakers in Malaysia has introduced a new approach to national identity under the banner of multiculturalism. These filmmakers highlight films that represent the 'other' in Malaysia, aiming to portray a different version of the nation. Muthalib observes that Malaysian mainstream cinema has historically emphasised pure

entertainment, neglecting the country's ethnic and cultural diversity despite the international promotion of Malaysia as 'Truly Asia' (Hassan, 2007). Other ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Indians, are often portrayed stereotypically, as comics or greedy middlemen (Khoo, 2007). The discussion of multiculturalism in Malaysian cinema seeks to shift the filmmaking paradigm towards inclusivity.

The influence of the NEP (National Economic Policy) and the NCP (National Culture Policy) in creating Malaysia's national image has shaped society to prioritise the Malay majority. These policies are also reflected in locally produced films, emphasising the authority-defined national identity. Post-new wave filmmakers, or independent filmmakers, emerged to challenge this concept. Zawawi mentioned filmmakers such as Teck Tan, James Lee, Ho Yuhang, Deepak Kumaran Menon, and Tan Chui Mui, who re-evaluated Malaysian identity by showcasing non-Malay cultures (Zawawi, 2009).

Khoo Gaik Cheng's studies on films such as Nasi *Lemak 2.0* and *Petaling Street Warriors* explored multicultural interactions in Chinese-produced films in Malaysia (Khoo, 2014). These films highlighted hybrid, cosmopolitan societies that challenge the segregation of Malaysian identities. Similarly, Wang Changsong and Chen Yiming's study on *The Journey* examines the portrayal of Malaysia's three major identities—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—through family as the foundation of society (Wang & Chen, 2017).

Prominent independent filmmakers such as James Lee, Ho Yuhang, Tan Chui Mui, Amir Muhammad, and Deepak Kumaran Menon have broadened the concept of Malaysian identity (Mahyuddin et al., 2017). Yasmin Ahmad, though often funded by various sources, is associated with independent filmmakers due to her inclusive and multicultural content (Richards & Zawawi, 2012). Her films, like *Sepet*, has significantly impacted the understanding of multiracial interactions in Malaysia.

Indian filmmakers in Malaysia have also contribute to the discourse on multiculturalism. Hassan Muthalib's *Voices of Fourth-Generation Malaysian-Indian Filmmakers* highlighted the significance of Indian filmmakers in presenting an alternative view of Malaysian society (Hassan, 2012). These filmmakers, including Deepak Kumaran Menon and Arivind Abraham, have challenged the authority-defined national identity and highlighted Indian's voices in film.

Non-independent filmmakers like Erma Fatima have also sought to broaden mainstream content by portraying contemporary Malays. Her film *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* engages with the concept of the modern Malay female, reacting to Malaysia's trend towards strict Islamic adherence (Khoo, 2006). This film provides a fresh perspective on sensitive subjects, advocating for progressive policies such as gender equality and meritocracy.

In another study on non-independent filmmakers, Zawawi Ibrahim addressed the concept of an established Malay identity. He uses U-Wei's film *Perempuan...* to challenge the mainstream perception of Malaysia's national identity, which emphasised how this film question and deconstruct the official narratives promoted by the Malaysian state. U-Wei's films serve as a form of cultural resistance, offering alternative perspectives on national identity, history, and social norms (Zawawi, 2003). Zawawi's study is interesting because he exhibited the disagreement among the Malays regarding the recognised national identity and offer a wider and broader view of the Malays. Therefore, the view of an identity can be perceived as fluid instead of the rigid state presented by the state. This in hand, exhibit the diverse and complex culture within the Malay community.

The extensive study of challenging Malay norms can also be referred to in the study of *Filmografi 'Anak Mami' dan Wacana Keetnikan: Sebuah Perspektif Kritis*. In this work,

Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan examines A. Razak Mohaideen's filmography, with a focus on the socio-cultural representation of the Jawi Peranakan ethnic community in Malaysia. The study employed the concept of ethnic boundaries, drawing on sociological theories from scholars such as Barth, Banton, and Mansor Mohd. Noor, to analyse the dynamic representation of ethnicity within the *Anak Mami* film series. This approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of its socio-political implications. Comedy is used to explore the clash between tradition and modernity, especially in arranged marriages and social expectations. The films feature strong female characters who often protect and lead their families, challenging traditional gender roles but sometimes reinforcing cultural stereotypes. These stories also touch on bigger issues like how the community fits into Malaysian society and their efforts to keep their cultural heritage alive. Badrul believes that the *Anak Mami* film series helps us to understand Jawi Peranakan identity better, placing it within the broader Malay culture and challenging the idea of a single Malay identity (Badrul, 2017).

Despite facing government intervention and suppression, independent filmmakers eventually received support from organisation like KOMAS, which organised the Freedom Film Fest. This festival offers training and funding for selected scripts, providing a platform for films to address sensitive issues (Mahyuddin et al., 2017). This festival is supported by local governments, which enables filmmakers to present diverse perspectives and challenge the nation's media establishment.

Independent filmmakers in Malaysia and the representation of minority in film are known for employing techniques that deviate from mainstream conventions, positioning them as the 'other' within Malaysian cinema. These filmmakers aim to contest and negotiate the country's perceived identity, highlighting the minority issues. It is important to note that several Malay filmmakers are challenging the prevailing norms in the country by presenting

their own perspectives on the Malay community. Studies by Khoo Gaik Cheng, Zawawi Ibrahim, and Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan exemplify these concepts, thereby broadening the understanding of the Malay ethnic group.

By 2010, the efforts of independent filmmakers had transformed Malaysian cinema, producing and screening various multicultural films. This marks the beginning of a new chapter in Malaysian cinema, with non-Malay films gaining popularity among local audiences (Ngo, 2019). It is important to highlight the development of local films throughout the year, as the concept of Malaysia's film are expanded to include the diverse society in Malaysia. Although this is a monumental progress for film development in the country, the indigenous in Sabah especially the Kadazandusun were still lack in attention to be a part of the film polemic in Malaysia. This is despite the development of independent filmmakers and the Kadazandusun telemovie production in Malaysia that have begun in the early years of 2000s.

2.11 Representations of Regional States in Cinema

To better comprehend the intricate relationship between land and culture, numerous studies have focused on the localisation and fluidity of culture, particularly within the cinematic landscapes of Malaysia and its neighbouring countries. These studies aim to elucidate how geographical contexts influence cultural narratives and cinematic representations. In certain instances, local culture significantly differs from that of neighbouring regions due to distinct geographical situations.

Conversely, some studies present a different perspective, suggesting that culture transcends geographical boundaries and can be shared across regions, irrespective of the imaginary borders delineated by states. However, political imperatives often necessitate the

reinforcement of specific cultural identities, especially in border regions. Governments may promote certain cultural narratives in cinema to assert national identity and sovereignty. This can compel communities living at the nation's borders to reassess their cultural identities, despite having practised them for generations. This dynamic is evident in the cultural policies of Malaysia, where the government has, at times, promoted a unified national culture through cinema to foster national unity and political stability. Consequently, the relationship between land and culture is complex, influenced by both geographical factors and political strategies, leading to a continuous negotiation of cultural identities within the cinematic domain.

The relationship between land and culture in the cinematic representations of Malaysia and its neighbouring countries is multifaceted, shaped by both geographical and political factors. While geographical conditions can create distinct local cultures, political agendas often seek to standardise cultural narratives, thereby impacting the cultural identities of border communities.

Study such as *Representations of Borderland in Malaysian and Indonesian Cinemas* from Mohd Erman Maharam highlight the contested nature of borderland identities and the ambivalence of political and cultural boundaries. In the film *Bunohan*, boundaries are omnipresent, formed not only by the physical delineations of political entities but also by social situations that influenced individuals and their social mobility. The film elucidates that the concept of power is deeply embedded within society, manifesting in people's attitudes and natural behaviours. However, harnessing this power effectively is contingent on choosing the right approach. Power relations within these lands extend beyond interactions between individuals and establishments; they also encompass ideologies of spirituality that may defy logical explanation. Nearly all Malaysian and Indonesian

borderland films grapple with and attempt to unravel the layers of cultural identities, belonging, and issues of mobility among the inhabitants. *Bunohan* is ultimately a poetic cinematic, showcasing the idea of Borderlands in both national cinemas suggest that national boundary lines have had little effect on cultural identities and practices (Mohd, 2017).

Another study from Mohd Erman Maharam regarding the concept of cultural identities and border can be referred in *Inbetweenness, Tanah Air and Nusantara in Dain Said's 'Bunohan' (2012), 'Interchange' (2016) and 'Dukun' (2018)* that examined the narratives and aesthetics of Dain's films, which focus on themes such as in-betweenness, identity, regional mobility, and interactions with inherited cultures. Films such as *Bunohan*, *Interchange*, and *Dukun* depicted *tanah air* as a social space where groups interact and form connections. Through transnational, non-state-centred representations, Dain explored how the relationship between land and water has shaped societies in the Nusantara region and his study revealed the cultural biases and discrimination resulting from national power struggles. In Malaysia, societal structures are dominated by races and ethnicities, which influenced by race-based political parties since independence. These films, however, present cultural perceptions as fluid and flexible (Mohd, 2023).

The concept of *tanah air* and in-betweenness is central in Dain's films, particularly in *Bunohan*. He uses ghostly characters to evoke strong emotions and disrupt the natural narrative flow, encouraging deeper audience engagement. Dain consistently highlighted the cultural connections among the populations of Nusantara, challenging the notion of nation-states by depicting a close relationship between people and their natural surroundings. His films explored themes of immortality, spirituality, and traditional beliefs, which illustrated the intricate connections among Malaysians and the broader Nusantara region. Dain's work signifies the integration of cultural dimensions, particularly those related to nature, to thrive

as a modern nation. This integration is crucial for preserving national cultural identities. His films blend physical and peripheral spaces into interconnected worlds, challenging traditional concepts of national identity and culture in Malaysia and potentially other Nusantara countries. The protagonists in these films embodied composite characters that reflect the shared identity of the Nusantara people (Mohd, 2023).

The three studies above exemplified the nature of culture as something that can be shared across the boundaries of land and countries. In this context, the influence of the NCP has also shifted in a similar manner. As Malay culture forms the core of the NCP, its cultural practices have spread among the people in Sabah and Sarawak. It is undeniable that the spread of the Malay culture has been ingrained in the people of Borneo especially in the Kadazandusun community. This has led Kadazandusun youth to prefer using the Malay language, as it is the language used in formal documents (Reid, 1997). For the Kadazandusun filmmakers, it is evident that some indigenous filmmakers heavily uses the Malay language in their telemovie albeit in accented manner. If Kadazandusun filmmakers opt to use their indigenous language, they are required to include Malay subtitle. Previously, Kadazandusun filmmakers had to comply with a Malaysian censorship rule requiring their telemovies to use 70% Malay and 30% indigenous language. However, this policy was later abolished (Hassan, 2012).

The fluidity of culture extends beyond a single community and can be observed globally, as exemplified in the study *Popular Imaginary and Cultural Constructions of the Nonya in Peranakan Chinese Culture of the Straits Settlements*. This research intricately explores Nonya identities through distinct archetypes such as *garang/li hai* (feisty/crafty and manipulative), *poonsu* (resourceful), and *toh tiap* (victimised), which derived from popular culture like *The Little Nonya*. These identities emerged during the Peranakan Golden Age

in the Straits Settlements, a period marked by colonialism, wealth, and education, which shaped the matrifocal Peranakan culture, where Nonyas were expected to excel as household managers. Post-war Nonyas had to navigate public patriarchy, with figure like Mrs. Lee Choon Guan exemplified the struggle to survive and provide for her family. Post-war Nonyas often faced more oppressions from women upholding patriarchal ideology than from men. This internalised patriarchy created a complex dynamic where Nonyas were both oppressed and empowered, which provided means to resist Chinese patriarchy. This is as seen in the *The Little Nonya*, where Yueniang preserves her ancestral home and family prestige against significant odds. However, the Second World War and modernity disrupted much of Peranakan wealth and culture, leading to the erosion of these social constructions in the new millennium, yet they remain part of the Nonya imaginary (Neo et al., 2020).

This study provides insight into a Chinese immigrant community living within a border, detached from their ancestral land. However, for the Nonyas, their deep cultural identity and historical development within the Straits Settlements region have showcased the adaptability and multicultural aspect of the Peranakan Nonya, allowing them to structure their own unique brand of identity. This identity particularly highlights the significant roles of women within their community, reflecting their ability to navigate and shape cultural norms in response to their specific socio-historical context. The Peranakan Nonyas have thus created a distinct identity that blends traditional Chinese elements with local influences, underscoring the resilience and dynamism of their cultural heritage.

Previous research has noted the widespread practice of Malay culture that transcends borders, particularly among communities situated on the edge the country. However, the case for Sabah is different as the state does not share its border with the peninsular, Sabah is situated at the northern part of Borneo Island and settled by different ethnic groups with their

own cultures. Thus, study regarding the people Sabah and their representation in films has been conducted in *Mengkonstruksi 'Kesabahan': Analisis Kritis Sinematik terhadap Wacana Kedaerahan* (2016), which presents a cinematic analysis using Edward Said's Orientalism and the 'voyage-in' to create a regional discourse in Malaysian films, particularly focusing on the representation of Sabahan identity. Film such as *Tangisan Akinabalu* (2018) has attempted to depict Sabahan culture but fall short of representing it accurately. This is due to a lack of understanding and sensitivity towards cultural practices in Sabah, as peninsular filmmakers often view Sabah's people through their own lens rather than that of the natives. The study highlighted that such film practices have the potential to create and reinforce stereotypical images of Sabahan people. Instead, Sabahan films should be constructed from the perspective of the natives, showcasing cultures that reflect the Sabah community (Faiznur et al., 2016).

Studies such as *Representations of Borderland in Malaysian and Indonesian Cinema* with *'Inbetweenness', Tanah Air, and Nusantara in Dain Said's Bunohan (2012), Interchange (2016), and Dukun (2018)* illustrated that culture is fluid and often tied to a community rather than defined by the state boundaries. These studies suggest that culture is deeply rooted in race, religion, and belief, regardless the geographical borders. The study of *Popular Imaginary and Cultural Constructions of the Nonya in Peranakan Chinese Culture of the Straits Settlements* presents the concept of assimilation by Chinese immigrants as a way to construct their cultural identity.

However*, Mengkonstruksi 'Kesabahan': Analisis Kritis Sinematik terhadap Wacana Kedaerahan* provide a different argument, citing that the Malays in the peninsular were noted to have a limited understanding of the local culture practiced by the Sabah communities. This can be attributed by the geographical situation where Sabah does not

share the same border with the states in the peninsular, Therefore, the culture does not share similarities with neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia (except for Kalimantan). This also highlights that the culture in Sabah is vastly different from that of the people living in the peninsular, as they are separated by the South China Sea. For instance, the Kadazandusun ethnic group in Sabah has its own distinct language, traditions, values, and beliefs. This explains why Kadazandusun filmmakers prefer to produce films that prioritise their own image and experiences, as these are familiar and highly regarded by both the filmmakers and their community.

2.12 Indigenous Kadazandusun Filmmaking

The Kadazandusun community has long sought to establish a unified identity, referring to themselves collectively as Kadazan. However, as Trixie Tangit notes, attempts to consolidate the Kadazan and Dusun under a single identity have often faltered, as some groups resist compromising their distinct cultural identities and language in favour of a collective one (Tangit, 2017). This highlights the diverse traditions, values, and cultures within the community. The absence of a shared culture has become a significant challenge to unification, as some groups resist compromising their distinct cultural and language identities in a favour of a collective one.

Fouco Barlocco's study, *An Inconvenient Birth: The Formation of a Modern Kadazan Culture and Its Marginalisation within the Making of the Malaysian Nation (1953–2007)*, explores the nationalist aspirations of the Kadazan indigenous group during the 1950s. Barlocco highlights their efforts to standardise the Kadazan language and elevate its status as a lingua franca in Sabah, similar to the national language initiative in Peninsular Malaysia (Barlocco, 2013). These efforts reflect the Kadazan's view of themselves as a

sovereign people, a belief that persists today as cultural autonomy. For example, the Kadazandusun community continues to demand federal recognition of their rights to practise and preserve their culture, with language forming a cornerstone of this effort. Barlocco argues that protecting the Kadazandusun language is essential to safeguarding their culture from being subsumed by Malaysia's dominant cultural narratives.

There are numerous obstacles in the efforts to foster a unified Kadazandusun identity. One significant challenge is the lack of shared culture among Kadazan and Dusun groups. The introduction of an official Kadazandusun dialect in 1995 was an attempt to bridge these cultural gaps, much like how the Malay language unifies Peninsular Malaysia. While progress has been made, particularly among groups like the Rungus and Murut (Stephen et al., 2022), The Kadazan and Dusun communities remain hesitant to fully embrace the dialect. This slow progress is compounded by younger generations favouring other cultural influences such as the Malay and English as those languages are use in the official documents in Malaysia (Reid, 1997), which risks diminishing the relevance of Kadazandusun heritage.

Research on Kadazandusun filmmakers and their contributions to indigenous cinema remains limited. However, notable studies, such as Hiroyuki Yamamoto's *Our People: Telemovies, Bangsa, and Nationalism 3.0 in Sabah, Malaysia* (2013), examine the cultural practices of Sabah's indigenous communities. Yamamoto praises their tolerance for diversity and argues for a broader embrace of inclusivity. In this context, he analyses Abu Bakar Ellah's telemovie *Orang Kita*, which he sees as an assertion of Sabah's indigenous identity amidst Malaysia's political complexities (Yamamoto, 2012).

Similarly, Sydney Thomas Sibangan's master's thesis, *The Authorship of Abu Bakar Ellah in His Telemovies* (2015), identifies Ellah's use of indigenous elements—such as language, settings, and themes—to authentically represent Sabah's cultural diversity.

Sibangan's work highlights Ellah's distinct directorial style, which emphasises indigenous heritage (Sibangan, 2015). Recent self-publications, such as *The Emergence of Sabahan Telemovies and Cultural Representation* (2019) and *The Interstitial Mode of Sabah Telemovie Production* (2019), along with *Representation of 'Other' in Malaysian Film: Kadazandusun Identity in Indigenous Telemovie* (2021), have further explored the role of Sabah's indigenous cinema in cultural representation, political expression, and identity construction (Sibangan, Teo, Thia, et al., 2019), (Sibangan, Teo, & Thia, 2019) & (Sibangan et al., 2021).

These studies emphasise how Kadazandusun cinema serves as a powerful platform for diversity unification, cultural expression and identity reclamation. Yamamoto, for instance, envisions a singular "Sabahan identity" for all indigenous groups, akin to the three dominant identities in Malaysia—Malay, Chinese, and Indian. He supports this notion with observations of *Orang Kita*, which showcases the camaraderie and tolerance of Sabah's indigenous characters.

A united Kadazandusun identity is crucial for amplifying indigenous voices on political, economic, and social matters in Sabah. Indigenous filmmaking holds significant potential to create shared cultural narratives that strengthen unity within the Kadazandusun community. By telling stories rooted in shared experiences and cultural issues, Kadazandusun telemovies can foster understanding and solidarity among diverse ethnic groups. In this way, indigenous cinema not only preserves cultural heritage but also serves as a unifying force for the Kadazandusun people.

2.13 Conclusion on Malaysian Cinema and the Negotiation of Identities

Overall, the historical landscape of Malaysian cinema and the influence of the National Culture Policy (NCP) on filmmaking highlight the tension between nation-building and cultural diversity. While the policy aimed to unify Malaysia's multiracial society, its emphasis on Malay hegemony has marginalised minorities and regional cultures, including the Kadazandusun. This exclusion emphasises the urgent need for an inclusive approach to a national identity—one that values and represents all of Malaysia's communities.

For Kadazandusun filmmakers, navigating Malaysia's authority-defined identity requires both strategic engagement and cultural resistance. They must negotiate with institutions to gain visibility while simultaneously pushing against the constraints of the NCP. This dual approach demands resilience and creativity, as they seek to carve out a space for their stories within a system that often marginalises them.

The path forward lies in unity and self-representation among the Kadazandusun people. The community's diversity, while it represents strength, has also been a source of internal division. Efforts to establish a collective Kadazandusun identity have often faltered due to differences in language, tradition, and self-identification among subgroups. This fragmentation weakens their ability to advocate for their representation on the national stage.

Cinematic storytelling offers a powerful medium to bridge these divisions. By creating films that reflect shared cultural values and address common challenges, Kadazandusun filmmakers can foster a sense of solidarity within their community. Such films can also serve as a platform for dialogue with broader Malaysian society, contesting and negotiating with the authority defined identity. Filmmaking can play a pivotal role in this process, offering a means to preserve their heritage, assert their identity, and contribute to a more equitable Malaysian narrative. By embracing their diversity and advocating for

their place in the national story, the Kadazandusun can challenge the limitations of the NCP and the marginalisation to ensure their voices are heard in Malaysia's evolving cultural landscape.

CHAPTER 3

THE INDIGENOUS FILM ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK AND THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter covered Malaysia's National Cinema and the ongoing contestation and negotiation of representation by diverse ethnic groups in film. This includes the limited previous studies on the Kadazandusun people and their identity representation and fragmentation in film. Therefore, this chapter aims to explain the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, which is designed to explore the cultural and identity dynamics within Kadazandusun telemovies. This exploration is conducted in conjunction with Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema theory. Imagined Community is utilised to examine how Kadazandusun telemovies reinforce a shared culture identity, emphasising the roles of language, tradition, and storytelling in fostering unity among diverse sub-ethnic groups. Meanwhile, Fourth Cinema highlights the importance of indigenous control over narratives, production, and representation in filmmaking, ensuring cultural authenticity and self-determination. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive lens to analyse how Kadazandusun telemovies preserve, assert, and adapt their indigenous identity within the national contexts.

3.2 The Inspiration for The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Design

Historically, Western cinema has dominated the representation of indigenous people, often resulting in inauthentic depictions due to the lack of indigenous filmmakers behind the camera (Martens, 2012). The portrayal of indigenous communities by non-indigenous

filmmakers has raised concerns regarding the authenticity of these representations. This misrepresentation has prompted indigenous communities, such as the Maori in New Zealand, to recognise the importance of controlling their own narratives in film. The collaborative efforts of the Maori and the international community have been instrumental in developing indigenous filmmaking into a successful industry in New Zealand. However, this development has not been without challenges, as indigenous filmmakers often face being labelled as the "other" and they are required to compete with the more dominant, mainstream cinema (Martens, 2012).

The turning point for Maori filmmaking came with the release of *Ngati* (1987), directed by Barry Barclay, an indigenous Maori filmmaker. This film marked a significant moment in the history of indigenous cinema, as it was considered by Martens (2012) to be the first indigenous feature film made by a member of an indigenous community living within a Western-dominated cultural context. *Ngati* was a commercial success and garnered international acclaim, positioning Maori filmmaking as a force to be reckoned with in both national and international contexts. Barclay's motivation for making an indigenous film stemmed from his dissatisfaction with how Western cinema misrepresented indigenous peoples, fuelling the need for indigenous stories to be told authentically, with indigenous values and issues at the forefront. *Ngati* exemplified this by presenting Maori values and addressing issues relevant to indigenous people. It also suggested the possibility of a productive relationship between Maori and Pakeha (European descendants) in New Zealand (Martens, 2012).

The success and recognition of Maori filmmaking, particularly the work of Barclay, has paved the way for indigenous peoples worldwide to assert control over their own narratives in media and film. Since 1999, indigenous communities have successfully

established their own nationally run television networks, such as the Aboriginal People's Television Network in Canada, Maori TV in New Zealand, Taiwan Indigenous Television, and National Indigenous Television in Australia (Ginsburg, 2016). These platforms have allowed indigenous people to represent themselves and their stories without the distortion or intervention often present in mainstream media.

The examination of indigenous filmmakers and their works can be divided into three key themes: the contestation and negotiation between indigenous and national identities, the perseverance to portray indigenous identity authentically in film, and the use of film as a tool for defining indigenous identity to ensure its relevance and continuity. These three themes —Contest/Negotiation, Perseverance, and Self-Definition—are critical to understanding the experiences of indigenous filmmakers globally. These approaches emerged from discussions on specific issues within the existing body of literature, highlighting the struggles and efforts of indigenous filmmakers to voice their experiences, either independently or with minimal external intervention.

These themes are supported by various studies on indigenous film and media. Works such as *Storytelling for Our Own People: A Reflection on Working with Maori Filmmaker Barry Barclay* (Milligan, 2017), *Indigenous Media from U-Matic to YouTube: Media Sovereignty in the Digital Age* (Ginsburg, 2016), *The Impact of Maori Television on Being Maori: A Geographical Approach* (Poihipi, 2007), and *Voice of the Arhuacos: Transcending the Border* (Lulkowska, 2019) provide a scholarly foundation for the key terms discussed. These studies examine the ways in which indigenous filmmakers assert their cultural sovereignty and resist external influences, all of which are crucial for analysing the indigenous telemovies in Sabah.

By exploring these terms within the context of indigenous filmmaking, the analysis highlights the global struggle of indigenous filmmakers to assert their identities and tell their stories on their own terms. Through the lens of Contest/Negotiation, Perseverance, and Self-Definition, the experiences of Kadazandusun filmmakers in Sabah can be placed within the broader discourse of indigenous media production, showcasing their efforts to use film as a means of cultural preservation and self-representation amidst both national and global pressures.

3.2.1 First Theme: Contest or Negotiation in Indigenous Filmmaking

The concept of contesting in indigenous filmmaking stems from the resistance against the dominant national identity that seeks to unify diverse ethnic groups into a single, homogenised entity. National identity plays a crucial role in shaping the films produced, as cinema becomes a tool to project the image of the nation and promote unity. This often influences national cinema, steering it towards narratives that align with the state's vision. For indigenous peoples, this process can lead to misrepresentation or erasure, as their identities are subsumed under a dominant cultural narrative. In New Zealand, the dissatisfaction of the Maori with the way Western filmmakers depicted them in films sparked a movement to contest these portrayals. The result was the establishment of indigenous film production to take control of their own stories and challenge the dominant narratives that shaped their representation.

Indigenous filmmakers began contesting these misrepresentations because they recognised the fundamental distinction between their identity and the imposed national identity. The work of Barry Barclay, an indigenous Maori filmmaker, serves as a notable example of this contestation. Throughout his career, Barclay sought to challenge and disrupt

the Western depictions of indigenous peoples in cinema. His film *Ngati* (1987) is often cited as a direct response to the way indigenous people had been represented by Western filmmakers, offering a narrative that was shaped by Maori perspectives rather than one tailored to Western audiences (Milligan, 2015). By doing so, Barclay not only asserted Maori identity in the film industry but also sparked a broader conversation about the place of indigenous narratives within national cinema.

However, contestation alone is not sufficient. Indigenous people are often minorities within the national context, and this reality forces them to negotiate their identities in relation to the dominant culture. Negotiation arises from the recognition that full separation from the national identity may not be feasible, and thus, indigenous peoples must navigate a delicate balance between asserting their identity and integrating into the larger national framework. In this context, indigenous filmmakers find themselves negotiating between two identities: their own cultural identity and the national identity that governs the broader societal structure.

Negotiating identity in film is a strategy that seeks to preserve indigenous culture while acknowledging the necessity of coexistence within the larger community. The balance between these identities allows indigenous peoples to assert their uniqueness without completely isolating themselves from the national narrative. As Milligan (2017) notes, contest and negotiation are often intertwined in indigenous filmmaking, as both approaches are necessary for indigenous communities to maintain their identity while remaining part of the larger society. The two terms are used interchangeably because while indigenous peoples resist assimilation, they also recognise the importance of dialogue and compromise in sustaining their cultural identity over time.

Faye Ginsburg emphasises the importance of careful navigation when using film to challenge existing power structures. While film can be an effective medium for highlighting indigenous struggles and gaining support, indigenous filmmakers must recognise that they are working within a system that continues to be dominated by those very power structures (Ginsburg, 2016). This awareness compels indigenous filmmakers to approach contestation and negotiation with caution, ensuring that their efforts do not completely alienate them from the broader societal framework in which they must function.

A powerful example of this negotiation process is Maori TV, established in 2003 in New Zealand. The channel was designed to educate the public about Maori culture and preserve it, yet its primary language of communication was English (Poihipi, 2007). This reflects the reality of negotiating between Maori and New Zealand identities—while the channel aimed to promote indigenous culture, it used a dominant language to reach a broader audience. However, in 2007, a second channel was created specifically for Maori speakers, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between preserving indigenous language and culture while engaging with the national identity (Ginsburg, 2016). Similarly, Barclay's film Ngati alternated between the Maori language and English, further exemplifying the balance between asserting Maori identity and engaging with broader, national audiences (Murray, 2008).

The relationship between indigenous and national identities is shaped by a long and gradual process of assimilation. In Malaysia, this is seen in the implementation of policies such as the New Economy Policy and the New Cultural Policy, which integrated vernacular schools into the national education system and made Malay a compulsory subject (Noraini & Esmaeil, 2017). These policies reflect a broader trend of integrating diverse communities under a single national identity. However, for indigenous peoples, such policies also present

challenges in maintaining their distinct cultural identity while navigating the pressures of assimilation.

In conclusion, the concepts of Contest and Negotiate are essential in understanding the dynamics of indigenous filmmaking. Indigenous filmmakers, like the Maori in New Zealand and the Kadazandusun in Malaysia, must contest dominant representations of their communities while simultaneously negotiating their place within the broader national framework. This balance allows them to assert their cultural identity while remaining part of a society that often marginalises or overlooks their stories. Indigenous film, therefore, becomes a critical site of resistance, adaptation, and preservation, enabling these communities to sustain their cultural heritage amidst the forces of nationalism and globalisation.

3.2.2 Second Theme: Perseverance of Indigenous Identity through Filmmaking

Perseverance, as a concept, involves the continuous efforts of indigenous peoples to preserve, conserve, and revitalise their culture while living within societies dominated by other, often more powerful, cultures. This perseverance is reflected in their films, where authentic portrayals of language, culture, traditions, and values are central to distinguishing their narratives from mainstream cinema. Through these authentic representations, indigenous filmmakers create space for their people to tell their own stories, ensuring that their identities remain visible and distinct within the larger national or global context.

Indigenous filmmakers often utilise specific cultural markers, such as language and traditions, to link their identity to their films, as seen in the case of Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah*. This film offers an authentic portrayal of Australia's Aboriginal community, with the characters speaking in Aboriginal lingo and their lives depicted in a

raw, realistic manner. The film's central theme is the main characters' struggle for belonging, and through its authentic representation, it challenges audiences from the dominant culture to witness the marginalisation experienced by Aboriginal people. The use of Aboriginal language and cultural markers in *Samson and Delilah* allows the film to offer a genuine and unfiltered perspective on Aboriginal life, providing a significant opportunity for viewers to appreciate the authenticity of the culture and its struggles (Huijser & Collins-Gearing, 2014). This effort to maintain authenticity in the face of dominant cultural narratives is an important aspect of indigenous perseverance, allowing filmmakers to assert their cultural identity while resisting the pressures to conform to mainstream portrayals.

A similar act of perseverance is seen in Taiwan's Ayatal aborigine group through the film *Finding Sayun*. This film portrays the experiences of the Ayatal people, focusing on their cultural identity while exploring their historical struggles with foreign influences, from Japanese occupation to modern-day Taiwan. *Finding Sayun* has become a symbol of aboriginal perseverance in Taiwan, demonstrating how indigenous culture can endure even in the face of marginalisation. The film serves multiple purposes: it raises awareness about the portrayal of indigenous peoples during the Japanese occupation, documents the lives of three generations of indigenous people, and promotes cultural tourism by encouraging visitors to experience Ayatal traditions firsthand (Sterk, 2014). In this way, the film functions as both a tool of cultural preservation and as a means of generating broader appreciation and recognition of indigenous identity, allowing the Ayatal people to maintain their cultural relevance in an increasingly globalised world.

Both *Samson and Delilah* and *Finding Sayun* illustrate how indigenous filmmakers employ perseverance in their works, emphasising authenticity and cultural specificity to resist the pressures of dominant cinematic narratives. By doing so, they do not only preserve

their cultures but also educate wider audiences about the distinct identities of indigenous peoples. These films create opportunities for cultural understanding and empathy, allowing indigenous people to control their own representations and assert their place within national and global discourses.

The perseverance of indigenous filmmakers in these contexts is particularly vital in a world where dominant cultures often overshadow or erase minority voices. By creating films that focus on indigenous experiences, values, and languages, these filmmakers ensure that their communities remain visible and that their stories are told with authenticity. This act of perseverance is not merely about cultural survival but about actively defining and shaping how indigenous identities are portrayed, thereby asserting control over their cultural narratives.

3.2.3 Third Theme: Self-definition of the Indigenous Identity by Indigenous Filmmakers

The concept of self-definition within indigenous filmmaking encompasses the active efforts of indigenous peoples to maintain their cultural representation and autonomy through cinema. This manifests in storytelling that highlights specific issues, values, and experiences that are crucial for indigenous peoples, both as a means of self-reflection and as a way to attract attention to their struggles. By using film to explore and assert their identities, indigenous filmmakers not only preserve their cultures but also ensure that these identities remain relevant in the face of external pressures, such as foreign cultural influences and assimilation. This is especially pertinent for younger generations, who are particularly vulnerable due to their minority status and the constant societal push towards integration into mainstream cultures.

Film, in this context, serves as a vital tool for self-definition, allowing indigenous communities to reaffirm their identities, educate broader audiences, and foster resilience among younger members of their communities. The process of using film as a form of self-reflection helps to ensure that indigenous peoples remain rooted in their culture while adapting to contemporary challenges. This proactive approach to cultural preservation enables them to guard against the erasure or dilution of their identities, especially in the face of globalisation and dominant cultural narratives. Through this process, indigenous peoples not only defend their cultural heritage but also equip themselves to thrive in the future, ensuring that their culture remains relevant and continues to evolve without being subsumed by foreign influences.

Agata Lulkowska's research on indigenous filmmaking in Colombia similarly highlights how film can be used as a medium to represent the traumatic experiences of indigenous peoples. Lulkowska notes that indigenous films in Colombia have been developed as a response to colonial and contemporary cultural persecution, serving both as a form of resistance and a means of healing (Lulkowska, 2019). This method, often developed in collaboration with European filmmakers, addresses the pain endured by indigenous communities during colonisation while emphasising the importance of cultural survival. Beyond depicting indigenous peoples and their cultures with authenticity, these films also play a crucial role in informing audiences about the ongoing struggles of indigenous peoples (Lulkowska, 2019). In this way, indigenous films become a form of cultural preservation as well as a platform for advocacy, education and reflection.

However, as indigenous filmmakers gain international recognition, there is a risk that the authenticity of their cultural representation may be compromised in order to appeal to mainstream cinema audiences. This raises concerns about the balance between cultural

integrity and wider acceptance. For instance, Taika Waititi, a Maori filmmaker from New Zealand, has achieved significant global success but has taken a different approach from earlier Maori filmmakers like Barry Barclay and Merata Mita, who used film primarily to preserve indigenous heritage. While Barclay and Mita focused on telling stories that deeply engaged with Maori identity and issues, Waititi's films are more geared towards a global audience, often blending humour and indigenous culture in ways that resonate widely beyond the Maori community (Martens, 2012). This shift reflects the complex dynamics of indigenous representation in the global film industry, where the need for cultural authenticity sometimes competes with the desire to reach larger, more diverse audiences.

The challenge for indigenous filmmakers, therefore, lies in defining and asserting their cultural identity without losing sight of the authenticity that makes their stories unique. As indigenous cinema continues to gain visibility on the world stage, the balance between maintaining cultural integrity and appealing to broader audiences becomes a critical consideration. Nonetheless, the use of film as a means of defining and preserving indigenous identity remains a powerful tool, one that enables indigenous communities to control their narratives, address their historical and contemporary struggles, and ensure that their cultures continue to thrive despite external pressures.

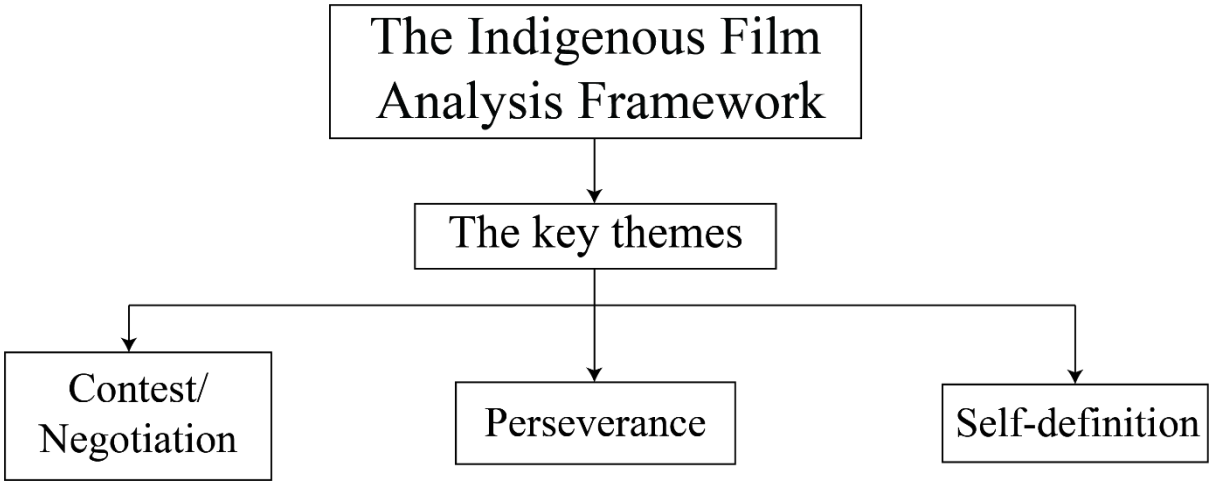


Figure 3.1: An overview of the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework

There are notable similarities in how previous studies of indigenous film systematically approach the subject by highlighting key components in the discourse. The central focus of these studies often revolves around the discussion of identity, particularly the relationship between indigenous and dominant identities. This topic serves as a foundation for structuring critical discourse about indigenous peoples, including the Kadazandusun, and their use of film as a medium to address current social, cultural, and political issues. The way these films negotiate identity and belonging within a broader societal context is a key theme in indigenous cinema globally.

In terms of development and achievement, there is a significant disparity between Kadazandusun filmmakers in Sabah and international indigenous filmmakers. International indigenous filmmakers have often gained greater recognition and access to resources. However, certain parallels can be observed, particularly in the assertion of their sole authority to tell indigenous stories. This autonomy helps ensure that films remain authentic from the indigenous perspective, free from external influence. The act of filmmaking, in this case, becomes an expression of cultural pride, a response to contemporary issues faced by

the community, and a means of preserving and conserving cultural heritage through narrative. These films are not only creative expressions but also serve as cultural documents that reflect the realities of indigenous communities while ensuring the survival of their identities for future generations.

Language plays a crucial role in this process, as it is a key marker of identity. George Orwell famously asserted that “those who control language control the world”, pointing to the idea that authority lies with those who determine the form and structure of accepted language (Mozaffor, 2017). This concept resonates deeply in the context of indigenous film, where control over language equates to control over how indigenous peoples are represented and understood. For the Kadazandusun, the preservation of their language is central to maintaining cultural identity. However, as noted by Anthony Reid in his 1997 study *Kadazan/Dusun: An Endangered Species, the Kadazandusun language* has been in decline due to the growing preference for Malay and English, which are used in official documents and public life. Reid highlighted how this shift away from indigenous languages poses a threat to the cultural identity of the Kadazandusun people (Reid, 1997).

In 2021, TV3, a major Malaysian broadcaster, aired a segment titled *Etnik Sabah, Pertuturan Ibunda Asli Diancam Kepupusan* (Ethnic in Sabah, the Native Language Facing Extinction) during the Harvest Festival in Sabah (Buletin TV3, 2021). This segment reiterated the concerns raised by Reid, focusing on the younger generation's lack of proficiency in their native Kadazandusun language. The report highlighted the uncertain future of the Kadazandusun language and the potential impact of its decline on the community’s identity. Both Reid’s study and the TV3 segment emphasised the importance of language preservation, as language is inextricably linked to cultural identity and survival.

The decline in language proficiency is not merely a linguistic issue but has wider implications for the preservation of Kadazandusun cultural heritage. Language carries with it the traditions, values, and histories of a community, and its erosion can lead to the loss of cultural knowledge and identity. For Kadazandusun filmmakers, this reality presents both a challenge and an opportunity. By incorporating their native language and cultural narratives into their films, they contribute to the revitalisation of Kadazandusun identity. Filmmaking thus becomes a tool not only for storytelling but also for cultural survival, reinforcing the connection between language, film, and identity.

In this context, film plays a crucial role in empowering indigenous communities such as the Kadazandusun to reclaim and preserve their cultural narrative. By controlling how their stories are told and in which language, these filmmakers assert their place within both local and global discourses. This does not only highlights the significance of film as a medium for cultural preservation but also reflects the broader struggle of indigenous peoples to maintain their identity in the face of external pressures and assimilation. As Orwell suggested, those who control language wield significant influence, and for indigenous communities, maintaining that control through film is a vital aspect of their cultural resilience and empowerment.

3.3 Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community

Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Community, introduced in 1983, provides a systematic approach to understand the formation of national identity. Since its inception, Anderson's theory has been both criticised and appreciated. Critics argue that Imagined Community are only applicable in local situations and not on a global scale, suggesting that mutual economic agreements are more significant than 'imagined' bonds, which form

naturally (Robertson, 2011). However, academics worldwide still utilise Imagined Community as an essential conceptual framework to study national identity. Imagined Community assist in reassessing and reassuring local identities against the pressures of globalisation (Calhoun, 2016). Anderson's theory presents an approachable framework for studying hegemonic-absent societies within sovereign nations and the sub-imagined identities within them.

Anderson characterises a nation as an Imagined Community, inherently limited and sovereign (Sari & Krisnawati, 2017). The term 'imagined' is vital as it denotes the 'state of mind' of citizens, regardless of race, religion, or language, to associate with each other and create a sense of identity and belonging (Baumgärtel, 2011). This means members of a nation agree to belong to a community, even though they may never meet each other.

Anderson explained that the creation of national identity is facilitated by the establishment of an administrative vernacular (national language) to create a network of communication within the nation (Robertson, 2011). The spread of this vernacular was largely aided by print capitalism (print media) in the form of newspapers and novels. Print capitalism provided nationwide readers with insights into their nation's current state (Calhoun, 2016), while simultaneously spreading and promoting the national language to the furthest territories within the country. Anderson argued that this phenomenon creates a bond of kinship among people, encouraging assimilation into a singular national identity (Harnita et al., 2019).

However, Anderson also addressed the limitations of the national language due to geographical factors and the tendency for societies to associate with local familiarity. He articulated that the gradual factors in the formation of national identity gave rise to a dialect, which led to a 'cousin' of the administrative vernacular. These dialects often hold a lower

status as they lack the dissemination power of the formally printed version, leading to their limited use and suppression by prevailing authorities (Anderson, 2006).

The relevance of Anderson's conceptual framework in contemporary times is significant. He based the Imagined Community foundation on the establishment of networks made possible by print media. Today, the world is rapidly transitioning to digital technology, rendering print somewhat obsolete. However, studies like *The Spread of Nationalism Using social media* by Dewi Kartika Sari and Ester Krisnawati from Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana (2017) have applied Anderson's framework to contemporary settings. They emphasised the network of communication created through social media platforms among ethnic groups like the Papua, Maluku, Batak, and Kalimantan. These ethnic groups used these platforms to maintain identity within smaller Imagined Community and concurrently the larger Imagined Community of Indonesians (Sari & Krisnawati, 2017). For the Kadazandusun community, the dissemination and analysis of indigenous culture will be conducted through their own telemovies. Although Anderson's concept was originally intended to explain the foundations of national identity, the Kadazandusun had already developed their own sense of an Imagined Community through their nationalist efforts before the early Sabah's indigenous leaders decided to join the Malaysia federation (Barlocco, 2013). Therefore, the notion of a shared culture already existed among the Kadazandusun people.

Kadazandusun telemovies, akin to the role of the printing press, expands the notion of shared culture, particularly in contemporary settings. This approach extends Anderson's idea of an Imagined Community to film, highlighting its relevance to minority indigenous cultural identity.

3.3.1 Kadazandusun Identity as an Imagined Community

The concept of an Imagined Community, as coined by Benedict Anderson, can be effectively applied to understand the formation of Kadazan nationalism in Sabah during the 1950s. Anderson's framework suggests that nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by their members who perceive themselves as part of a cohesive group despite never meeting most of their fellow members. This idea resonates with the efforts of early Kadazandusun leaders in Sabah to forge a unified identity among diverse indigenous groups.

In the context of Sabah, the highpoint of the shared culture among the Kadazandusun can be traced back to their belief of originating from the *Nunuk Ragang* (Giant Banyan) tree, situated in the deep interior part of Sabah. From there, the Kadazandusun believe that they eventually grew and expanded into the diverse ethnicities that exist today (Norsuhaila & Asmiaty, 2019).

In terms of Kadazan nationalism, the movement aimed to unify various indigenous ethnicities under a single Kadazan identity. This initiative was driven by leaders such as Catholic missionaries and local Kadazandusun figures who utilised language, media, and cultural practices to promote a shared Kadazan-ness (Barlocco, 2009). Their efforts were crucial in fostering a sense of unity and political identity among the indigenous communities, enabling them to envision themselves as a distinct entity within the larger framework of Malaysia.

Studies such as those by Reid and Tangit explore the label of Kadazandusun identity, language, and its political and cultural ramifications. From their studies, it is apparent that the effort to unite the Kadazandusun was met with serious political and cultural backlash. Anthony Reid's study, *Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia)* (1997), offers a political perspective on the Kadazandusun language and its challenges,

especially as the younger generation prefers to use Malay and English in formal documents (Reid, 1997). Reid attributes change in the Kadazandusun cultural landscape to domestic political enactments such as Tun Mustapha's "One culture, One religion, One language" approach in the 1970s. He also highlights the inability of Kadazandusun leaders to unanimously agree upon a unified culture and identity, focusing more on differences than similarities.

Tangit notes that the standardisation of the Kadazandusun language has led the youth to become more rooted in their Kadazandusun identity, while the older generation remains dissatisfied with the over-Dusunised nature of the language (Tangit, 2017). Conversely, the study *For The Greater Good: Resolving Differences in Opinions on the Standard Indigenous Language in Sabah* demonstrates the positive reception of the standard Kadazandusun language among the Murut and Rungus (Stephen et al., 2022). This exemplifies the progress of a shared culture among the Kadazandusun and its relevance in the indigenous community.

It is significant to highlight the studies of Barlocco, Reid, Tangit, and Stephen to exhibit the existence of the idea of 'Kadazan' or 'Kadazandusun' identity well before the indigenous communities in Sabah joined the Malaysian federation in 1963. This indicates that the concept of a shared culture was already present within the Kadazandusun community. The early leaders appealed to this idea within their respective communities to unite the various ethnic groups in Sabah. According to the The Kadazan Resolution 1961 article 6 stated the following:

> Lest we be condemned to repeat our past for forgetting our history, for the sake of unity of being the foremost indigenous people of Sabah, (North Borneo) and sharing more similarities than differences in worldviews, cosmology, adat and the way we relate to mother nature, it will be unjust for us to negate and disrespect the wisdom

> of our visionary leaders and wise elders of 1961 who, after hours of debate and deliberations during the August 7, 1961 National Kadazan Congress, resolved by overwhelming majority votes that Muruts too are "Kadazans". (Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association Sabah, 2024)

The early leaders of the Kadazandusun acknowledged the shared culture among the various ethnics and sub-ethnics. This is the reasoning to utilise Anderson's Imagined Community, as the Kadazandusun is an imagined identity, an identity that include 45 indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah. Therefore, by applying Anderson's framework to film instead of the printing press, we can extend Tilman Baumgartel's assertion that the concept of Imagined Community has evolved to include television and radio as mediums for spreading cultures and creating bond (Baumgärtel, 2011). With the focus on the film contents, the Imagined Community theoretical framework could highlight the culture exhibited in the Kadazandusun telemovies and to associate it with the notion of shared culture and strengthening the bond among the Kadazandusun community.

3.4 The Approach to Imagined Community Theoretical Framework

According to Pratiwi Cristin Harnita, Putri Hergianasari, Jamilah Ahmad, and Dewi Kartika Sari, the Imagined Community can be categorised into four key components: Imagined, Sovereign, Limited, and Community (Harnita et al., 2019).

The imagined is structured within the consciousness of its people. Anderson asserts that such a community is inherently horizontal, limited, and sovereign. It is horizontal because nationalism transcends race, religion, and culture, allowing individuals to share a collective identity without personally knowing one another. Sovereignty refers to the

construction of national ideology through institutions designed to foster a sense of nationalism among citizens. The concept is also limited, as it is defined by geographical and demographic boundaries that distinguish the states within a nation. Finally, the community aspect reflects individuals' emotional and cultural attachment to a larger group, reinforced by shared symbols that cultivate a sense of kinship and belonging.

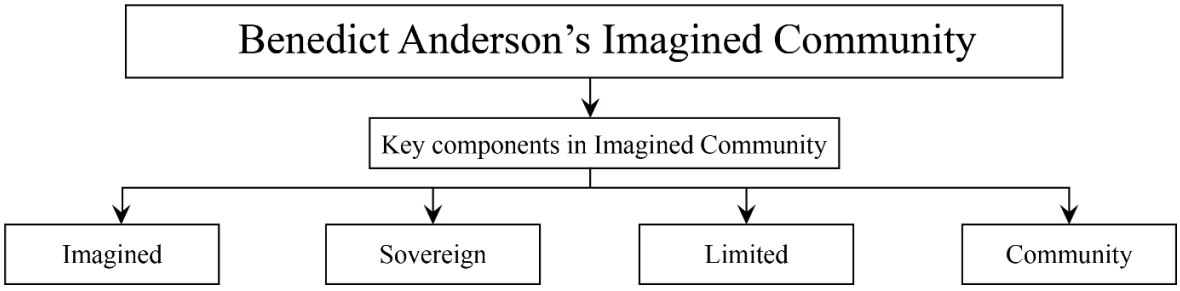


Figure 3.2: The Imagined Community Framework

In this study, the Imagined Community framework is applied to Film Analysis Framework to explore Kadazandusun indigenous identity in Malaysia. The function of film is akin to the print and social media serve as a medium, accumulating layers of information. Tilman Baumgärtel stated that cinema and television have taken on the roles traditionally held by print media (Baumgärtel, 2011). Therefore, Kadazandusun telemovie could serve to illuminate the indigenous identity its representing, while serving as a medium of shared culture to nurture unity among the Kadazandusun identity.

3.5 Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema

The concept of Fourth Cinema is pivotal when discussing indigenous filmmakers, as it highlights their efforts to establish a distinct presence in the film industry. This thesis

integrates the Fourth Cinema concept to support discussions on filmmaking as a means for indigenous peoples to affirm their identities. While there are similarities and differences between the ideal concept of indigenous filmmakers within Fourth Cinema and those in Sabah, the concept remains relevant.

3.5.1 The Emergence of Fourth Cinema Theory

Indigenous peoples have long participated in various media, including print, radio, and television. Eventually, film emerged as a medium for expressing indigenous artistic and creative products. Notably, the indigenous Maori in New Zealand produced successful films such as Barry Barclay's *Ngati* in 1970, which offered alternative narratives accessible to diverse audiences.

New Zealand cinema, at the time, was dominated by Eurocentric films aimed at Western audiences, reflecting mainstream practices in content and representation. The concept of indigenous filmmaking originated in New Zealand with Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay, who proposed this idea in the early 2000s when Maori filmmaking was gaining attention and support. Barclay believed in indigenous peoples controlling their own image to preserve and perpetuate their culture's dignity.

> The term "Fourth Cinema" extends from the global cinema's categorization. Barclay stated: "I am in another cinema. … I am not in First Cinema. The cinema of America. The cinema of the international mass market. I am not in Second Cinema either; in the art house cinema for the cinema buffs of the modern nation-state. … And … I am not in Third Cinema also. I am not living in a Third World nation-state". (Martens, 2012)

According to Barclay, indigenous cinema is distinct in its practice and ideological background, aiming to distance itself from the mainstream perceptions. This led to the production of other indigenous films and the involvement of prominent Maori filmmakers such as Merata Mita, recognised by Barclay as the first person to produce a true indigenous film.

3.5.2 The Approach to Fourth Cinema

Emiel Martens contends that the concept of Fourth Cinema can be examined through three components: Content, production, and reception, which significantly influences indigenous filmmakers. Christina Milligan also highlights these characteristics: “Barclay was clear that Fourth Cinema is not just about content and modes of production, but also about reception” (Martens, 2012). Understanding these three areas allow for a systematic and critical approach to Fourth Cinema, addressing the need for indigenous self-representation and identity protection.

Fourth Cinema emphasises that films should authentically represent indigenous peoples, with indigenous storytellers shaping the content. This ensures that narratives reflect their perspectives and directly benefit their communities.

Indigenous involvement in film production is essential, reinforcing the importance of indigenous authority in both executive and creative roles. Martens (2012) asserts that indigenous filmmaking should actively engage, respect, and serve the communities in which it is produced.

Regarding reception, Fourth Cinema prioritises educational content over mere entertainment (Martens, 2012). By addressing relevant social, cultural, and political issues,

it fosters awareness and self-determination within indigenous communities. However, Martens notes that indigenous cinema has increasingly adapted its content to appeal to mainstream audiences, shaped by market demands and policy constraints.

3.5.3 Fourth Cinema and the Global Indigenous Community

Fourth Cinema is not exclusive to Maori; Barclay explained that it applies to global indigenous ethnic groups as a method of filmmaking and political activism: “Fourth Cinema does not simply stand for films produced by Indigenous filmmakers, but refers to a distinct politically engaged mode of filmmaking that has emerged from the shared Indigenous experience of exclusion in postcolonial settler states and allows for film practices and images that are controlled by—and do justice to—Indigenous peoples and their concerns and customs” (Martens, 2012).

> Barclay acknowledged the optimism and scrutiny in associating diverse indigenous groups under a single concept, noting the unique cultures and challenges that can lead to disagreements. He emphasised the common experiences of dispossession and the need to reclaim their meanings within their communities. (Murray, 2008).

Fourth Cinema aims to educate both indigenous people and the general public about important issues. Milligan asserts: “Essentially, the core of Fourth Cinema is the control of indigenous image-making must be in the hands of indigenous people themselves” (Milligan, 2017). Filmmaking serves to expose and convey the value of indigenous identity to one’s own community, encouraging the continuation of indigenous practices. The ultimate goal is to preserve indigenous identity within the film industry, ensuring that that indigenous communities derive benefits from the films produced.

Building on this foundation, numerous studies have explored the practical application of Fourth Cinema, examining how indigenous filmmakers utilise this framework to support and represent their communities. Across the world, from the Māori of New Zealand to the Native peoples of the Americas, indigenous filmmakers have actively worked to assert and safeguard their cultural identity through cinema. These studies highlight innovative methods that not only reinforce cultural identity but also engage both local and international audiences.

A key aspect of this cultural reinforcement is the emphasis on indigenous identity within visual storytelling. Christian (2017) explored this in her study *Gathering Knowledge: Indigenous Methodologies of Landplace-Based Visual Storytelling/Filmmaking and Visual Sovereignty*, applying Archibald's Indigenous Storywork Principles—respect, reciprocity, responsibility, reverence, holism, synergy, and interrelatedness (Christian, 2017). Her research underscores storytelling as a means of preserving cultural knowledge and sovereignty, ensuring its survival for future generations, particularly among indigenous communities in Canada.

Beyond storytelling, indigenous filmmaking also prioritises the transmission of filmmaking knowledge to new generations. Penney (2022) examined this in *The Meaningful Experiences of Young Indigenous Filmmakers While Learning Filmmaking Techniques and Creating and Sharing Films*, illustrating how young indigenous individuals develop an appreciation for indigenous cinema. Her study advocates for student-led filmmaking in education, promoting creative, collaborative, and culturally relevant learning environments (Penney, 2022). While culture naturally evolves, recognising its significance strengthens indigenous identity and sustains filmmaking practices.

In addition to knowledge transmission, global indigenous filmmaking acknowledges the importance of collaboration with non-indigenous participants. Bristowe (2017) addressed this in *Indigenising the Screen, Navigating the Currents of Change, a Vision of Fourth Cinema*, proposing a framework for Māori and non-Māori cooperation. Central to this framework is the concept of singular relationality, which challenges the notion that historical identities must lead to irreconcilable differences. Instead, it envisions a Cultural Interface where different identities productively integrate, facilitating knowledge exchange to support indigenisation (Bristowe, 2017).

Bristowe illustrates this framework through *The Prophet*, a film partially funded by the New Zealand Film Commission through Te Paepae Ataata. This case demonstrates the practical implications of the framework, particularly in screenwriting. His study highlights the necessity of strategies that navigate dominant screenwriting paradigms while integrating visual and temporal elements that align with character motivation. A crucial aspect of this approach is the recognition of a 'Voice Within,' which is personal, autoethnographic, collective, and ancestral. This aligns with the interiority championed by filmmakers such as Barry Barclay and Merata Mita, pioneers of Fourth Cinema and Māori filmmaking in New Zealand.

While an autoethnographic approach enhances films with depth and authenticity, it also presents challenges, such as the risk of subjective bias. Balancing personal narratives with broader indigenous perspectives remains critical, as does the incorporation of ancestral voices, which requires a nuanced understanding of indigenous epistemologies. For non-Māori collaborators, fully grasping and integrating these perspectives can be complex.

However, not all global indigenous filmmaking studies directly apply the Fourth Cinema framework, yet they still contribute to a broader understanding of indigenous

representation. For instance, Rutherford's *Indigenous Presence in the US Imagination* examines Native American portrayals in cinema, from mainstream Hollywood films to independent indigenous filmmaking. His work critiques traditional stereotypes and explores how indigenous knowledge systems can subvert colonial and capitalist identities through film.

The Western genre, in particular, provides a lens for analysing Native American representation. Rather than being merely stories about cowboys, Western films often reflect the colonial history of the U.S. and the treatment on Native Americans. Historically, Hollywood has constructed myths about indigenous people, aligning portrayals with settler-colonial perspectives rather than indigenous worldviews (Rutherford, 2022). However, by reframing America as a space for indigenous expression, new interpretations of film can emerge. Traditionally, the 'Indian' has been positioned as the antithesis of white civilisation and capitalism. Yet, this construction can be subverted to legitimise Native American identity.

Real-world events further illustrate this potential for subversion. The Standing Rock protests, for example, provided a platform for indigenous representation in film and media. Documentary such as *Taking Alcatraz* contextualise indigenous activism, offering an alternative perspective on U.S. history. Rutherford's work thus presents an alternative approach to indigenous filmmaking, yet it aligns with the core principles of Fourth Cinema by supporting indigenous efforts to reclaim identity and challenge stereotypes.

Ultimately, indigenous filmmaking serves as a powerful tool for asserting and preserving cultural identity in the face of assimilation and marginalisation. Studies by Christian, Rutherford, Bristowe, and Penney all highlight a common theme: the prioritisation of indigenous voices in film while expanding frameworks for indigenous filmmakers.

Indigenisation remains essential, ensuring that films are deeply rooted in indigenous communities rather than shaped by settler-colonial perspectives. These studies advocate for the protection and preservation of indigenous images from political, economic, and social influences, reinforcing the importance of self-representation.

Furthermore, Fourth Cinema provides an invaluable framework for indigenous filmmakers, allowing them to shape their narratives rather than having them dictated by external influences. By prioritising indigenous self-representation, it enables filmmakers to reclaim cultural identity, challenge stereotypes, and preserve traditional knowledge. The studies discussed highlight the importance of indigenous control over filmmaking, fostering a sense of ownership and authenticity in cinematic storytelling. Despite ongoing challenges, particularly in balancing collaboration with non-indigenous participants and maintaining cultural integrity, Fourth Cinema remains a powerful tool for asserting indigenous presence in the global film industry.

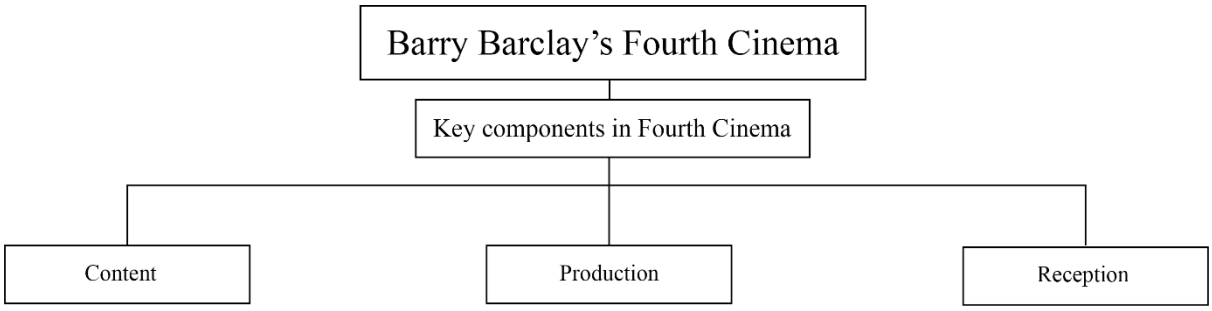


Figure 3.3: The Fourth Cinema Framework

3.5.4 Fourth Cinema and Indigenising the Kadazandusun Filmmaking

From the previous discussion regarding Fourth Cinema, it is evident that the primary aim is to develop a conceptual framework applicable to global indigenous filmmakers.

Therefore, Fourth Cinema essentially strives to establish an idealised notion of the indigenous filmmaker and their working environment. However, it has been criticised for overreaching by attempting to apply a singular framework to the diverse indigenous groups across the globe (Murray, 2008).

Barry Barclay addresses this issue, explaining that global indigenous groups face common challenges, such as displacement, due to living in nations dominated by other cultures. This displacement results in traumatic experiences for indigenous communities. Barclay asserts that these experiences can unify global indigenous groups and that documenting them is crucial, as they hold significant historical value for remembrance and reflection.

In the context of the Kadazandusun filmmakers, this framework offers both opportunities and challenges. The Kadazandusun, known as an indigenous group from Sabah in Malaysia, have a rich cultural heritage that includes unique traditions, languages, and storytelling practices. Fourth cinema provides a platform for Kadazandusun filmmakers to present their narratives, preserving and celebrating their culture while contributing to the global indigenous discourse.

However, the challenge lies in ensuring that the Kadazandusun experience is authentically represented and not overshadowed by a homogenised global indigenous identity. Each indigenous group has distinct histories, traditions, and perspectives, and while common experiences of displacement and trauma exist, the nuances of each culture must be respected and highlighted.

For Kadazandusun filmmakers, engaging with Fourth Cinema means navigating the balance between contributing to a global indigenous narrative and maintaining the

uniqueness of their own cultural stories. By doing so, they can ensure that their voices are heard on a global stage while preserving the integrity of their cultural identity.

3.6 Significance of the Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema Theoretical Frameworks

Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community theory is a valuable tool for analysing Kadazandusun telemovies because it explains how shared culture identity can be maintained even among dispersed and diverse sub-ethnic groups. Kadazandusun identity, with its roots in the shared origin story of *Nunuk Ragang* and its common cultural symbols, has long faced pressures from assimilation into a broader Malaysian national identity. Telemovies can act as a modern "printing press", as Anderson described, promoting cultural unity by portraying shared traditions, languages, and values.

The decline of the Kadazandusun language and cultural practices, as documented by scholars like Anthony Reid, highlights the importance of media in revitalising these elements. Telemovies can encourage pride and interest in the Kadazandusun identity, especially among younger generations. For instance, films that incorporate the official Kadazandusun dialect or showcase traditional rituals not only preserve these cultural markers but also make them accessible and engaging for a modern audience. By fostering this shared sense of belonging, telemovies strengthen the bonds within the Kadazandusun community and safeguard their identity against external pressures.

Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema framework underlines the necessity for indigenous filmmakers to have control over their narratives. This control is crucial for ensuring that Kadazandusun culture is authentically represented and not misinterpreted or diminished by outsiders. Historically, indigenous communities worldwide have been misrepresented in

mainstream media, often portrayed through the lens of dominant cultures. Similarly, Kadazandusun culture has faced stereotyping and oversimplification in Malaysian cinema, with productions unable to fully capture the depth and nuances of their traditions and values.

Fourth Cinema provides a blueprint for Kadazandusun filmmakers to take ownership of their stories, producing films that reflect their lived experiences and perspectives. By doing so, these filmmakers can challenge dominant narratives, educate broader audiences, and empower their own communities. For instance, Maori filmmakers in New Zealand, such as Barry Barclay and Merata Mita, used Fourth Cinema principles to reclaim their cultural narratives, setting an example for Kadazandusun filmmakers. Films that adhere to Fourth Cinema principles serve as creative works, cultural archives and tools for activism. They offer an avenue for Kadazandusun filmmakers to assert their cultural sovereignty, resist marginalisation, and ensure their traditions remain relevant.

3.7 The Theoretical Frameworks' Relevance to Kadazandusun Telemovies

The combination of Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema is especially powerful for Kadazandusun telemovies. While Imagined Community focuses on the collective identity fostered through shared cultural symbols, Fourth Cinema ensures that these symbols are authentically represented by the people who live and breathe them. Together, these frameworks address both the need for unity within the Kadazandusun community and the necessity of maintaining cultural integrity in the face of globalisation and national homogenisation.

Kadazandusun telemovies serve as a platform to showcase cultural practices, such as harvest festivals, traditional dances, and oral histories, while also addressing contemporary issues like language decline, land rights, and generational conflicts. By producing these

films, Kadazandusun filmmakers can create a space where their culture is not only preserved but also celebrated and shared with wider audiences. Moreover, the act of filmmaking itself becomes a form of activism, a way to assert Kadazandusun identity within the broader Malaysian context and the global indigenous narrative.

Furthermore, entertainment such as film can play a crucial role in encouraging motivating language learning. Studies such as *Reasons behind Young Learners' Learning of Foreign Languages* (2015) and *Learning English from Movies: An Exploratory Study* (2023) indicate that entertainment, including movies, music, and video games, significantly incentivises language acquisition and cultural understanding (Akcay et al., 2015) & (Alolaywi, 2023). Similarly, Kadazandusun films have the potential to encourage the use of the official Kadazandusun language and shared cultural practices, fostering stronger cultural cohesion within the Kadazandusun community. This internal cohesion is vital to safeguarding their identity against external influences and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework is essential for understanding Kadazandusun telemovies because it bridges the gap between cultural preservation and modern storytelling. By using Imagined Community, the framework highlights how telemovies can reinforce a shared sense of identity among the diverse sub-ethnic groups within the Kadazandusun community. It emphasises the role of films in promoting unity through the portrayal of shared traditions, language, and values, addressing the challenges posed by assimilation and modernisation.

Meanwhile, Fourth Cinema empowers Kadazandusun filmmakers to control their cultural narratives, ensuring authenticity and resisting misrepresentation. It provides a

pathway for these filmmakers to celebrate their heritage, educate wider audiences, and challenge stereotypes, all while preserving their identity for future generations.

Together, these three frameworks highlight the importance of Kadazandusun telemovies as tools for cultural resilience, self-representation, and education. They enable Kadazandusun filmmakers to assert their identity within Malaysia's national cinema and contribute to the global indigenous narrative, ensuring their unique heritage is not only preserved but also thrives in an ever-changing world. In doing so, these filmmakers safeguard their culture, empower their community, and inspire future generations to embrace and celebrate their Kadazandusun identity.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the approach, data acquisition, and methods of data analysis employed in this thesis. To reiterate, the research adopts a qualitative methodology, with narrative analysis, mise-en-scène analysis, and textual analysis as the primary methods of examination. These methods are used to analyse the selected telemovies and films produced by Kadazandusun filmmakers.

4.2 Research Procedures

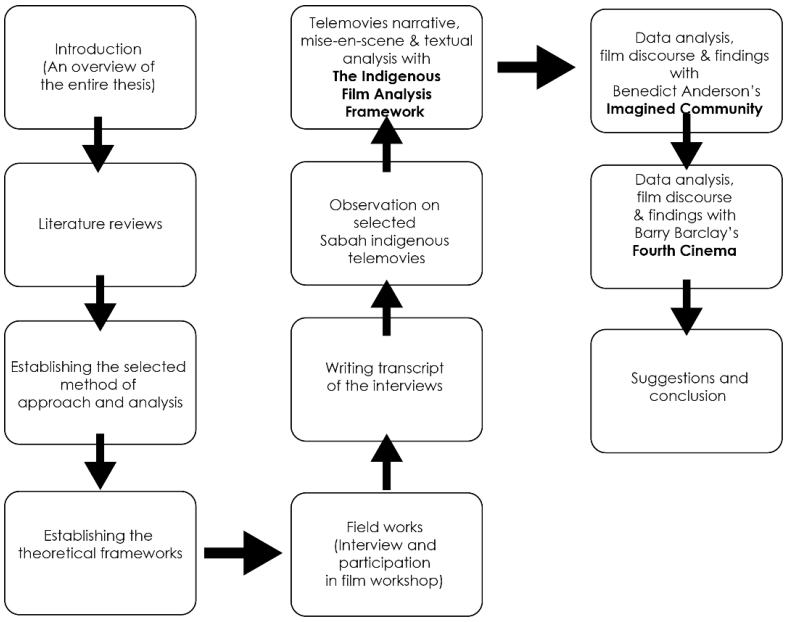


Figure 4.1: Chart showing the workflow of this thesis

4.3 Research Approach

The qualitative approach was chosen for this study because it aligns with the nature of the information gathered and the analytical needs of the research. Given the focus are on the experiences of Kadazandusun filmmakers and the theoretical frameworks guiding their storytelling, the qualitative method offers a systematic approach to understand the intricate connections between the filmmakers' personal experiences, cultural contexts, and the narratives they have constructed in their telemovies. This approach is particularly effective in capturing the subjective and cultural dimensions of the filmmaking process, providing insights into how these directors infuse their indigenous identity into their works.

4.4 Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory approach due to the nature of its subject matter, which revolves around critically questioning and investigating the concepts and contents of Kadazandusun telemovies. The topic of Kadazandusun filmmakers is frequently overlooked in Malaysian film discourse, where their contributions are virtually unknown at the national level. Consequently, there is a notable lack of knowledge about Kadazandusun filmmaking in Malaysia, even though Kadazandusun filmmakers have been creating films since the early 2000s. This absence of scholarly attention underlines the necessity for an exploratory approach, as defined by Stebbins (2001), which seeks to place the researcher in a position to make discoveries in areas that have not been previously investigated in depth (Stebbins, 2001).

In this context, the exploratory approach is appropriate because it allows the researcher to delve into uncharted territories, where the subject matters—Kadazandusun telemovies and their filmmakers—remains under-researched. The study aims to fill this gap

by critically examining the telemovies produced by Kadazandusun filmmakers and linking these films to broader concepts of indigenous identity, storytelling, and cultural preservation. In doing so, the study helps to highlights the significance of Kadazandusun film production and addresses the fragmentation of the Kadazandusun identity.

The exploratory nature of this research necessitates a thorough investigation of how Kadazandusun filmmakers develop their narratives and how these narratives contribute to the cultural identity of the community. Given that previous research has rarely examined the roles of Kadazandusun filmmakers in Malaysian cinema, the study seeks to uncover new insights into the ways these filmmakers engage with their cultural heritage and the challenges they face within the broader national film industry. This involves linking the content of the telemovies, the experiences of the filmmakers, and the theoretical concepts surrounding indigenous filmmaking, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural production of Kadazandusun telemovies.

4.5 Research Questions

i. How do Kadazandusun telemovies portray their cultural identity through the themes of contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition?

ii. How do the fragmented representations of Kadazandusun identity in telemovies contribute to constructing a collective ethnic identity?

iii. Why does filmmaking play a pivotal roles in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kadazandusun ethnic group, enabling them to sustain and reinforce a cohesive and unified sense of identity?

4.6 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework

The first research question is designed to gather primary data that informs the entirety of the study. Specifically, the data is collected by using the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, which then utilised to apply both Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema theoretical frameworks. The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework and its keys themes of contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition were designed from thematic analysis of prior indigenous film literatures, which were used to highlight the struggles, achievements, and significance of global indigenous filmmaking. The categorisation into these three themes emphasise the ways in which indigenous filmmakers use cinema to express their stories and preserve their cultural heritage in the face of pressures from nationalism and globalisation. Through this categorisation, the content of the selected Kadazandusun telemovies is examined to uncover how filmmakers engage with themes of competition, perseverance, and identity definition, shedding light on the distinct challenges faced by Kadazandusun filmmakers.

As part of the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, the selected Kadazandusun telemovies are examined using three analysis methods to uncover the key themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance and self-definition. Narrative analysis examines how the story is told, focusing on its structure and flow (Parsa, 2004). Mise-en-scène analysis delves into the visual elements placed in front of the camera, such as settings, costumes, and props, to understand how they enhance the story's meaning (Napat & Norsiah, 2017). Textual analysis studies the film as a text (McKee, 2001), focusing on findings the themes of context/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition.

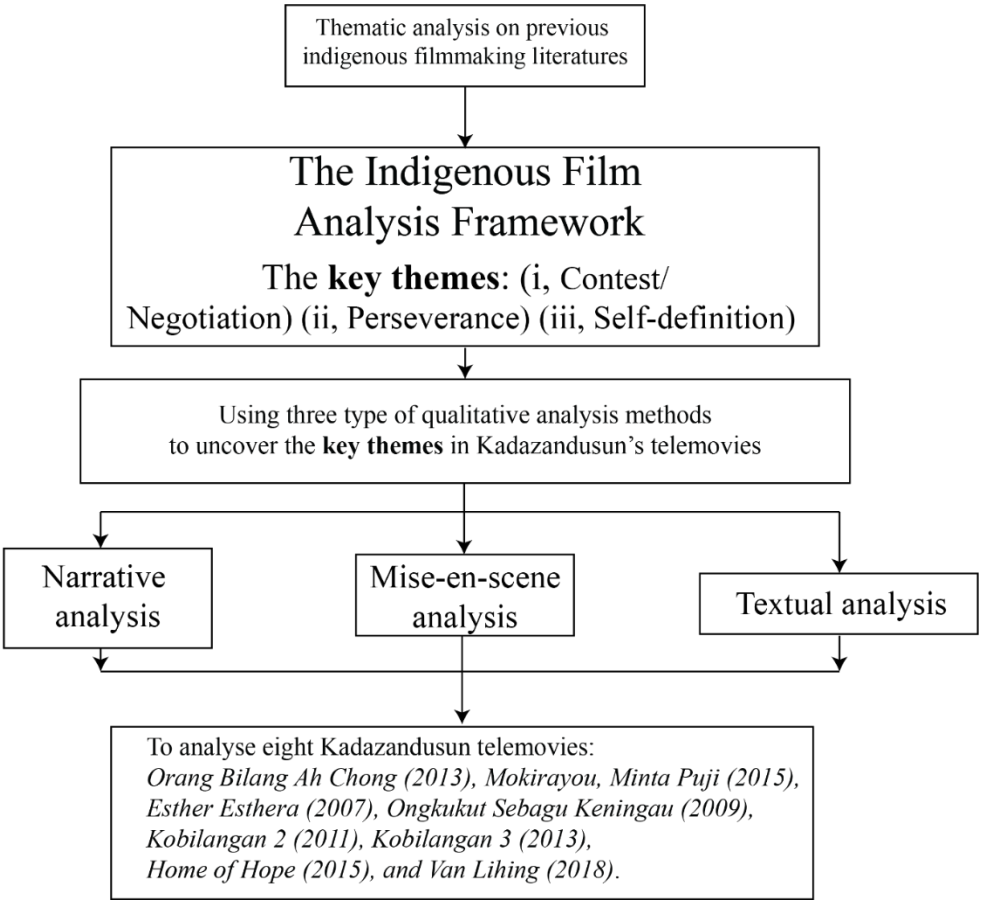


Figure 4.2: The design of the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework and its application to analyse Kadazandusun's telemovies

4.7 First Theoretical Framework: Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community

By analysing these telemovies within the themes of contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition, the study positions its findings in alignment with the second research question (The application of Anderson's Imagined Community). This approach enables a critical examination of the distinction between the Malaysian national identity and the indigenous identity of Kadazandusun filmmakers, as depicted in their films. Anderson's framework is particularly useful for understanding how Kadazandusun filmmakers construct a sense of community that contrasts with the dominant national narrative, emphasising the prioritisation of indigenous identity and the filmmakers' intent to

preserve this identity for future generations. This exploration highlights the complex negotiation between national and indigenous identities, showcasing how Kadazandusun filmmakers assert their cultural distinctiveness within a national context that often seeks to assimilate minority identities.

4.8 Second Theoretical Framework: Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema and the Preservation of the Kadazandusun's Identity through Filmmaking

The third research question focuses on the role of film in preserving and sustaining Kadazandusun identity amidst the pressures of assimilation into the accepted Malaysian national identity. The analysis engages in a critical discourse that considers the content, production, and reception of Kadazandusun telemovies, emphasising the importance of film as a medium for expressing indigenous experiences. Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema framework is instrumental here, as it positions indigenous filmmaking as a form of cultural resistance and education. By using film to document and share their cultural stories, Kadazandusun filmmakers not only express their experiences but also provide a valuable resource for current and future generations. In this way, film serves as a powerful tool for preserving Kadazandusun heritage, offering an educational reference that can be used to sustain their cultural practices and identity over time.

Ultimately, the exploration of all of the research questions allows for a comprehensive understanding of the role of Kadazandusun filmmaking in the broader context of national and indigenous identity. The analysis of telemovies content, the distinction between national and indigenous perceptions of community, and the significance of filmmaking as a tool for cultural preservation all contribute to a deeper comprehension of how Kadazandusun filmmakers navigate and resist assimilation into the dominant national

identity. By engaging with these themes, the study not only highlights the importance of indigenous filmmaking but also underlines the potential of film as a medium for sustaining cultural identity and educating future generations.

4.9 Research Method Overview

4.9.1 Primary Data

Non-structured Interview

This study conducted several interviews with Kadazandusun directors such as Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas, all of whom reside in different districts of Sabah. Tony Francis Gitom is based in Penampang, Ramli Ahmad in Kota Kinabalu, Alfred Ujin in Keningau, and Marc Abbas in Putatan. Although some initial questions were directed to each filmmaker, the interviews were conducted in a non-structural format to maintain contextual flow and encourage the directors to openly express their views. This approach was chosen to gather valuable insights into their experiences in telemovie production and their perspectives on the significance of Kadazandusun filmmaking.

The flexible nature of the interviews allowed the directors to provide a more in-depth exploration of their work, highlighting their individual approaches and interpretations of Kadazandusun identity within their films. By using this open-ended format, the study was able to collect a wide range of qualitative data that is directly aligned with the research objectives, namely, how Kadazandusun culture is represented in their telemovies, the methods they employ to assert indigenous identity, and the role that filmmaking plays in preserving their cultural heritage.

To ensure the interviews remained focused on the key themes of the study, the questions were tailored to address the following core aspects: the representation of

Kadazandusun culture in their telemovies, the strategies used to affirm indigenous identity within their narratives, and the importance of filmmaking in sustaining and preserving Kadazandusun identity for future generations.

The following are the questions posed to the Kadazandusun filmmakers in the interviews:

1. The general histories of the director himself before becoming a filmmaker.
2. What are the reason of deciding to be a filmmaker and what are the telemovies that has been produced?
3. What are the 'Sabah indigenous values/ Sabah indigenous identities' in film through the perspective of the producer/director?
4. What are your views when deciding the theme for the story in filmmaking?
5. What are the process in producing telemovie in the context of casting, crew selection, equipment, budget and government approval?
6. What are the challenges that troubling Sabah indigenous filmmaker recently/today? (The lack of training, budget, equipment and local Sabahan professional workforce)
7. What are the personal views of the director when comparing indigenous and non-indigenous when representing Sabah indigenous in their films?
8. What are the Sabahan narrative in films according to your (director/producer) point of view? How Sabah's indigenous story should be portrayed in film and what are the significances of it?



Figure 4.3: Pictures of interviews with four Kadazandusun filmmakers (From top left to bottom right: Marc Abbas, Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, and Alfred Ujin)

Participation in Tony Francis Gitom's *Perkampungan Filem* (Film Workshop)

The researcher's participation in the *Perkampungan Filem* workshop in 2018 provided an opportunity for an observation of the Kadazandusun filmmaking process. This involvement allowed the researcher to gain first-hand experience of the methods and techniques used by Kadazandusun filmmakers in producing their telemovies. The workshop also served as a practical training ground for filmmakers such as Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas before they went on to establish their own film production careers. By observing these directors in a practical setting, the researcher was able to gain valuable insights into the general processes involved in Kadazandusun telemovie-making, enhancing the overall understanding of how indigenous filmmakers approach their craft. The workshop offered a broader context for understanding how shared experiences and training have

shaped the distinctive style and focus of these filmmakers, providing a foundation for their cultural storytelling.



Figure 4.4: Poster of Tony Francis Gitom's *Perkampungan Filem* in 2018

4.9.2 Secondary Data

This research will analyses Kadazandusun telemovies and the Malaysian filmmaking industry using a wide range of resources. These include film reviews, magazines, social media content, and digital media platforms that provide insights into audience engagement and responses to films.

The study will focuses on telemovies produced by Kadazandusun filmmakers such as Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas. The telemovies selected for analysis are *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* (2013), *Mokirayou, Minta Puji* (2015), *Esther Esthera* (2007), *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* (2009), *Kobilangan 2* (2011), *Kobilangan 3* (2013), *Home of Hope* (2015), and *Van Lihing* (2018).

The research also utilises academic journals to build on existing knowledge. It involves literature reviews on Malaysia's national identity, the National Culture Policy,

Malay cinema, independent Malaysian films, and the role of minority and regional communities in filmmaking. Additionally, it examine studies on the Kadazandusun community and its contributions to filmmaking. By combining these resources, this study aims to place Kadazandusun telemovies within the broader cultural, social, and cinematic context of Malaysia.

4.9.3 Data Analysis

This thesis employed the thematic analysis method to design the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework for studying the selected Kadazandusun telemovies. This comprises of three key themes: contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition. This framework is specifically designed to highlight the ways in which Kadazandusun filmmakers negotiate and assert their cultural identity through their films. Once the data is gathered, it is further contextualised through the application of Benedict Anderson's Imagine Community theoretical framework. Anderson's framework is based on four key components: imagined, sovereign, limited, and community. By applying these frameworks, the study highlights the shared culture among the Kadazandusun and to encourage unity among the diverse ethnic groups within it.

The discussion is further developed by employing Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema framework. Barclay's theory is particularly relevant in the assessment of indigenous films, as it offers insights into how indigenous filmmakers use cinema as a medium for cultural expression and resistance.

Barclay's Fourth Cinema framework is further utilised by using the components of content, production and reception of Kadazandusun films, allowing for a detailed analysis of how these films contribute to the preservation and continuation of indigenous identity. In

terms of content, Kadazandusun filmmakers use storytelling to convey cultural values, traditions, and experiences unique to their community. On the production side, the filmmakers' methods and approaches reflect their commitments to cultural authenticity, often using local languages, traditions, and settings to reinforce indigenous identity. Finally, the reception of these films by both local and broader audiences demonstrates their significance as cultural artefacts that not only entertain but also educate and sustain the cultural memory of the Kadazandusun people.

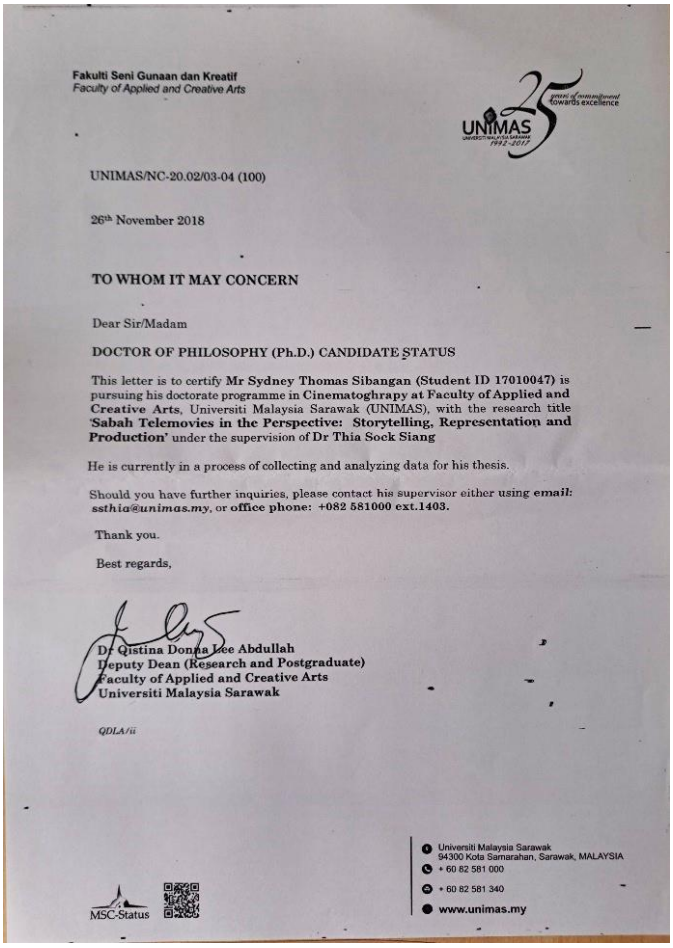
By integrating Anderson's and Barclay's frameworks, the study critically examines the complexity of the Kadazandusun identity, while highlighting the crucial role of film as a tool for cultural preservation. Through this multidimensional analysis, the study illustrates how Kadazandusun filmmakers contribute to the broader discourse on identity, resistance, and cultural sustainability in Malaysia.

4.10 Research Ethics

The ethical standards followed in this study were in accordance with the standards set by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Data collection, particularly involving in-person meetings with Kadazandusun filmmakers, was conducted in compliance with these ethical guidelines. The filmmakers, including Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas, were informed well in advance of the agreed interview dates. Furthermore, the researcher obtained an official letter from UNIMAS, granting permission to gather information and confirming the researcher's identity as a PhD candidate in the cinematography programme within the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts. Copies of this official letter were provided to each filmmaker to verify the researcher's credentials and facilitate any potential inquiries.

Participation in Tony Francis Gitom's *Perkampungan Filem* (film workshop) in 2018 was also handled through proper ethical channels. The researcher joined as an official member by paying the one-time membership fee, which granted full access to participate in the workshop, both in front of and behind the camera. This experience provided valuable insights into low-budget indigenous filmmaking in Sabah and allowed for an authentic understanding of the production process.

In addition, the acquisition of the telemovies analysed in this study was conducted ethically. The VCD/DVD copies of the films were either purchased from retail shops or directly from the filmmakers themselves. This ensured that the copies were obtained legally, avoiding any issues related to piracy. Secondary sources, such as literature and books, were accessed through open-source platforms on the internet. All cited works are referenced in the bibliography in accordance with the standards approved by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. By adhering to these ethical practices, the study-maintained transparency and integrity throughout the research process.



Fakulti Seni Gunaan dan Kreatif
Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

UNIMAS/NC-20.02/03-04 (100)

26th November 2018

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Ph.D.) CANDIDATE STATUS

This letter is to certify **Mr Sydney Thomas Sibangan (Student ID 17010047)** is pursuing his doctorate programme in **Cinematoghrapy at Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts**, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), with the research title **'Sabah Telemovies in the Perspective: Storytelling, Representation and Production'** under the supervision of **Dr Thia Sock Siang**

He is currently in a process of collecting and analyzing data for his thesis.

Should you have further inquiries, please contact his supervisor either using **email: ssthia@unimas.my**, or **office phone: +082 581000 ext.1403.**

Thank you.

Best regards,

Dr Qistina Donna Lee Abdullah
Deputy Dean (Research and Postgraduate)
Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

QDLA/ii

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MSC-Status

Figure 4.5: Picture of official letter from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak confirming the identity of the researcher

4.11 Conclusion

In summary, this thesis adopts an exploratory method as its research approach, aligning with the established research design. This approach enabled the study to explore and critically examine questions concerning Kadazandusun filmmakers and their films within the broader context of preserving and sustaining their cultural identity.

The exploratory method of this thesis comprised of primary data, secondary data and data analysis. Primary study involves personal interviews and observation. Observation was facilitated by participation in Tony Francis Gitom's *Perkampungan Filem* (film workshop)

in 2018, which provided the opportunity to observe indigenous filmmaking methods and gain insights from the Kadazandusun filmmakers. Secondary study was employed by analysing selected telemovies via narrative analysis, mise-en scene analysis and textual analysis method. This research also utilised existing resources such as film reviews, magazines, social media, digital media sharing platforms, academic journals, and both statistical and non-statistical data from the Malaysian film agency FINAS. The data analysis involving the use of film indigenous framework analysis done on primary and secondary studies then served as source of indigenous contents, which allowed for their placement within the two theoretical frameworks of the study.

The data analysis is grounded in three frameworks (the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema), which were applied to the analysis of eight telemovies produced by four different Kadazandusun filmmakers. Thematic analysis was employed to structure the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, focusing on key points derived from previous studies on indigenous films. This process established the main components of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition as the central themes to the discourse on indigenous filmmaking. To uncover these key themes, the narrative, mise-en-scene and textual analysis are utilised to highlight the contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition exhibited by the Kadazandusun filmmakers in their telemovies.

Furthermore, Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema were essential for placing Kadazandusun filmmakers within the context of Malaysian national cinema and highlighting the content and narratives associated with indigenous filmmakers. Anderson's Imagined Community framework contextualised the role of these filmmakers within the broader national cinematic discourse, while Barclay's

Fourth Cinema emphasised the importance of film in ensuring indigenous stories are heard and identities preserved in the face of constant cultural assimilation.

Regarding research ethics, the study followed strict ethical guidelines by obtaining an official letter from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, confirming the researcher's identity as a PhD candidate and requesting permission to collect information. The Kadazandusun filmmakers were informed well in advance about the academic nature of the inquiries, and interview dates were scheduled accordingly. Official letters from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak were distributed to all selected filmmakers. Additionally, participation in Tony Francis Gitom's film workshop was conducted properly by paying the membership fee, which allowed the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of indigenous filmmaking in Sabah, particularly within the constraints of low budgets and amateur workforces. The selected telemovies were legally obtained through retail shops and directly from the filmmakers, supporting the local industry and avoiding issues related to pirated copies.

CHAPTER 5

UNVEILING THE KADAZANDUSUN IDENTITY AND ADDRESSING THE FRAGMENTATION IN TONY FRANCIS GITOM AND RAMLI AHMAD'S TELEMOVIES

5.1 Introduction

Based on the discussion of the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, Imagined Community, and Fourth Cinema in Chapter 4, this section analyses selected Sabah indigenous telemovies, namely *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* (2013) and *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* (2015) by Tony Francis Gitom, as well as *Esther Esthera* (2007) and *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* (2009) by Ramli Ahmad. Additionally, a similar analysis will be conducted in Chapter 6 to examine *Kobilangan 2* (2011) and *Kobilangan 3* (2012) by Alfred Ujin, along with *Home of Hope* (2011) and *Van Lihing* (2018) by Marc Abbas.

This chapter employ the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework as well as Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema theoretical frameworks to provide a comprehensive analysis. Each of these frameworks provides a distinct perspective for analysing and understanding the themes and cultural significances embedded within the selected telemovies.

The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework is pivotal in understanding the representation and portrayal of indigenous identity, culture, and issues in these telemovies. It enables a critical examination of how indigenous community are depicted and the extent to which these representations align with or address the issue within the Kadazandusun community.

Benedict Anderson's theory of Imagined Community provides a broader socio-political context, which explore how cultural artefact contribute to the construction and reinforcement of national identity. Anderson's framework is particularly useful in analysing how media, including telemovies, serves as a platform for imagining and defining community boundaries and shared histories especially for the indigenous Kadazandusun.

Barry Barclay's Fourth Cinema, on the other hand, offers a more in-depth perspective focusing on indigenous filmmaking practices. This framework emphasises the importance of indigenous control over the production and storytelling processes, advocating for a cinema that speaks from the indigenous perspectives. Barclay's concept is crucial in evaluating the authenticity and self-representation within these telemovies, highlighting the significance of indigenous voices in the cinematic landscape as a way to sustain it.

By employing these three conceptual frameworks, this chapter aims to provide a robust and multidimensional analysis of the indigenous Kadazandusun's telemovies. This approach not only enriches the understanding of the cultural and social dynamics at play but also underscores the importance of diverse perspectives in film studies.

5.2 Tony Francis Gitom's Background

Tony Francis Gitom, born on 18 June 1967, hails from the Kadazan ethnic group in the Penampang district. His formal education culminated with the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (S.P.M.). Following this, Gitom pursued his passion for photography and relocated to Peninsular Malaysia in search of career opportunities.

Gitom's move proved fruitful, as he established himself as a filmmaker and emerged as one of the Peninsula's prominent directors. Notably, he directed the Malay drama series *Syurga di Pintu Neraka* (*Heaven at Hell's Gate*) in 1996 and *Cinta Antara Benua* (*Love*

Between Continents) in 1997, both of which gained significant popularity in Malaysia during the 1990s. His exceptional work in the drama *Selamat Harijadi Su 3* (*Happy Birthday Su 3*) earned him the Best Director award at the 1997 National Screen Awards.

In 2004, Gitom returned to Sabah, and the following year, he launched his film workshop, *Perkampungan Filem*, aimed at teaching filmmaking to Sabah's indigenous people. At the same time, he established *Penampang Studio*, which is his film production company in Sabah. Aware of the limited financial and professional resources available at that time, Gitom encouraged his mentees to adopt a collaborative approach, pooling resources through what he termed the *rukut-rukut* system—a community-driven accumulation of materials, time, and effort. This system has enabled *Perkampungan Filem* to produce several low-budget films over the years.

Gitom's pedagogical approach prioritises hands-on practice over theoretical instruction. Regardless of their prior experience, workshop participants are involved in all aspects of a new film project, from casting to crew roles. Between 2005 and 2018, nearly every film workshop resulted in the production of a new telemovie annually. This practical method has equipped many newcomers with essential skills for low-budget filmmaking, inspiring them to create their own telemovies and even establish their own production companies. Notable examples include Alfred Ujin and Marc Abbas, both of whom began their careers as participants in Gitom's film workshop.

Gitom's contributions have significantly shaped Sabah's filmmaking landscape, fostering a new generation of filmmakers who continue to build upon his legacy of community collaboration and practical learning.



Figure 5.1: Picture of Tony Francis Gitom taken during personal interview

5.3 Tony Francis Gitom's Perspectives on Kadazandusun Filmmaking

Tony Francis Gitom has an extensive portfolio of approximately 30 published projects, comprising drama series and telemovies produced during his tenure with Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), Malaysia's national broadcaster (Sibangan, personal communication, December 8, 2018). Throughout his career, Gitom has been vocal about the unequal treatment between Malay content and that of Sabah's indigenous peoples.

> When I produced Malay drama in the Peninsula, I used the Malay language and cast only Malay actors. There was no issue. However, when I produced a drama in Sabah with indigenous content, several issues arose due to the use of indigenous talents and language. (Sibangan, personal communication, December 8, 2018)

Gitom's statement highlights a significant issue within the Malaysian media landscape—the lack of representation and support for indigenous narratives and voices. This disparity reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics where dominant cultural groups receive more visibility and resources than minority groups. Gitom's work not only stands as a

testament to his personal achievements but also serves as a critical commentary on the need for greater inclusivity and equity in media representation.

By drawing attention to these inequalities, Gitom emphasises the importance of providing a platform for indigenous stories and perspectives, which are vital to Malaysia's cultural diversity. His advocacy for equal treatment in media content is essential for fostering a more inclusive national identity that respects and celebrates indigenous cultures. Through his projects and workshops, Gitom has actively worked to bridge this gap, empowering indigenous filmmakers and ensuring their stories are told and heard. His efforts contribute to a broader movement towards cultural preservation and recognition within the Malaysian media industry.

Gitom's filmmaking approach also addresses the issue of fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community by incorporating multiple indigenous languages and cultural elements into his works. By blending languages such as Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Bajau, and Sabah's Malay, his films appeal to diverse indigenous audiences, fostering a sense of unity among the various ethnic groups. Although Bajau is not part of the Kadazandusun community, the inclusion of Bajau language and cultural elements in his films promotes better relationships between the Kadazandusun and Bajau community in Sabah. This linguistic and cultural inclusivity strengthens communal ties, reinforcing a shared identity despite historical and geographical divisions. By using cinema as a means of cultural convergence, Gitom's work plays a crucial role in promoting solidarity among Sabah's indigenous communities.

> So, when we mix indigenous languages—for example, adding Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, and a bit of Bajau, followed by some Malay in the Sabah dialect—the film instantly becomes marketable across all areas of Sabah. When we market such a film,

> we promote it in the indigenous language. For example, if we use the Bajau language, which Bajau? The Bajau in Kota Belud. They will buy it because they want to see their own language, characters, and plot. Such content is rarely available on TV1, TV2, or Astro. (Sibangan, personal communication, December 8, 2018).

It is evident that Gitom strategically positioned the Kadazandusun and other indigenous ethnic groups of Sabah as his primary audiences. This focus shaped his filmmaking approach, ensuring that his films resonate deeply with local community rather than catering primarily to audiences outside the state. By doing so, Gitom sought to ensure that the cultural narratives and lived experiences of Sabah's indigenous community were authentically represented and celebrated.

This targeted approach not only highlights Gitom's commitment to preserving and promoting indigenous cultures but also signals the broader implications of media representation. His work challenges dominant narratives and advocates for a more inclusive media landscape that values and respects the diversity of its audience. However, while marginalisation or biases does exist in Malaysia's cinema landscape, it may be more beneficial for the Kadazandusun community to first focus on resolving internal issues, such as strengthening cultural unity and fostering collaboration among filmmakers. By addressing these challenges from within, the community can build a stronger foundation before seeking wider recognition in the national film industry.

As an indigenous Kadazandusun filmmaker who has worked in both mainstream and indigenous film production, Gitom is well-positioned to navigate the local market when selling his telemovies. However, local distribution presents both advantages and disadvantages. One key advantage is accessibility—indigenous people can easily obtain and watch telemovies that reflect their culture. However, the drawback is a "captive market,"

which limits the distribution area for indigenous telemovies, often resulting in smaller profits.

Despite these challenges, Tony Francis Gitom remains steadfast in his mission to advance indigenous filmmaking. The establishment of the *Pakatan Harapan* government following the 2018 general election brought renewed hope. Gitom gained the attention and support of government film institutions such as FINAS, which aimed to assist Sabah's indigenous filmmakers, particularly in securing financial resources. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of parliamentary support in 2020 led to a political shift back to the *Perikatan Nasional* administration in 2021. As a result, the promised financial assistance was likely altered to fit the new political landscape.

Further complicating matters, the transition to the *Unity Government (Perpaduan)* in 2022 placed Kadazandusun filmmakers in an uncertain position regarding government funding. Although the new administration has expressed a commitment to empower the Borneo region (Nizam, 2022), the specific impact on filmmakers such as Gitom remains unclear. Nevertheless, the increasing number of Kadazandusun films being screened in cinemas in recent years indicates positive developments for Sabah's indigenous filmmaking industry.

Despite the numerous challenges he has faced over the years, Tony Francis Gitom's dedication to Kadazandusun filmmaking remains a driving force. His resilience and unwavering commitment illustrate his crucial role in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Sabah's indigenous communities.

5.4 The Story of Orang Bilang Ah Chong (2011)

The telemovie *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* narrates the story of a local gangster based in the town of Donggongon, Penampang. The primary characters include Ah Chong (Tony Francis Gitom) with a Sino-Kadazan background as the leader, Marc (Marc Abbas) as the group lieutenant, and Anthony (Anthony G. Josson) with a Kadazan background as Ah Chong's personal bodyguard. The narrative unfolds with Marc Abbas making a grave mistake of accidentally killing a landowner whose property Ah Chong intends to purchase. This error implicates Ah Chong alongside Marc, as Marc is his subordinate. Consequently, Ah Chong orders Marc to flee to Singapore temporarily. However, Marc defies Ah Chong's directive and instead demands that Ah Chong clear his name by seeking help from a certain politician. Ah Chong refuses Marc's request, prompting Marc to vow vengeance against Ah Chong and Anthony. Marc then orchestrates an ambush to kill Ah Chong and Anthony as they travel to inspect potential land acquisitions. This plan is disrupted by the unexpected occurrence of a meteor, which transported Ah Chong and Anthony back in time, leaving Marc and his followers behind.

The time travel event separates Ah Chong and Anthony, sending them to different historical periods. Ah Chong is transported to 1976, while Anthony finds himself in pre-colonial era of Sabah. Ah Chong arrives just before the tragedy that will claim the lives of Sabah's Chief Minister (Tun Fuad Stephen) and his cabinet members in a plane crash, an incident referred to as the Double Six Tragedy, which occurred on 6th June 1976. Ah Chong attempts to warn the people of Sabah in the 1970s about the impending disaster.

In 1976, Ah Chong encounters a young woman, Raniti Santaim, who is washing clothes by the river. He urgently requests her assistance, claiming he is being pursued by assassins. Perplexed by his strange attire and his request for a phone, Raniti hesitates to help

him, as he appears incoherent. Her father, Valentine Valen, approaches, concerned for his daughter's safety. Since Valentine doesn't understand Malay, he depends on Raniti to translate the conversation into Dusun. After they inform Ah Chong that it is the 1970s, he departs.

Following a confrontation with local gangsters, Ah Chong escapes and seeks water from Raniti, who invites him to a dinner with her father. During the meal, Ah Chong explains his predicament, revealing that he is from 2011 and describing significant political and economic changes in Sabah. He warns them about the upcoming tragedy and the subsequent loss of indigenous land claims. Raniti and Valentine are astonished by Ah Chong's account, finding it hard to believe that non-indigenous people could dominate Sabah's future.

Later, Ah Chong meets Ramli and Sumarli, friends of Raniti's family, and elaborates on Sabah's political situation in 2011, proving his claim of being from the future. Like Raniti and Valentine, Ramli and Sumarli are shocked to learn that Sabah is governed by a peninsular political party (Barisan Nasional). They assert that Sabah is under a strong leadership of the Berjaya party, led by *Huguan Siou* (Strong Leader) Tun Fuad Stephen, who prioritise indigenous welfare. Ah Chong's warning about Tun Fuad Stephen's impending death and the future illegal immigration issues in 2011 is met with scepticism, and they decided not to take action.

Meanwhile, Anthony finds himself transported to pre-colonial Sabah, where he rescues a young woman from being pursued by a group of men. However, he is soon apprehended by another group led by the girl's father, who is unable to understand Malay and takes Anthony to their village. When the village leader is kidnapped, Anthony rescues him, earning his gratitude. They bond over drinks, and the leader offers his daughter's hand in marriage to Anthony, who politely declines, wishing to return to his time and reunite with

his boss. Eventually, Anthony encounters a powerful *Bobolian/Bobohizan* (Shaman) who helps him return to his original time, where he reunites with Ah Chong in Donggongon, much to their relief.

This telemovie was produced as part of the *Perkampungan Filem* workshop in 2011, utilising the workshop participants as casts and crews. Due to a shortage of participants, Tony Francis Gitom decided to assign multiple roles to single cast members.



Figure 5.2: The DVD cover for *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* telemovie (Source: Gitom, 2013)

5.5 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Application on *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*

5.5.1 The Narrative Analysis of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*

Orang Bilang Ah Chong (2011) is a telemovie that blends gangster drama, historical fiction, and political commentary to explore themes of power, identity, and cultural

displacement. The narrative follows Ah Chong, a gangster leader in modern time of Sabah, who is transported through a supernatural event to pivotal moments in the state's history. This telemovie critically engages with issues of political sovereignty, indigenous identity, and socio-political transformation.

The telemovie merges time travel fiction with historical revisionism, notably transporting Ah Chong to 1976, just before the Double Six Tragedy. This reflects Sabahans' anxieties over the loss of indigenous leadership and autonomy (Hamdan, 2013). Ah Chong's attempt to warn people of the impending disaster serves as a metaphor for the Kadazandusun community's struggle to reclaim agency over their history and future.

A key narrative strategy is the contrast between past and present, power and subjugation, as well as autonomy and external control. In the past, indigenous Kadazandusun figures like Valentine Valen are culturally dominant, speaking only Kadazandusun languages. In contrast, modern characters such as Anthony, a Kadazandusun, speaks only Malay, symbolising the erosion of indigenous linguistic and cultural identity. This shift is depicted as a consequence of political and cultural policies, particularly Malaysia's national integration efforts and federal intervention.

The film also examines internal divisions within the Kadazandusun community, illustrating how historical, political, and economic forces have created fragmentation. The contrast between past and present highlights both external suppression and the community's responsibility to reclaim its heritage and strengthen collective identity. Anthony's linguistic and cultural detachment represents the consequences of assimilation but also serves as a call to action.

Ah Chong's role as an outsider—a gangster rather than a traditional indigenous leader—reinforces the need for self-determination. His transformation into someone who

invested in Sabah's history and future suggests that awakening to one's identity and agency is possible but requires active pursuit. Rather than portraying the Kadazandusun as passive victims, the telemovie challenges them to reclaim their cultural and political voice.

Additionally, the film serves as a political critique, using Ah Chong's character to expose how economic and political shifts have marginalised Sabah's indigenous communities. His warnings about the future—particularly regarding land loss and diminishing political representation—mirror contemporary Kadazandusun's concerns. The narrative weaves in issues like illegal immigration, the dominance of Peninsular-based political parties, and the commercialisation of indigenous land, making the film not only an entertainment piece but also a commentary on historical awareness.

By centring on a flawed gangster rather than a traditional hero, the film subverts expectations. Ah Chong's transformation—his growing concern for Sabah's history and future—acts as a metaphor for indigenous political consciousness. In doing so, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* becomes a compelling critique of dominant narratives and a call for the reclamation of Kadazandusun identity and agency.

5.5.2 The Mise-en-Scène Analysis of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*

The setting of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* is divided into three distinct time periods: pre-colonial, post-independence Malaysia, and the modern era. Each era serves as a crucial narrative device, reflecting thematic and socio-cultural transformations. The pre-colonial era showcases a society untouched by external cultural influences, with the Kadazandusun people residing in traditional huts within a jungle environment. The post-independence era is depicted in rural village settings in Sabah, representing a more relaxed and contented society optimistic about the future despite facing challenges. While, modern era is

represented by the urbanisation of Donggongon town, highlighting contemporary society's materialism and financial pursuits, represented by the presence of gangsters. These settings emphasise the necessity of Kadazandusun preservation while adapting to political, economic, and societal changes.

The film's costumes reflect cultural shifts within the Kadazandusun community. Modern era is characterised by Western-style clothing, such as t-shirts, trousers, and jackets, demonstrating the influence of foreign culture and global fashion trends. This signifies the evolving identity of modern Kadazandusun society, shaped by economic changes and cultural assimilation. The post-independence era features attires associated with Southeast Asian traditions, reflecting regional cultural influences. Characters such as Valentine, Raniti, and Ramli wear sarongs, indicating that cultural assimilation had begun by 1976. The pre-colonial era employs simple and creative attire, largely based on artistic interpretation rather than strict historical accuracy, which illustrate the transformation of the Kadazandusun people over time.



Figure 5.3: Image on the left showing Satius in pre-colonial Kadazandusun costume and Anthony as a modern Kadazandusun wearing western attire (Source: Gitom, 2013)

Director Tony Francis Gitom employed an improvisational approach, providing actors with a general overview of each scene rather than a full script. This allowed them to

incorporate personal concerns and perspectives into the dialogue. Themes such as Ah Chong's worries about the future of the Kadazandusun and Anthony's concerns about alcoholism emerged organically. While unconventional, this method contributed to the authenticity and spontaneity of performances, reinforcing the film's cultural and societal messages.

The production relied on minimal lighting, occasionally using a single light source for scenes. Props were inexpensive and pre-owned, reflecting budgetary constraints. Despite these limitations, Gitom prioritised storytelling over high production values, aiming to portray Kadazandusun history, internal conflicts, and the consequences of past actions leading to fragmentation.

The cinematography, limited by basic equipment, nonetheless crafted meaningful compositions. One notable scene features a dinner with Valentine, Raniti, and Ah Chong. They share the same meals, symbolising unity, yet Ah Chong, a Sino-Kadazan, requires Raniti to translate his conversation with Valentine. This highlights the cultural disconnection between generations, which emphasises the need to bridge this gap.



Figure 5.4: Dinner scene between of Ah Chong, Raniti and Valentine. Which show the disconnection of the Kadazandusun culture as Raniti has to be a translator between the two Kadazandusun men (Source: Gitom, 2013)

Orang Bilang Ah Chong is a deeply symbolic telemovie tracing the historical and cultural evolution of the Kadazandusun people. Through its portrayal of different eras, it underscores the importance of cultural preservation and adaptation. While constrained by budgetary limitations, its improvisational performances, meaningful cinematography, and thematic depth render a poignant narrative about identity, heritage, and the necessity of cultural continuity in an evolving world.

5.5.3 The Textual Analysis of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*

In *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* (2011), the contest/negotiation of indigenous identity is reflected through the strategic use of language, historical juxtaposition, and socio-political commentary. The film employs the Kadazandusun language to assert cultural authenticity and continuity, particularly in the pre-colonial and post-independence settings. Characters such as Satius and the Shaman primarily communicate in Dusun, reinforcing the historical significance of language in shaping indigenous identity. Similarly, Raniti and Valentine

predominantly converse in Dusun, illustrating its widespread use in familial and communal interactions during the 1970s. Valentine speaks exclusively in Dusun, while Raniti understands and translates Dusun into Malay, highlighting a generational linguistic shift influenced by national linguistic policies (Reid, 1997). This linguistic transformation underscores the fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community as younger generations become increasingly detached from their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Parallel to this linguistic negotiation, the film critiques assimilation through Anthony, a modern Kadazandusun who speaks Malay but understands Dusun. His journey into pre-colonial Sabah reveals stark contrasts between historical autonomy and present-day marginalisation. The mise-en-scène reinforces this theme, with traditional village settings in pre-colonial and post-independence eras juxtaposed against the urbanised, financially driven society of modern Donggongon. Clothing symbolism further delineates cultural transformation: pre-colonial characters wear traditional attire, 1970s figures don Southeast Asian-influenced garments such as sarongs, while modern characters wear Western-style clothing, reflecting globalisation and cultural dilution. This visual representation aligns with the narrative's discourse on self-definition, urging contemporary Kadazandusun individuals to reclaim their linguistic and cultural heritage despite historical erasure.

The film exhibit the perseverance through the exploration of political autonomy and the consequences of historical events on indigenous identity. The dialogue between Ah Chong, Ramli, and Sumarli in 1976 encapsulates this struggle as they react with disbelief at Ah Chong's revelation that by 2011, Sabah would be governed by Barisan Nasional, a Peninsular-based political party. Their 1970s perspective underlines the drastic transformation that led to the diminishing influence of the Kadazandusun in governance. The film references the impact of Tun Mustapha's administration, which aligned Sabah's cultural

policies with the 1971 National Culture Policy, marginalising indigenous traditions and reinforcing a homogenised national identity (Tangit, 2017). By highlighting this, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* emphasises the resilience and perseverance of the Kadazandusun, who continue asserting their cultural and political presence despite suppression.



Figure 5.5: Ramli and Sumarli reaction of disbelief when Ah Chong told them that Sabah will be ruled by the Barisan Nasional party in 2011 (Source: Gitom, 2013)

Additionally, the film critiques socio-political challenges, particularly land dispossession and demographic shifts. In a dinner scene involving Ah Chong, Raniti, and Valentine, Ah Chong warns of future illegal immigration and indigenous land loss. His dialogue explicitly states that within two decades, much of the land would no longer be in Kadazandusun hands, mirroring real-world concerns about the land alienation and changing demographics in Sabah (Puyok & Piya, 2020). This conversation critiques federal policies that have gradually disadvantaged indigenous land rights and political representation. The film also touches on the shifting religious landscape caused by illegal immigration, acknowledging the socio-cultural transformations that are reshaping Sabah's indigenous community (Tangit, 2017). These political and economic changes further exacerbate the fragmentation of the Kadazandusun, weakening their collective bargaining power and social cohesion.

Beyond external political concerns, the self-definition is shown through the film critiques internal social issues, such as alcoholism within the Kadazandusun community. A scene featuring Anthony and Satius drinking highlights this issue, with Anthony admonishing Satius's excessive drinking as detrimental. While acknowledging alcohol consumption as a cultural practice (Chua et al., 2016), the film advocates moderation and self-awareness. This aligns with its broader message of self-definition, urging the Kadazandusun to confront internal challenges while striving for cultural preservation.

5.6 The Imagined Community in *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*

Benedict Anderson's concept of the Imagined Community provides a valuable framework for analysing how the fragmented Kadazandusun identity, as portrayed in *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*, contributes to the construction of a collective ethnic image. Anderson argues that nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by their members even when they do not personally know one another (Anderson, 2006). However, it is important to note that Anderson's original idea pertains to nation-building, whereas its application to the Kadazandusun focuses on fostering a cohesive image for the indigenous community. This framework thus offers insight into how the telemovie cultivates a sense of shared identity among the Kadazandusun, despite historical and cultural divisions.

The imagined aspect of Kadazandusun identity is constructed through the film's depiction of different historical periods, illustrating the transformation of the community over time. The telemovie positions its protagonists—Ah Chong and Anthony—as individuals navigating distinct historical realities, each representing a different stage of Kadazandusun identity formation. By contrasting pre-colonial, post-independence, and modern eras, the film highlights a continuous cultural thread that persists despite external

influences and socio-political changes. The contrast between fluent Dusun speakers in the past and Malay-dominant speakers in the present highlights the gradual erosion of indigenous linguistic identity. However, by depicting a shared past through the storytelling of the pre-colonial Kadazandusun and the pre-Double Six Tragedy, the film serves as a reminder to the current Kadazandusun community of their enduring connection, not only among themselves but also with other indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah. This is particularly significant for the 45 ethnic groups under the Kadazandusun umbrella. Through this understanding, the film contributes to strengthening the imagined collective identity of the Kadazandusun, fostering a deeper sense of cultural unity and resilience.

Sovereignty is a recurring theme, particularly in its critique of political and economic marginalisation. Pre-colonial settings depict the Kadazandusun as self-sufficient community, contrasting with the 1970s period, where optimism about indigenous political representation remains. However, the modern timeline, in which Ah Chong warns of land dispossession and external political dominance, underscores the loss of sovereignty over time. The film presents these concerns as part of a larger narrative of Kadazandusun disenfranchisement, reinforcing the need for cultural and political reclamation.

The concept of limited boundaries is evident in how the Kadazandusun identity is framed within a distinct geographical and cultural space. While acknowledging external influences, the film remains focused on internal fragmentation. Linguistic differences, economic disparities, and generational shifts are the key factors in the internal fragmentation that has contributed to the division within the Kadazandusun community. However, the inclusion of multiple indigenous languages—including Kadazan, Dusun, and Murut—alongside cultural elements such as traditional attire, communal dining, and spiritual practices, emphasises a common identity. This selective portrayal of shared cultural markers

reinforces the idea that the Kadazandusun belong to a singular, albeit diverse, ethnic community.

The community aspect is constructed through the telemovie's emphasis on collective struggles and shared cultural heritage. Character interactions demonstrate interdependence, whether in resisting external threats, preserving oral traditions, or maintaining indigenous practices. The narrative structure, which allows characters from different time periods to interact, symbolises an ongoing dialogue between past and present generations. This suggests that despite fragmentation, an underlying cultural unity connects the Kadazandusun across time. Furthermore, the telemovie's production process—wherein community collaboration was prioritised through the *rukut-rukut* system—mirrors this on-screen representation, reinforcing that Kadazandusun identity is not only imagined but actively constructed through communal effort.

Overall, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* serves as a medium through which fragmented Kadazandusun identity is reconciled into a collective image. By highlighting shared language, historical struggles, and cultural practices, the telemovie contributes to constructing an Imagined Community that transcends individual differences. Despite internal divisions and external challenges, the film asserts that Kadazandusun identity remains intact, continuously shaped by historical memory and contemporary realities. In doing so, it provides a powerful commentary on the importance of cultural preservation and collective resilience in the face of ongoing socio-political change.

5.7 The Fourth Cinema in *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*

Filmmaking plays a pivotal role in preserving Kadazandusun cultural heritage, reinforcing a cohesive sense of identity. In the context of Fourth Cinema, which centres on

indigenous narratives, Tony Francis Gitom's *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* exemplifies how filmmaking addresses fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community while promoting cultural continuity. Examining the film through the key components of Fourth Cinema—content, production, and reception—demonstrates how Kadazandusun filmmaking functions as a medium of cultural preservation and identity reinforcement.

The content of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* intertwines gangster drama with historical fiction, using time travel as a device to critique political, cultural, and linguistic shifts within the Kadazandusun community. Ah Chong, a modern Sino-Kadazan gangster, finds himself transported to key historical moments of Sabah, uncovering the evolution of indigenous identity. This reflects a key idea in Fourth Cinema—taking back control of history by telling it from a native perspective.

The film's use of Kadazandusun language emphasises linguistic erosion within the community. In the 1970s setting, older characters such as Valentine Valen speak exclusively in Dusun, while younger characters, like Raniti, acts as a linguistic mediators between Malay and Kadazandusun languages. The contrast between Ah Chong's era and pre-colonial Sabah reinforces concerns about cultural fragmentation and the loss of linguistic fluency. By incorporating indigenous languages alongside Sabah accented Malay, the telemovie resists the rapid linguistic assimilation, demonstrating how language functions as a crucial marker of cultural continuity.

Additionally, the film critiques external political influences that have marginalised the Kadazandusun. Ah Chong's warnings about the Double Six Tragedy and its long-term consequences for indigenous sovereignty echo contemporary anxieties regarding land dispossession and political disenfranchisement. This engagement with political history

aligns with Fourth Cinema's objective of challenging dominant narratives imposed by the nation-state and advocating for indigenous self-determination.

A defining aspect of Fourth Cinema is the emphasis on indigenous production methods, often relying on collective collaboration rather than commercial industry structures. *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* exemplifies this approach through its production under the *Perkampungan Filem* workshop, which actively involved participants from the local Kadazandusun community. Gitom's use of the *rukut-rukut* system— where resources such as equipment, time, and labour are pooled. This is to ensures that filmmaking remains accessible despite financial constraints.

Gitom's teaching method prioritises hands-on learning, allowing workshop participants to gain practical filmmaking experience. This approach nurtures a new generation of indigenous filmmakers who can independently create films that reflect their cultural narratives. The improvisational acting style, where performers contribute personal concerns and viewpoints to the dialogue, enhances authenticity. Rather than adhering to rigid script structures, the production process allows for organic expression, reinforcing the community's active role in shaping their own stories.

Despite technical limitations, such as minimal lighting and basic cinematographic equipment, the film effectively conveys its themes through strategic visual compositions. The dinner scene, where Ah Chong, Raniti, and Valentine share a meal while struggling to communicate, symbolises generational and linguistic divides within the Kadazandusun. This use of mise-en-scène to highlight cultural fragmentation emphasises the film's commitment to representing indigenous realities.

Fourth Cinema prioritises indigenous reception, focusing on the cultural impact within native community over mainstream commercial success. Gitom strategically

positions Kadazandusun audiences as the primary viewers of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*, ensuring the film resonates with local experiences and concerns. By incorporating multiple indigenous languages, including Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, and Bajau, the film fosters a sense of shared identity despite historical and geographical divisions.

The film's distribution model reflects the challenges and opportunities within indigenous filmmaking. While mainstream Malaysian broadcasters provide limited space for indigenous narratives, localised distribution allows Kadazandusun community to access culturally relevant content. However, this creates a "captive market," restricting commercial growth and broader recognition. Nonetheless, the increasing presence of Kadazandusun films in cinemas suggests a growing demand for indigenous storytelling, potentially expanding their reach.

By highlighting socio-political issues such as land rights, political representation, and linguistic preservation, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* contributes to an ongoing discourse on indigenous resilience. The film serves not only as a historical reflection but also as a call to action, urging Kadazandusun individuals to engage in cultural preservation. This aligns with Fourth Cinema's role as a medium for indigenous advocacy, ensuring native voices remain central in shaping their own narratives.

Filmmaking within the Kadazandusun community embodies the core principles of Fourth Cinema by prioritising indigenous perspectives, community-driven production, and localised reception. *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* serves as a critical intervention in the preservation of Kadazandusun heritage, addressing fragmentation through its emphasis on language, history, and self-determination. Through its grassroots production model, the film empowers indigenous filmmakers to reclaim their narratives, fostering a more unified cultural identity. As the Kadazandusun continue to navigate political and cultural challenges,

filmmaking remains an essential tool to reinforce their heritage and ensuring their stories endure for future generations.

5.8 *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* and the Reconnection with the Kadazandusun Identity

The examination of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* through the Indigenous Fim Analysis Framework demonstrates its function as a cultural resistance text that critically explores the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity. At its core, the telemovie emphasises the theme of reconnection with the past—both historical memory and collective trauma—to establish a more cohesive indigenous identity. Through its narrative structure, the film positions the past as an anchor for the present, urging the Kadazandusun community to remember and engage with historical experiences to fortify their identity in contemporary Malaysia.

Ah Chong's and Anthony's encounters with previous generations highlight the disjuncture between past and present. Their displacement into different historical periods enables direct engagement with pre-Double Six and pre-nationhood indigenous society—where Kadazandusun cultural autonomy still seem remained intact. However, their inability to fully integrate into their ancestral culture due to their detachment from Kadazandusun values, practices, and language signifies a broader cultural erosion experienced by the community.

While external factors have influenced Kadazandusun identity, the film presents an urgent message: addressing internal divisions is key to strengthening collective identity. The narrative highlights shared historical experiences, including the Double Six Tragedy, mass immigration, and indigenous land loss. Ah Chong's warnings about the future serve as critical markers of Kadazandusun fragmentation. The failure of historical characters to act

on these warnings reflects not just the inevitability of these events but also the recurring failure of the Kadazandusun to establish a cohesive voice and future direction.

The concept of the Imagined Community provides a valuable framework for understanding how *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* contributes to consolidating Kadazandusun identity. By juxtaposing different temporal contexts—1976 Sabah, where indigenous leadership was strong, and modern Sabah, where cultural fragmentation has intensified—the film highlights the necessity of internal cohesion. The reconstruction of collective memory, facilitated through Ah Chong's and Anthony's temporal displacements, challenges historical amnesia and reinforces cultural continuity. In this way, the film strengthens the Imagined Community of the Kadazandusun by encouraging self-reflection and deeper engagement with historical and cultural heritage.

Language serves as a key unifying element in this process. The film's interplay of Kadazandusun languages, Sabah's Malay, and local accents reflects the pluralism within the community while also exposing linguistic fragmentation that weakens collective identity. By advocating for the revitalisation and standardisation of Kadazandusun as a common linguistic medium, the film offers a pragmatic approach to strengthening cultural unity. As a repository of collective consciousness, language not only bridges generational division but also fosters a stronger sense of belonging among the 45 ethnic subgroups under the Kadazandusun umbrella. In this context, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* aligns with Imagined Community principles by demonstrating how internal cohesion—rather than resistance to external pressures—is fundamental to the survival and empowerment of indigenous identity.

Beyond fostering a collective historical consciousness, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* aligns with Fourth Cinema by serving as a platform for indigenous self-representation. The film moves beyond mainstream Malaysian cinema's tendency to overlook or simplify

indigenous narratives, instead presenting an authentic portrayal of Kadazandusun experiences and concerns. Unlike commercial productions shaped by state or corporate interests, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* was produced under the *Perkampungan Filem* initiative, which prioritises community-driven storytelling. This grassroots approach not only decentralises creative control but also preserves indigenous epistemologies, traditions, and political perspectives that might otherwise be marginalised in dominant cinematic discourses.

More importantly, the film's adherence to Fourth Cinema principles strengthens Kadazandusun identity by fostering cultural introspection. It does not merely depict the community's struggles but actively invites them to engage in their own cultural revitalisation. The portrayal of indigenous spiritual beliefs, such as the role of the *Bobolian* (shaman) in aiding Anthony's return to the present, asserts the legitimacy of Kadazandusun traditions as sources of strength rather than relics of the past. This affirmation of cultural authenticity counteracts internal disintegration by reaffirming the value of indigenous knowledge systems.

The film's contribution to Fourth Cinema studies is further emphasised by its methodological approach. By training indigenous filmmakers and utilising local resources, the *Perkampungan Filem* initiative fosters a sustainable model for indigenous cinematic production that prioritises community voices. In doing so, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* demonstrates how indigenous media can function as cultural preservation and a catalyst for unity, ensuring that Kadazandusun identity is continually renegotiated and reinforced within contemporary Malaysia.

By integrating the principles of Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema, the examination of *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* provides both a theoretical and practical

frameworks for addressing the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity. Rather than portraying this identity as something to be reclaimed from external forces, the film presents it as a construct requiring internal consolidation and self-definition. Through its emphasis on historical continuity, linguistic unity, and indigenous self-representation, it makes a vital contribution to Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema studies, demonstrating how indigenous cinema can actively strengthen cultural identity.

By centring its narrative on historical reconnection and cultural reflection, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* offers a compelling critique of the current state of Kadazandusun identity. The film argues that the greatest challenge to indigenous continuity is not solely external influences but the internal struggle to define and consolidate a shared cultural identity. Through its exploration of historical trauma, cultural erosion, and the potential of linguistic unity, it highlights the urgent need for greater indigenous agency and resilience.

In conclusion, the telemovie is not merely a lamentation of past losses but a call to action for the Kadazandusun to actively reclaim and redefine their place within Malaysian society. By addressing fragmentation and fostering internal cohesion, the Kadazandusun community can transition from passive recipients of historical and political change to active participants in shaping their own future. In doing so, *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* exemplifies how indigenous cinema can serve as both a mirror and a catalyst, inspiring a renewed sense of identity and collective purpose.

5.9 The Story of Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji (2015)

This telemovie tells a comedic story of a group of friends who wish to be famous in the filming business. The story mainly follows Soley (Soley Maubil), Satius (Satius Gautong) and Anthony (Anthony G. Josson) as the main characters in the telemovie. The

story began with the three of them attending a casting for film production from the peninsular. However, only Anthony was selected to be in the production due to his large build. Later, Soley and Satius met with Anthony at an outdoor diner to congratulate him on his achievement. However, Anthony was reluctant on celebrating as he only acquired the roles of an extra although he will be involved in 30 different scenes in the film. Soley and Satius encouraged Anthony to not felt disappointed and he should be grateful of the opportunity given to him.

Moving forward in the plot, Soley found out that there is another casting organised by a local indigenous film production. Here, the telemovie exhibit numbers of participants that unable to speak their own native language but the film producer or Boss (John Samud) is still willing to hire them as long they can perform well. However, the Boss was depicted as a perverted individual who sought to exploit the actresses in his production. When Soley, Satius and Anthony meet with the Boss, he immediately asked them if they are willing to work hard without the promise of payment. Three of them agreed and began shooting on the next day,

Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji is a telemovie that reflects the current state of indigenous filmmaking in Sabah at that time. This is demonstrated by a rough process of talent selection, the use of basic equipment, and multi-tasking within a production. Tony Francis Gitom created this film to give the local audience a general understanding of the experiences indigenous filmmakers has to go through, as well as their unconventional method of producing their telemovies.

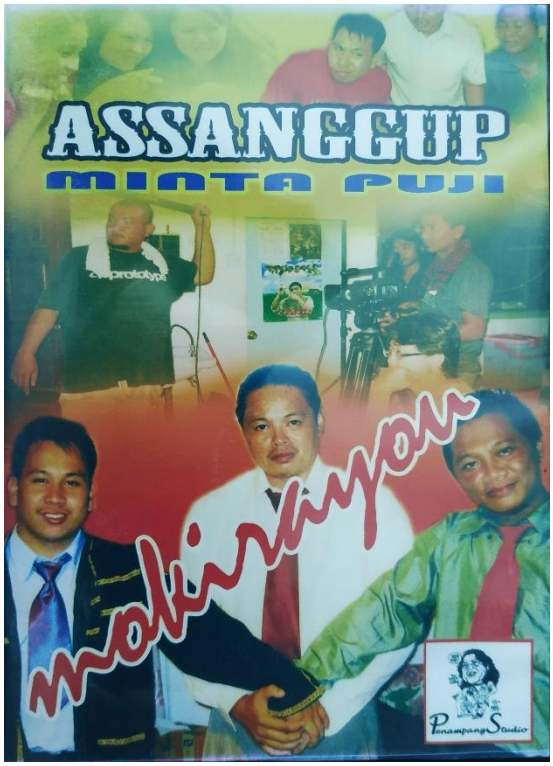


Figure 5.6: The box art for *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* telemovie (Source: Gitom, 2015)

5.10 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Application on *Mokirayou, Assangup Minta Puji*

5.10.1 The Narrative Analysis of Mokirayou Assanggup Minta Puji

Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji is a comedic yet socially reflective telemovie that critiques the state of indigenous filmmaking in Sabah. The film follows three friends—Soley, Satius, and Anthony—who aspire to become successful actors. Their journey is marked by disillusionment, exploitation, and resilience, painting a stark yet humorous depiction of the challenges faced by Kadazandusun filmmakers and actors.

The narrative structure of the telemovie is episodic, resembling a series of vignettes that expose different aspects of the local film industry. From failed auditions to the harsh reality of working in a low-budget indigenous production, the story unfolds as a self-

referential critique of Sabah's struggle for cinematic recognition. The inclusion of a predatory film producer, who exploits actors with promises of fame and fortune, reflects the unsavoury part of the Kadazandusun people that needed to be address and improve.

A significant narrative device in the telemovie is the comparison of the Peninsular Malaysian film industry with local indigenous filmmaking. The contrast is stark: Peninsular films have structure, financial backing, and wider market reach, whereas Sabahan filmmakers rely on grassroots efforts, basic equipment, and sheer perseverance. This contrast is encapsulated in Anthony's frustration—despite appearing in 30 scenes, he is still relegated to the role of an extra, highlighting the lack of meaningful representation for Sabah's indigenous actors in the national film industry. But in the same time, it highlight the need for Kadazandusun to be their own representative and encourage them to create their own films.

The telemovie also blends fiction with reality, functioning as both an entertainment piece and an insider's commentary on the struggles of indigenous filmmakers. By depicting the flaws of local production methods, Gitom acknowledges the limitations of Kadazandusun filmmaking while simultaneously advocating for perseverance and adaptation. Rather than presenting an idealistic vision, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* embraces self-awareness, making it a meta-commentary on Sabah's indigenous cinema. Additionally, the episodic structure and fragmented narrative mirror the fragmented nature of the local filmmaking itself, discreetly reinforcing the challenges of cohesion and continuity in indigenous culture-making.



Figure 5.7: Image on the left shows the shooting scene in *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* telemovie (Source: Gitom, 2015). Image on the right is taken during Tony Francis Gitom's film workshop in 2018. The telemovie reflects the reality of Kadazandusun filmmaking in terms of production

5.10.2 The Mise-en-Scène Analysis of Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji

The settings of *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* are based in the urbanised areas of Kota Kinabalu and Penampang, showcasing a modern Kadazandusun society that enjoys economic opportunities and the ability to make life choices in pursuit of their passions. This is reflected in the characters' workplaces: Anthony works in a gym, Soley is a security guard in a park, and Satius is a mechanic in a garage. All of them aspire to change their lives by engaging in filmmaking. The filming locations in *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji*, particularly the jungle scenes, are set in rapidly developing village areas. This demonstrates Tony Francis Gitom's resourcefulness in selecting backgrounds that align with his vision while keeping production costs minimal, avoiding the need for remote jungle locations.

The attire in *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* is simple, with most costumes being the personal clothing of the cast members. This reduced the production's burden of sourcing appropriate costumes and aligns with the telemovie's core message: to encourage the Kadazandusun people to produce films despite limited resources. The approach serves to inspire Kadazandusun filmmakers to collaborate with their indigenous community to create

cultural productions. Most of the cast wear clothing that has been previously used multiple times, reinforcing the film's modest yet fitting aesthetic.

Similar to *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*, the performances in *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* are based on the actors' understanding of the scenes. This allows for honest expressions, particularly in conversations such as the one between Boss (John Samud) and Anthony regarding the Kadazandusun's presence in the creative industry. Boss' insights stem from his real-life experiences as a singer and performer in the Kadazandusun entertainment scene. His perspective on resilience and hard work emphasises the telemovie's aspiration to serve as a reference and inspiration for emerging Kadazandusun filmmakers.



Figure 5.8: The director (Boss) is telling Anthony to use his talent in filmmaking to create an opportunity for himself (Source: Gitom, 2015)

Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji remains consistent in its effort to be a reference point for aspiring Kadazandusun filmmakers. The lighting is minimal, primarily used to brighten the scene, often with a single light source rather than the conventional multi-light setup used in the mainstream filmmaking. The use of props also highlights the basic equipment required to create a film. In the jungle scene, the production relies on a single charged-couple device (CCD) camera, a homemade reflector, and a crew member shading the director to facilitate visibility through the viewfinder. This simplicity emphasises the

tenacity and creative potential of the Kadazandusun people in producing cultural works that can be shared and enjoyed by the wider community.

Following the minimalist filmmaking approach, the cinematography in *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* is limited in terms of shot variation and framing due to the use of a single camera and tripod. Despite these constraints, Tony Francis Gitom succeeded in capturing meaningful compositions, particularly in the scene where Boss gifted Anthony a camera. This moment symbolises the film's core intention: to encourage the Kadazandusun community to persist in filmmaking and cultural production. Filmmaking, by nature, requires collective effort, and this scene serves as a metaphor for the Kadazandusun people to unite in preserving and expanding their culture, especially in the digital era.



Figure 5.9: The scene that shows Boss is giving Anthony a CCD camera to recognise his passion for filmmaking and to encourage him to continue making films in the future. (Source: Gitom, 2015)

Both *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* and *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* exemplify the resilience and determination of the Kadazandusun people in storytelling and filmmaking. Despite limited resources, these productions successfully delivered strong cultural messages through their settings, performances, and cinematographic choices. By embracing local

narratives and minimalistic filmmaking techniques, they serve as vital references for aspiring Kadazandusun filmmakers, emphasising the importance of cultural preservation and creative collaboration.

5.10.3 The Textual Analysis of Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji

Tony Francis Gitom continues his commitment to linguistic authenticity in *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji*, following the precedent set in *Orang Bilang Ah Chong*. The telemovie prominently features the Dusun language as a part of the contest, particularly through the dialogue of Satius, Soley, and John Samud. Their frequent use of Dusun underscores Gitom's dedication to preserving the indigenous language, reflecting its enduring presence as a first language among segments of the Kadazandusun community. The film illustrates the organic use of Dusun through naturalistic conversations, reinforcing its cultural significance. For example, in one exchange, Soley reassures Satius in Dusun, saying, *"Kada, Kada, Kada kopio mogod-togod Satius"* (Don't, don't, don't be mad, Satius), to which Satius responds, *"Oruol ti ginawo ku"* (My feeling hurts). Such moments not only add authenticity but also serve as a quiet assertion of linguistic identity within a broader national context that prioritises Malay and English.

Alongside the use of the Dusun language, the telemovie incorporates Malay with a distinct Sabah dialect, reflecting the everyday communication of the indigenous community. This linguistic choice enhances relatability for local audiences and highlights Gitom's nuanced approach to cultural representation. Anthony and Boss predominantly speak Malay, their speech reflecting regional intonations and expressions, such as *"Saya lapar bah ni"* (I'm hungry), reinforcing the film's commitment to linguistic realism. By employing a mix

of Dusun and Sabah accented Malay, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* indistinctly engages in a negotiation of identity. It acknowledges the encroaching dominance of Malay in public and official settings while asserting the continued relevance of indigenous languages in informal and familial contexts. The film thereby mirrors the bilingual reality of the Kadazandusun people, where language use is shaped by both cultural heritage and socio-political structures.

The telemovie serves as both a testament to and an act of perseverance against the disadvantages faced by Kadazandusun filmmaking. Before digital technology, filmmaking in Malaysia was heavily regulated, with authorities using cinema as a tool to promote state ideologies (Asiah, 2006). The National Culture Policy further reinforced this control, leading to extensive censorship of films deemed to challenge national narratives (Rao, 2013). Consequently, indigenous filmmakers were often scrutinised, censored, or sidelined (Baumgärtel, 2011). *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* emerges as a response to these constraints, demonstrating that Sabah's indigenous community persists in telling their own stories despite the lack of support. The telemovie does not conform to conventional Malaysian film norms but instead asserts the validity of indigenous perspectives, traditions, and values within cinematic storytelling.

A recurring theme in the film is the diminishing fluency of Dusun among younger generations. This issue is highlighted in an audition scene where Boss, speaking in Dusun, instructs young talents to act using the language. Their response — *"Inda, kami cuma tahu berlakon dalam Bahasa Melayu Sahaja"* (No, we only know how to act in Malay) — exposes the generational shift towards Malay dominance. This concern has been noted by scholars, including Anthony Reid, who attributes the decline of Kadazandusun language proficiency to the prioritisation of Malay and English in education and official

documentation (Reid, 1997). As these languages are perceived as necessary for economic and professional advancement, the use of indigenous languages becomes increasingly confined to domestic and cultural settings. *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* thus functions as both a cultural artefact and a commentary on the linguistic erosion faced by the Kadazandusun people.

The telemovie acknowledges the disparity between Sabah's indigenous filmmaking industry and the more established Malaysian film sector. It portrays the reality of local productions, which operate with limited budgets, basic equipment, and amateur actors. This is encapsulated in a line from the film: "It is a miracle if we use a small camera in Sabah. We can produce a telemovie, film. We can generate a lot of money. But if people in the peninsular see us using small cameras, it would embarrass us" (Gitom, 2015). The statement reflects both an awareness of Sabah's cinematic limitations and a defiant assertion that indigenous filmmakers should not be deterred by such constraints. Rather than resigning to marginalisation, the film advocates self-sufficiency and resilience. The message is clear: Kadazandusun filmmakers must create their own opportunities rather than waiting for an external validation. This sentiment is reinforced in another line: "It is really hard to find opportunity in Sabah, but we must know to create one" (Gitom, 2015). By acknowledging its own limitations, the telemovie encourages a proactive approach to cultural production, positioning indigenous filmmakers as agents of their own creative futures.

The telemovie also highlights its self-definition through the multilingual reality of the Kadazandusun people, particularly through the linguistic interactions between its main characters. Satius and Soley converse primarily in Dusun, while Anthony, though fluent in Malay, understands Dusun but does not speak it. This dynamic reflects the lived experience of many Kadazandusun individuals who navigate between languages in daily interactions.

A notable example occurs when Anthony tells Soley, “Eh, Soley,” to which Soley responds in Dusun, *“Nunu ngaran diti?”* (What is it?). Anthony then informs him in Malay about an audition: *“Ada ujibakat”* (There is an audition), prompting Soley’s Dusun response, *“Hinonggo?”* (Where?). This fluid code-switching reflects the linguistic shifts within the Kadazandusun community, influenced by external factors and evolving socio-cultural landscapes.

Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji takes a fresh approach to Kadazandusun filmmaking, focusing less on external barriers and more on divisions within the community itself. While outside challenges are real, the film suggests that indigenous filmmakers must also overcome internal struggles and find creative ways to sustain their industry. One example depicted in the film is paying actors with copies of the telemovie, which they can then sell—an unconventional but resourceful approach to financial sustainability. Rather than simply lamenting the difficulties faced by Kadazandusun filmmakers, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* encourages its audience to take ownership of their cultural narratives. It highlights the importance of perseverance, pride in their linguistic heritage, and a strong sense of self-determination. Ultimately, the film is more than just entertainment—it is a call to action for the Kadazandusun community to shape their own stories and future.

5.11 The Imagined Community in Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji

The *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* telemovie serves as a cultural artefact through which the Kadazandusun people, despite their internal divisions, construct a shared sense of belonging. The Kadazandusun identity in the telemovie is not presented as a monolithic entity but rather as an amalgamation of individual experiences. Characters such as Soley, Satius, and Anthony embody different facets of Kadazandusun identity, reflecting a range of

cultural expressions within the community. Soley and Satius, who converse primarily in Dusun, represent those deeply rooted in indigenous linguistic traditions, whereas Anthony, who understands Dusun but speaks mainly in Malay, symbolises the generational shift towards linguistic assimilation. Despite these differences, their shared struggles and aspirations in the creative industry contribute to a collective cultural identity. The film thus becomes an act of imagined or imagining the Kadazandusun as a cohesive group, using language and shared experience as binding elements.

The sovereignty of the Kadazandusun identity within *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* is expressed through its resistance to cultural erasure. The telemovie highlights the marginalisation of indigenous filmmakers within the Malaysian film industry, portraying the struggles of Kadazandusun actors who are confined to minor roles and excluded from mainstream representation. The film industry, dominated by Peninsular Malaysia, is depicted as structured and financially supported, whereas Kadazandusun filmmaking operates on minimal resources and community-driven efforts. However, the film does not merely lament this disparity; it asserts the Kadazandusun's ability to create their own cultural productions despite limitations. The characters' resilience, particularly Anthony's determination to pursue filmmaking despite repeated setbacks, reflects the sovereignty of Kadazandusun identity in the face of systemic exclusion. By choosing to tell their own stories, indigenous filmmakers reclaim their cultural space and assert their right to self-representation.

While *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* celebrates the endurance of Kadazandusun identity, it also acknowledges its limitation, particularly in language preservation. The film highlights the gradual decline of the Dusun language among younger generations, exemplified in an audition scene where aspiring actors admit they only know how to act in Malay. This moment underscores the linguistic shift within the Kadazandusun community,

where Malay and English increasingly dominate public discourse. The film's use of code-switching between Dusun and Malay mirrors the lived reality of many Kadazandusun individuals, who navigate between languages depending on social context. While this bilingualism reflects adaptability, it also raises concerns about the erosion of indigenous linguistic heritage. Despite these challenges, the telemovie insists on the continued relevance of Dusun, portraying it as an integral element of Kadazandusun identity. In doing so, it reinforces the notion that while the Kadazandusun may be linguistically and culturally fragmented, their shared heritage remains a unifying force.

The sense of community among the Kadazandusun is further reinforced through the collective efforts depicted in *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji*. The telemovie, despite its episodic structure and fragmented narrative, reflects the collaborative nature of indigenous filmmaking. The resourcefulness displayed in production—such as the use of personal clothing for costumes and makeshift filming equipment—emphasises the communal nature of Kadazandusun storytelling. The scene in which Boss gifts Anthony a camera serves as a metaphor for the continuation of this collective cultural effort. It symbolises the passing down of responsibility to the next generation, encouraging young Kadazandusun filmmakers to contribute to the preservation and expansion of their cultural narratives. This act of mentorship reflects a broader theme in the film: the Kadazandusun community must take ownership of their cultural production rather than relying on external validation.

In conclusion, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* demonstrates how individual experiences of fragmentation—linguistic shifts, industry marginalisation, and economic constraints—can collectively contribute to the construction of a broader Kadazandusun identity. While differences exist among Kadazandusun individuals, their shared struggles, aspirations, and creative resilience form the foundation of a collective cultural identity. The

telemovie does not present a utopian vision of indigenous filmmaking; rather, it acknowledges the challenges while advocating for perseverance and self-determination. Through its depiction of language, cultural negotiation, and grassroots filmmaking, it offers a powerful commentary on the ways in which the Kadazandusun, despite internal divisions, can forge a unified cultural identity.

5.12 The Fourth Cinema in Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji

Filmmaking plays a crucial role in preserving Kadazandusun cultural heritage, reinforcing identity, and addressing internal fragmentation. *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* (2015), directed by Tony Francis Gitom, aligns with Fourth Cinema principles by offering an indigenous perspective on the challenges faced by Kadazandusun filmmakers and actors. Through its content, production approach, and reception, the film exemplifies how indigenous cinema resists cultural erasure and fosters community unity.

A key feature of the content in the *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* is its commitment to linguistic and cultural authenticity. The film predominantly features Dusun language alongside Malay with a Sabah accent, reflecting the bilingual reality of the Kadazandusun people. This linguistic integration highlights the importance of language preservation, an essential aspect of cultural heritage that is increasingly under threat (Reid, 1997). Additionally, the film critiques the underrepresentation of Kadazandusun filmmakers in Malaysia's national cinema, contrasting their resource-limited productions with the structured and well-funded industry in Peninsular Malaysia. By exposing these barriers, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* does not merely documents indigenous struggles but actively participates in cultural resistance.

Gitom's minimalist filmmaking approach reflects the economic realities of Kadazandusun cinema while advocating for self-sufficiency. The use of real urban and village locations minimises production costs and grounds the narrative in lived community experiences. Simple, everyday attire for the cast prioritises authenticity over commercial polish, a hallmark of Fourth Cinema. The collaborative spirit within the production process—reliance on personal equipment, single-camera setups, and alternative financing methods such as selling copies of the telemovie—demonstrates the adaptive strategies needed to sustain indigenous productions. The film underscores that indigenous filmmaking does not need to conform to mainstream industry standards but should instead prioritise cultural expression.

Beyond its artistic and technical aspects, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji's* reception functions as an educational tool, encouraging young Kadazandusun individuals to reconnect with their heritage. By promoting self-representation, the film challenges longstanding perceptions that indigenous filmmakers are marginalised outsiders within Malaysia's cinematic landscape. Rather than seeking validation from mainstream industry practices, the telemovie advocates for a distinct Kadazandusun cinema that embraces its limitations as strengths. This assertion of agency aligns with the core objective of Fourth Cinema, which is to reclaim indigenous storytelling spaces.

By addressing internal fragmentation within the Kadazandusun cultural landscape, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for change. It affirms that indigenous filmmaking is more than an artistic pursuit—it serves as a way to sustain and reinforce a cohesive cultural identity amid linguistic and economic challenges. Upholding the core tenets of Fourth Cinema, the film positions Kadazandusun storytelling

as a vital force in preserving heritage and asserting indigenous agency in contemporary cinema.

5.13 *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* and the Self-Reliance of the Kadazandusun Identity

Applying the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework highlights *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* as more than just a comedic telemovie. The telemovie emphasises on the theme of self-reliance within the Kadazandusun community, particularly in improving cultural practices to create a more cohesive society. It serves as a cultural artefact that actively engages with the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity.

Through its narrative, mise-en-scène, and textual analysis, the film demonstrates how indigenous communities can reinforce their cultural identity despite significant challenges. By encouraging communal participation in filmmaking, the telemovie fosters a sense of resilience and belonging while promoting cultural continuity.

A defining aspect of *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* is its ability to bring together members of the Kadazandusun community, regardless of linguistic or cultural variations, in a collective creative process. The telemovie portrays individuals with varying degrees of cultural fluency, exemplified by Anthony's struggle with the indigenous language compared to Soley and Satius' proficiency. Despite these differences, all three characters remain integral to the collective pursuit of filmmaking. This dynamic reflects a broader cultural fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community, where linguistic erosion and external influences challenge cultural unity. By demonstrating how individuals from diverse backgrounds can collaborate towards a shared objective, the film suggests that culture-making—particularly through filmmaking—can bridge division and reinforce identity.

Furthermore, the film advocates for self-reliance among the Kadazandusun. It presents an indigenous filmmaking industry that, despite being limited by financial constraints, continues to demonstrate resilience. The contrast between the well-funded, structured filmmaking industry of Peninsular Malaysia and the resource-strapped independent productions in Sabah highlights this disparity. However, rather than portraying these limitations as insurmountable, the telemovie illustrates how Kadazandusun filmmakers navigate challenges through ingenuity, perseverance, and community support. The emphasis on *rukut-rukut* (collaborative effort) in the production underscores the importance of community-driven initiatives in sustaining indigenous filmmaking. This message encourages Kadazandusun filmmakers and cultural practitioners to create opportunities rather than being dependent on external validation.

Equally significant is the film's portrayal of collective effort and solidarity within the Kadazandusun community. The camaraderie between Anthony, Soley, and Satius symbolises how Kadazandusun people, despite internal differences, can work together towards common goals. This emphasis on collective action extends beyond filmmaking, suggesting a broader application in addressing socio-cultural challenges faced by the community. Even in the face of exploitation, financial hardship, and linguistic barriers, unity and shared purpose facilitate meaningful cultural production.

Drawing on Anderson's concept of Imagined Community, the film functions as a unifying cultural text, reinforcing a collective sense of belonging despite linguistic hybridity and socio-economic disparities. By featuring a blend of Dusun and accented Malay, the telemovie underscores the existence of a Kadazandusun identity that extends beyond linguistic proficiency, fostering an inclusive ethnic consciousness. This linguistic hybridity reflects the contemporary reality of the Kadazandusun, where language erosion and external

influences pose challenges to cultural cohesion. The film's ability to depict this diversity while reinforcing shared identity aligns with Anderson's assertion that media plays a crucial role in shaping national and ethnic consciousness.

Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji also embodies Fourth Cinema principles by advocating for indigenous self-representation. Rather than focusing solely on marginalisation, the telemovie demonstrates how Fourth Cinema serves as a tool for cultural resilience and identity reinforcement. It prioritises Kadazandusun perspectives by employing local filmmaking practices that challenge mainstream industry norms, reclaiming control over indigenous narratives.

A significant contribution of the film to Fourth Cinema is its depiction of collective participation in filmmaking. It highlights an alternative economic model that diverges from mainstream capitalist film production, demonstrating how indigenous filmmakers generate opportunities despite financial constraints. The practice of distributing copies of the telemovie as compensation reflects an indigenous approach to sustains cultural production that prioritises community engagement over commercial profit. This self-sufficiency fosters a sustainable indigenous filmmaking industry while reinforcing the notion that cultural production is a communal rather than individualistic pursuit.

By integrating Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema theories, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* offers a critical intervention on discussions of Kadazandusun identity. It asserts that continuous cultural production, particularly through indigenous filmmaking, is essential for consolidating identity. The telemovie does not merely depict filmmaking as an artistic endeavour but frames it as a crucial tool for cultural preservation. Through its meta-cinematic elements, it acknowledges the challenges of indigenous filmmaking while celebrating its potential as a unifying force. It underscores that Kadazandusun identity is

actively constructed through shared cultural practices, positioning collective cultural creation as a means of resisting fragmentation.

Although it successfully reinforces Kadazandusun identity, the film's reach is limited by challenges in distribution, funding, and accessibility. Indigenous filmmaking in Sabah requires structural support to extend its impact beyond local audiences. Without broader recognition and investment, its sustainability remains uncertain. Nevertheless, *Mokirayou, Assanggup Minta Puji* stands as a testament to the resilience of Kadazandusun filmmakers and their commitment to cultural self-definition within Malaysia's cinematic landscape.

5.14 Ramli Ahmad's Background

Ramli Ahmad, also known as Ramli Carlo, originates from the district of Ranau, located in the north-western region of Sabah. He received his early education at SK Tambunan and SK Segindai before continuing his secondary studies at SMK Mat Salleh. He later attended Maktab Perguruan Gaya and subsequently earned a degree in social science education from the University of Malaysia Sabah.

Initially pursuing a career in education, Ramli worked as a teacher before transitioning into a role within the education department. However, his deep interest in the entertainment industry remained evident throughout his professional life. He made appearances on both television and radio, using his annual leave as a government employee to explore his passion for filmmaking.

Ramli is recognised as one of the pioneers of Kadazandusun filmmaking, having contributed to the production of Sabah's first Kadazandusun/ indigenous telemovie, *Proton Saga Kelabu*, followed by *Orang Kita*. Like Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli gained substantial experience in related fields before fully venturing into Kadazandusun filmmaking. This

background eventually led to his directorial debut with the telemovie *Cinta itu Anugerah* in 2006. He later went on to produce several other works, including *Esther Esthera* and *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*.



Figure 5.10: Picture of Ramli Ahmad taken during personal interview

5.15 Ramli Ahmad's Perspective on Kadazandusun Filmmaking

Ramli Ahmad is a strong advocate for Kadazandusun creative content to be produced and managed by the indigenous community itself. His belief is rooted in his own experiences as a Kadazandusun artist involved in both music and filmmaking. Through his diverse roles within the creative arts, he has recognised the crucial distinction in how indigenous stories are told, particularly in contrast to non-indigenous approaches. Supporting this perspective, he stated:

> If you tell a story regarding the Sabah (Kadazandusun) indigenous, I believe it's better for the story to be told by the indigenous themselves… If the filmmaker is not native to this land, there is a possibility that the person is unable to depict the real ambiance of the story. (Sibangan, personal communication, 19 December 2018)

From this standpoint, Ramli points out the significance of lived experience as the defining factor. The Kadazandusun community possesses intrinsic cultural knowledge that

cannot be easily acquired or imitated. This cultural heritage makes Kadazandusun talents uniquely suited to authentically represent their own narratives. Having been immersed in their language, customs, and values from a young age, they are more attuned to the nuances of Kadazandusun storytelling. Their involvement, therefore, ensures that representations in film remain authentic and resonate deeply with Kadazandusun audiences.

Ramli's commitment to authenticity is further shaped by his extensive background in television and radio, where he remains particularly attentive to how Kadazandusun characters are portrayed. However, he has observed a persistent lack of professionalism in the acting skills of some indigenous performers involved in filmmaking. He addressed this concern, stating:

> The truth is, we have a lot of specialties, we have talents, lots of good actors and actresses. If we instruct them how to properly act, they will excel. However, our current problem is that most of the acting is still lacking—they just bluntly perform. They never study properly the art of acting. That is the reason why we are insufficient in terms of acting. Our acting is geared towards speaking rather than expressing. (Sibangan, personal communication, 19 December 2018)

According to Ramli, this lack of professionalism has diminished the credibility of Kadazandusun talent in film. He critiques indigenous actors for merely "acting" rather than fully embodying their roles, an issue he believes is hindering the growth of Kadazandusun filmmaking. However, his critique stems from a firm belief that Kadazandusun actors are capable of much more, provided they receive proper guidance and training. This challenge has also motivated him to refine his skills as a director, ensuring that his films avoid appearing contrived or artificial.

5.16 The Story of *Esther Esthera* (2007)

Esther Esthera is a romantic telemovie rooted in real events from Sabah, delving into themes of love, class disparity, familial expectations, and religious tension. The story revolves around the complex relationship between Sufian (played by Sufian Buang) and Esther (Ivye Alexandera), two individuals from vastly different socio-economic backgrounds. Esther comes from a wealthy family, while Sufian is impoverished. Esther's father, Sam (Deddy M. Borhan), vehemently opposes their relationship, fearing it will bring shame to their family due to Sufian's lower status. Despite these objections, Esther values Sufian for his character and moral integrity, a sentiment that causes her to support him financially. This, however, leads her family to suspect that Sufian is only interested in her wealth.

The relentless disapproval of their relationship eventually drives Esther to pursue her studies in Peninsular Malaysia. During her time there, a professor who is also her lecturer becomes quite fond of her, sparking suspicions in Sufian about the nature of their relationship. His insecurities about Esther's new life culminate in their breakup, causing Sufian to abandon his medical studies. Disheartened, he contemplates enrolling in a theology school, believing that service to the community could be achieved through the church. However, after a discussion with the headmaster, who advises Sufian to reconsider, he meets with the dean of the university, who recognises his potential and encourages him to complete his medical degree.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Esther and her lecturer grows intimate, eventually leading to their marriage. This news devastated Sam and his family, as Esther has married a Muslim, a move that Sam considers a betrayal of their Christian heritage. For generations, Sam's family has practised Christianity, and Esther's decision to convert is

viewed as a profound shame upon the family. Sam's fury at his daughter's choices strains their relationship further.

Years later, Sam is diagnosed with a severe illness, and in an ironic twist of fate, it is Sufian who becomes the doctor assigned to treat him. Despite their fraught history, Sufian harbours no resentment towards Sam and commits to providing the best care possible. Through this encounter, Sam realises the error of his previous judgement, acknowledging that he should not have looked down on Sufian because of his poor background. Sam asks for Sufian's forgiveness, which is given unconditionally. In the aftermath of this reconciliation, Sam and his family also forgive Esther, inviting her to return home to Sabah. Although the future is not what any of them had envisioned, they ultimately make peace with one another.



Figure 5.11: The front cover of *Esther Esthera* VCD box art (Source: Ramli, 2007)

5.17 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Application on *Esther Esthera*

5.17.1 The Narrative Analysis of *Esther Esthera*

The narrative structure of *Esther Esthera* intricately weaves together social, cultural, and religious dynamics within the Kadazandusun community. At its core, the telemovie follows the love story of Sufian and Esther, whose relationship is shaped by economic disparity, familial expectations, and religious identity. However, beyond the personal drama, the film serves as a broader commentary on contemporary Kadazandusun identity.

A key element of the film's narrative is its depiction of power structures within the family unit. Sam, Esther's father, embodies the traditional patriarch whose authority is challenged by his daughter's defiance. His strong opposition to her relationship with Sufian, first based on class and later on religion, underscores the hierarchical nature of Kadazandusun family dynamics, where parental approval remains a dominant factor in life decisions. The eventual reconciliation between Sam and Esther reinforces the importance of familial unity, suggesting that while Kadazandusun traditions are deeply rooted, they are not entirely resistant to change.

The telemovie also challenges the stereotype of indigenous passivity. Sam is not portrayed as an economically disadvantaged figure but rather as an influential businessman, countering the perception of Kadazandusun people as backward or dependent. His confidence and assertion that he has contributed to his community's progress disrupt the conventional narrative of indigenous people as victims of development rather than active participants in it.



Figure 5.12: Sam expressing his thought and his achievement in bringing development to their land (Source: Ramli, 2007)

Subtitles: The villagers all complained about me. They say I took away their properties, took away their lands. But you can see now Tuan Haji, I've provided plenty of jobs for them. The villagers are living well.

Additionally, *Esther Esthera* gently addresses the issue of fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community through its storytelling. The tension between Esther and her father, exacerbated by her interfaith marriage and eventual conversion, reflects broader societal changes that challenge communal cohesion. The telemovie's resolution, wherein familial ties are mended despite ideological differences, suggests a hopeful yet realistic approach to reconciliation within the community.

Through its nuanced portrayal of personal and communal struggles, *Esther Esthera* offers a layered exploration of Kadazandusun identity, illustrating the tensions between tradition and progress, unity and fragmentation. The film not only presents a poignant love story but also serves as a microcosm of the broader socio-cultural transitions experienced by indigenous communities in Malaysia.



Figure 5.13: Sam's reaction and disapproval of his daughter Esther marrying a Muslim (Source: Ramli, 2007)

5.17.2 The Mise-en-scène Analysis of *Esther Esthera*

The settings of *Esther Esthera* play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and emphasising key themes. The lavish house of Sam symbolises his wealth and influence, while Sufian's modest village house highlights his lower economic status. The farm setting underscores Sam's successful business, reinforcing his position of power. The use of Universiti Malaysia Sabah as a setting reflects the role of higher education in Sabah and provides a contrast between different social classes. Additionally, the theology school signifies Sufian's aspiration to become a priest, illustrating the presence of religious devotion in the Kadazandusun community. Ramli Ahmad carefully selected these locations to create a realistic depiction of Kadazandusun society and to enhance the film's storytelling by grounding it in identifiable socio-cultural contexts.

Costume design in *Esther Esthera* is instrumental in conveying the socio-economic disparities between the characters. Esther and her family are dressed in fashionable clothing and adorned with jewellery, visually signifying their affluence. In contrast, Sufian's attire is simple and practical, reflecting his status as a university student. His mother's clothing is

similarly modest, aligning with her background as a common villager. Ramli Ahmad's attention to these details ensures an authentic representation of the Kadazandusun community, depicting its diverse economic realities. The costuming effectively supports the narrative, allowing audiences to immediately grasp the class distinctions between characters and their respective social positions.

Unlike Tony Francis Gitom's improvisational approach, Ramli Ahmad placed significant emphasis on the script to guide performance. The involvement of veteran filmmaker Deddy M. Borhan, who portrays Sam, brings professional experience to the production and enhances the overall quality of the performance. The telemovie benefited from expert advice and direction, leading to more polished acting. However, some rigidity remains in certain scene, primarily due to the lack of experience of some cast members, as this was their first acting experience. Despite this, Ramli Ahmad sought to make *Esther Esthera* accessible to a broad audience. He carefully balanced the representation of Kadazandusun identity while ensuring the film remained understandable to other ethnic groups in Malaysia. This decision led to the selection of Malay as the main language, while reducing the prominence of local accents.

Lighting in *Esther Esthera* is used to reflect the emotional states of the characters, reinforcing the film's commitment to realism. However, technical limitations during the filmmaking process resulted in occasional errors, such as the presence of double shadows caused by multiple light sources. One example is the bedroom scene where Sufian calls Esther. In this scene, soft lighting is used to convey their emotional connection, despite the physical distance between them. The scene encapsulates the longing and attachment between the two characters, yet it ultimately ends in heartbreak due to jealousy. This moment symbolises the complexities of relationships within the Kadazandusun community,

demonstrating how external challenges and misunderstandings can lead to emotional turmoil and separation.



Figure 5.14: The scene where multiple light sources resulted in the casting of double shadows. Nevertheless, this scene represents the high point of Sufian and Esther's relationship (Source: Ramli, 2007)

Props play a vital role in reinforcing the film's thematic depth, particularly regarding religious identity. Esther is frequently seen wearing a cross necklace, a symbol that is also present in her mother Marcella's attire. The theology school that Sufian hopes to attend further highlights the significance of faith in Kadazandusun society. Ramli Ahmad effectively utilises these props to explore the intersection of faith, personal struggle, and familial expectations. The wedding scene, incorporating traditional Islamic elements, highlights the religious diversity within the Kadazandusun community, showcasing the coexistence of various faiths in Sabah. Through these visual elements, the film acknowledges the integral role of religion in shaping personal and communal identities.



Figure 5.15: The scene that shows Esther wearing a necklace with a cross, signifying that she is a Christian (Source: Ramli, 2007)

Cinematography in *Esther Esthera* is limited by the production's available resources, leading to a reliance on basic shot compositions such as full, medium, and close-up shots. However, Ramli Ahmad makes effective use of these limitations to craft compelling visual storytelling. One particularly striking example is Sufian's meeting with the head of the theology school. The scene is framed to emphasise Sufian's emotional turmoil, with the window blinds symbolising his clouded judgement. The blinds obscure a cross positioned on top of a cabinet, visually representing Sufian's inability to find spiritual clarity in his moment of distress. This scene ultimately conveys the deep-rooted influence of Christianity within the Kadazandusun community, as Sufian gains renewed perspective after receiving guidance and ultimately decided to pursue medicine instead of priesthood.

Another significant moment is the reconciliation scene between Sam and Esther, or Esthera, as she is referred to in this part of the telemovie. The framing of their embrace conveys the resolution of years of emotional pain and regret, signifying forgiveness, acceptance, and the enduring power of familial love. The shot composition adeptly captures

the emotional intensity of the moment, allowing audiences to connect deeply with the characters' experiences.



Figure 5.16: The scene where Sam forgives Esther (Esthera) (Source: Ramli, 2007)

5.17.3 The Textual Analysis of *Esther Esthera*

The interplay between textual analysis, narrative structure, and mise-en-scène in *Esther Esthera* reveals a textual analysis of contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition within the Kadazandusun community. The telemovie challenges prevailing stereotypes of indigenous people as backward or passive, and presents Sam as a powerful, self-made businessman. This characterisation not only disrupts external misconceptions but also reframes the narrative of Kadazandusun agency in development. The mise-en-scène reinforces this theme by contrasting Sam's wealth—evident by his lavish home and business enterprises—with Sufian's modest background, visually underscoring the economic spectrum within the community. Through this juxtaposition, *Esther Esthera* negotiates traditional power dynamics, illustrating that Kadazandusun individuals are active participants in modernisation rather than victims of it.

Negotiation is also evident in this telemovie's strategic use of language, which balances authenticity and accessibility. While the narrative is deeply rooted in

Kadazandusun identity, the decision to use standard Malay over indigenous dialects signifies a deliberate negotiation between local representation and broader national engagement. This linguistic choice aligns with the film's mise-en-scène, which selectively integrates markers of Kadazandusun culture, such as traditional attire and religious symbols, without alienating a wider Malaysian audience. The subtle incorporation of Sabah dialects in key dialogue scenes further reinforces this duality, acknowledging local heritage while ensuring comprehensibility. Through this negotiation, *Esther Esthera* reflects the cultural and linguistic fragmentation faced by the Kadazandusun community, where national integration sometimes comes at the cost of indigenous expression.

Perseverance emerges as a central theme in both narrative and mise-en-scène, particularly in relation to religious identity and familial conflict. Sam's opposition to Esther's conversion to Islam is depicted through emotionally charged performances and intimate cinematography, heightening the tension of interfaith discord within the family. The mise-en-scène employs religious iconography, such as Esther's cross necklace and the theology school setting, to symbolise her struggle between faith and familial duty. However, the eventual reconciliation between Sam and Esther highlights the Kadazandusun value of familial unity, suggesting that perseverance in the face of religious and ideological differences can lead to acceptance. This thematic resolution aligns with the broader societal tensions regarding religious conversion in Sabah, highlighting the film's engagement with historical and contemporary issues of indigenous identity.

The telemovie further explores self-definition by portraying Kadazandusun identity as fluid and evolving. *Esther Esthera* critiques the assumption that names inherently dictate identity. Sufian, a name commonly associated with Islam in Malaysia, belongs to a Christian character, slightly challenging rigid socio-religious classifications. The film's portrayal of

naming conventions within the Kadazandusun community reflects a broader openness to cultural plurality, where identity is determined by lived experience rather than imposed labels.



Figure 5.17: The scene where Haji Awang explains the distinct usage of names in Sabah (Source: Ramli, 2007)

This is reinforced through the casting choices, where Muslim actors play non-Muslim characters, demonstrating that religious identity within Kadazandusun community is not as strictly compartmentalised as mainstream Malaysian society often assumes. By weaving these elements into its narrative and mise-en-scène, *Esther Esthera* presents self-definition as an ongoing negotiation between personal choice, cultural heritage, and societal expectations.

Esther Esthera subtly explores the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity through internal conflicts within family, faith, and language. The tensions between tradition and personal choice, religious continuity and conversion, as well as the negotiation of cultural expression reveal identity as fluid rather than fixed. This film portrays Kadazandusun individuals navigating these personal struggles, where familial expectations and self-discovery often clash. Yet, through reconciliation, it suggests that despite internal divisions, resilience lies in the community's ability to embrace change while preserving its core values.

5.18 The Imagined Community in *Esther Esthera*

The telemovie *Esther Esthera* constructs the imagined Kadazandusun identity as a cohesive yet evolving entity by portraying characters whose personal struggles reflect broader societal challenges. While individuals navigate economic, religious, and generational division, they remain linked through shared cultural values such as filial piety, respect for tradition, and resilience. Esther's conflict with her father over interfaith marriage highlights the intersection of personal choice and communal expectations, reflecting tensions experienced within the community. Similarly, Sam's transition from a rigid patriarch to a more accepting father signifies the adaptability of Kadazandusun identity, suggesting that traditions, while deeply ingrained, can be reinterpreted. Through such representations, *Esther Esthera* presents Kadazandusun identity as dynamic rather than monolithic, shaped by individual experiences.

The film challenges stereotypical portrayals of indigenous community by asserting Kadazandusun agency and self-determination. Sam, depicted as a successful businessman, disrupts the perception of indigenous people as economically dependent or socially marginalised. His character redefines sovereignty within the Kadazandusun context, positioning economic self-sufficiency as a key element of identity. At the same time, the film's engagement with religious conversion underscores the complexities of sovereignty in cultural terms. Esther's decision to convert introduces tensions between individual belief and collective values. However, the eventual reconciliation between father and daughter reinforces the idea that Kadazandusun identity transcends religious affiliations, being rooted in shared history and kinship. This depiction highlights how Kadazandusun sovereignty extends beyond political autonomy to cultural self-definition within a shifting social landscape.

Kadazandusun identity, as represented in *Esther Esthera*, is not without boundaries but shaped by internal and external factors. The film illustrates how class differences, religious expectations, and language use impose limitations. While the characters belong to the same ethnic group, disparities in wealth and education create divisions, particularly between Sam's affluent family and Sufian's modest background. Language plays a crucial role in defining these boundaries. The predominance of Malay language in the film, with only selective use of Kadazandusun dialects, reflects the challenge of maintaining indigenous linguistic heritage within a national context. This linguistic negotiation reveals the pressures of assimilation and the potential erosion of cultural distinctiveness. However, through the inclusion of traditional attire, religious symbols, and familial rituals within the mise-en-scène, the film reinforces the enduring nature of a core Kadazandusun identity despite these constraints.

Despite fragmentation, *Esther Esthera* ultimately affirms a sense of Kadazandusun community through its emphasis on reconciliation and continuity. The resolution of familial conflict symbolises the resilience of communal bonds, suggesting that identity is preserved not through rigid adherence to tradition but through adaptation while retaining core values. The film's portrayal of religious diversity further illustrates this adaptability. While Esther's conversion initially creates discord, the eventual acceptance of her choice underscores the potential for inclusivity within the community. The film also highlights the significance of shared spaces, such as the family home and religious institutions, as sites of cultural transmission. Through these settings, the telemovie visually and narratively constructs a collective Kadazandusun experience, bridging individual differences to form a cohesive ethnic identity.

The representation of Kadazandusun identity in *Esther Esthera* demonstrates how individual experiences shape a collective image of the ethnic group. By navigating personal struggles related to class, religion, and tradition, the characters reflect broader challenges faced by the Kadazandusun community. The film constructs this identity as both fluid and resilient, defined by shared cultural values rather than uniformity. Through its narrative and mise-en-scène, *Esther Esthera* affirms that while Kadazandusun identity may experience fragmentation, it remains a cohesive and evolving community rooted in historical continuity, cultural adaptability, and communal solidarity.

5.19 The Fourth Cinema in *Esther Esthera*

Filmmaking is a crucial medium for indigenous communities to assert their cultural identity and challenge historical erasure. For the Kadazandusun ethnic group, *Esther Esthera* exemplifies Fourth Cinema's role in asserting their narratives, reclaiming indigenous control, and addressing cultural fragmentation. This analysis examines the film's content, production, and reception to explore how filmmaking enables the Kadazandusun to preserve their heritage while reinforcing a unified sense of identity.

The content of *Esther Esthera* intricately weaves Kadazandusun traditions with contemporary socio-cultural challenges, illustrating the tensions between modernity and indigenous identity. The film centres on the struggles of familial expectations, economic class, and religious conversion, reflecting the broader issues of cultural fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community. Sam, as a patriarch, symbolises the rigid authority of traditional customs, while his daughter Esther's defiance embodies the younger generation's evolving perspectives. This dynamic highlights the internal conflicts faced by the indigenous community concerning continuity and change.

The telemovie production strategically negotiates identity by portraying Kadazandusun characters as active agents rather than passive subjects. Sam's role as a successful businessman disrupts the stereotype of indigenous people as an economically disadvantaged, reinforcing the notion that Kadazandusun individuals are integral to Malaysia's development rather than mere bystanders. Moreover, the interplay of religious imagery, such as Esther's cross necklace and the theological school, underscores the lived reality of faith-based division within the community. By engaging with these thematic elements, the film contributes to the discourse on cultural preservation, advocating for an inclusive and evolving identity that accommodates both tradition and adaptation.

The reception of *Esther Esthera* especially in the mise-en-scène reinforces its cultural authenticity, despite the technical limitations of indigenous filmmaking. The film's setting, costumes, and props work collectively to depict Kadazandusun life, ensuring that visual storytelling remains a significant tool for cultural preservation. The contrasting settings of Sam's affluent home and Sufian's modest residence visually encapsulate class disparities within the community, challenging shallow representations of indigenous people. The inclusion of Universiti Malaysia Sabah and theological institutions further acknowledges the role of education and faith in shaping contemporary Kadazandusun identity.

Through its content, production, and reception, *Esther Esthera* demonstrates the indispensable role of filmmaking in preserving and reinforcing Kadazandusun cultural heritage. The film actively engages with issues of fragmentation, negotiating between tradition and modernity while asserting indigenous agency. By providing a platform for Kadazandusun stories, *Esther Esthera* functions as both a cultural archive and a medium for contemporary discourse.

Fourth Cinema's principles are evident in the film's emphasis on self-representation, linguistic preservation, and thematic complexity. In doing so, the telemovie resists cultural dilution and affirms the Kadazandusun community's ability to define their identity on their own terms. As indigenous filmmaking continues to evolve, its role in sustaining cultural heritage remains vital, ensuring that the stories of indigenous community endure amidst shifting socio-political landscapes. The legacy of films like *Esther Esthera* reinforces the importance of cinema as a tool for cultural survival, fostering a resilient and cohesive indigenous identity in the face of ongoing challenges.

5.20 The Reconciliation in *Esther Esthera* in Strengthening the Kadazandusun Identity

Through the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, *Esther Esthera* serves as a compelling narrative that addresses the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity by grounding its story on real-life experiences. The telemovie explores tensions surrounding societal prejudices, religious divisions, and eventual familial reconciliation within the Kadazandusun community. At its core, the film emphasises how internal biases and socio-economic disparities create divisions among the Kadazandusun people, highlighting the necessity of reconciliation and understanding to bridge these fractures.

The telemovie acknowledges the complexity of Kadazandusun society by depicting economic differences within the community. The stark contrast between Sufian's modest background and Esther's privileged upbringing illustrates the class-based prejudices that persist among the Kadazandusun. Sam, Esther's father, strongly opposes her relationship with Sufian, initially not due to religious or moral concerns but because of Sufian's lower economic status. This prejudice reflects an ingrained hierarchy within the community, where

financial standing dictates social acceptance. However, the film challenges this notion by portraying Sufian's resilience and eventual success as a medical doctor, demonstrating that economic status does not equate to moral or intellectual superiority.

A central theme of the telemovie is the role of family in navigating conflict and reconciliation. Despite their cultural and linguistic diversity, the Kadazandusun people share common familial values, making *Esther Esthera* deeply relatable. Family disagreements, particularly intergenerational conflicts, are inevitable, but unity, love, and mutual understanding must remain at the core of familial relationships. Sam's initial rejection of Esther following her religious conversion exemplifies the deep emotional turmoil that such transitions can provoke. However, his character arc is marked by growth, as he ultimately chooses love over resentment, welcoming his daughter back despite her defiance of his wishes. Similarly, his eventual apology to Sufian signifies the rejection of baseless prejudice, acknowledging that his earlier bias against Sufian's lower economic status was misplaced. This transformation serves as a poignant reminder that unchecked prejudice fosters division and regret.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the telemovie is the willingness of Muslim Kadazandusun actors to portray non-Muslim characters. This demonstrates a broader perspective within the community, acknowledging *Esther Esthera* as a Kadazandusun story that transcends religious boundaries. Rather than catering exclusively to Christian or Muslim audiences, the film presents a narrative that resonates with all Kadazandusun people, addressing the emotional pain and discord that exist within the community. By doing so, *Esther Esthera* asserts that the Kadazandusun, regardless of religious affiliation, remain part of a shared familial and cultural heritage. This approach challenges the notion that interfaith

relationships and conversions must lead to permanent division, instead promoting a vision of unity that accommodates diversity.

Through its nuanced storytelling, *Esther Esthera* encourages Kadazandusun individuals from different backgrounds to come together. The film suggests that, despite internal differences, the Kadazandusun share common experiences, histories, and challenges that should foster solidarity rather than discord. The shared trauma of displacement, economic hardship, and cultural negotiation necessitates ongoing dialogue and reconciliation. By depicting the constant process of negotiation, resolution, and reconciliation, *Esther Esthera* advocates for a collective Kadazandusun identity that embraces its inherent diversity rather than being fractured by it.

Fundamentally, *Esther Esthera* functions as both a reflection of and a response to the complexities of Kadazandusun identity. By addressing class divisions, religious tensions, and familial conflicts, the film portrays the fragmentation within the community while also providing a blueprint for healing and unity. It reinforces the notion that the Kadazandusun are bound not only by shared ancestry but also by a collective commitment to understanding, forgiveness, and cultural preservation. In doing so, the telemovie contributes to strengthening the Kadazandusun Imagined Community, fostering a sense of belonging that transcends socio-economic and religious division.

Esther Esthera offers a nuanced portrayal of the Kadazandusun by addressing the fragmentation of their identity rather than merely emphasising their marginalisation. Through the lens of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community and the principles of Fourth Cinema, the telemovie challenges essentialist representations and constructs a vision of Kadazandusun identity that is dynamic, inclusive, and resilient. Rather than depicting indigenous community as separate from mainstream development, the film illustrates how

Kadazandusun individuals actively engage with socio-economic, cultural, and religious complexities, negotiating their identity within a rapidly modernising Sabah.

The Kadazandusun community has historically faced challenges in consolidating a unified identity due to linguistic, religious, and socio-economic divisions. *Esther Esthera* responds to this fragmentation by constructing an imagined Kadazandusun identity that transcends rigid classifications, instead of portraying it as a fluid and adaptable cultural entity. The film emphasises that identity is not a fixed, homogeneous construct but is continually shaped by interactions with diverse groups.

One of the film's most significant contributions is its depiction of Kadazandusun individuals as integral players in Sabah's multicultural landscape. The interactions between Kadazandusun characters and other ethnic groups, such as Sam's business dealings with Tuan Haji Awang, illustrate how economic participation serves as a unifying factor. These exchanges position the Kadazandusun as stakeholders in broader societal progress, countering narratives that depict them as culturally isolated.

Religious diversity is another site of identity negotiation. The film presents interfaith relationships not as a source of division but as an opportunity for coexistence and dialogue. Esther's conversion to Islam initially creates tensions within her family, particularly with Sam, yet the resolution of these conflicts promotes reconciliation rather than estrangement. This depiction reflects the lived reality of interfaith interactions in Sabah, where religious boundaries are often more fluid compared to the rigid structures in Peninsular Malaysia. By illustrating that religious differences do not necessarily lead to social fragmentation, *Esther Esthera* offers a vision of Kadazandusun identity that is inclusive and evolving.

Linguistic choices further reinforce this imagined identity. While the film predominantly uses standard Malay to reach a national audience, subtle Kadazandusun

linguistic markers ensure the retention of indigenous identity. This strategic negotiation between accessibility and authenticity highlights the adaptability of Kadazandusun culture in engaging with wider Malaysian society without erasing its distinctiveness. Naming conventions in the film also reflect this fluidity; for instance, the use of Sufian—a name typically associated with Islam—for a Christian character challenges the rigid ethnic-religious classifications and affirms the pluralistic nature of Kadazandusun identity.

By addressing the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity, *Esther Esthera* makes a significant contribution to the study of Imagined Community. The film demonstrates how cultural identity can be both cohesive and adaptable, negotiating modernity while maintaining a connection to tradition. Rather than promoting a singular, monolithic indigenous identity, the film constructs a vision of Kadazandusun identity that values familial bonds, economic participation, and religious plurality. This portrayal challenges the assumption that indigenous identity must be defined in opposition to external influences, instead presenting it as an evolving entity shaped by historical continuity and contemporary reality.

Ultimately, *Esther Esthera* functions as both a reflection of indigenous struggles and a testament to the adaptability of Kadazandusun identity. By framing the narrative around reconciliation rather than ideological conflict, the film offers a forward-looking perspective that prioritises unity over division. In doing so, it contributes meaningfully to both Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema studies, demonstrating how indigenous cinema serves as a powerful medium for cultural negotiation, identity formation, and self-determination.

5.21 The Story of Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau (2009)

The plot of this telemovie revolves around a mentally ill man, Ongkukut (played by Adlye Jahisim), who lives in a small Dusun-Muslim community in Keningau. His existence, marked by wandering through the village and rubber farm, is seen as harmless unless he is agitated. The film presents a rich narrative that examines mental health, social responsibility, and the intersection of individual and communal well-being within a close-knit rural setting.

The portrayal of Ongkukut as a vulnerable individual introduces a significant theme: the community's response to mental illness. The village chief (Osman R. Rizam) takes a compassionate approach, requesting that the villagers leave Ongkukut undisturbed as long as he remains calm. This tolerance and understanding toward Ongkukut reflect the inherent value placed on communal care within the Dusun-Muslim society. The chief's leadership exemplifies the importance of safeguarding the dignity of mentally ill individuals, encouraging patience rather than fear or exclusion.

However, the situation takes a turn when a group of teenage girls encounters Ongkukut while he is bathing in the river. Their fear when Ongkukut approaches them illustrates the complex dynamics between perception and reality in how mental illness is viewed. Although Ongkukut's approach is non-violent, the girls' panic reaction is understandable given the unpredictability of his behaviour. This incident sparks tension in the village, initially leading the villagers to blame the girls for provoking Ongkukut. The village chief, however, takes the matter seriously and committed to addressing it during a community meeting, symbolising the role of dialogue in resolving conflicts within traditional community.

A parallel storyline follows Matupai (Justine Azri Gapai), who faces economic hardship and resorts to stealing rubber slabs to pay for his daughter's tuition. This subplot

highlights the economic struggles faced by rural community in Sabah, where individuals are often pushed to desperate measures to provide for their families. Matupai's actions not only undermine the village's economic stability but also introduce a moral dilemma—whether the pressure of poverty justify criminal acts.

The culmination of the plot brings these two narratives together. Matupai's attempt to steal rubber again leads to a confrontation with Ongkukut, who strikes him with a branch, causing Matupai to faint. This scene highlights the unpredictable nature of mental illness while also bringing forth the theme of justice. Ongkukut, who has been largely misunderstood and underestimated by the villagers, acts in a moment of apparent clarity when he witnesses Matupai's wrongdoing. This act propels the villagers to reassess their perceptions of Ongkukut and the role he plays within their community.

The resolution of the film focuses on the village's collective responsibility toward Ongkukut. Once Matupai confesses to his crime, the villagers shift their attention to Ongkukut, recognising that he is in need of professional medical help. The decision to admit him to a mental hospital is made with a heavy heart, as the villagers reflected on their previous misunderstanding of Ongkukut. The farewell scene, where the entire village gathered to bid him goodbye, represents a powerful moment of communal guilt, reconciliation, and solidarity.



Figure 5.18: The front cover of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* telemovie (Source: Ramli, 2009)

5.22 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Application on *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*

5.22.1 The Narrative Analysis of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*

Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau presents a compelling narrative that interrogates mental health, community responsibility, and economic hardship within a rural Kadazandusun-Muslim society. The film offers a nuanced depiction of mental illness in an indigenous setting, illustrating the tension between compassion and social stigma. Through the central character, Ongkukut, the narrative examines the complexities of traditional communal responses to mental illness, revealing both an ingrained sense of tolerance and the limitations of informal support systems in addressing such conditions.

The film's dual narrative structure juxtaposes Ongkukut's marginalisation with Matupai's economic desperation, creating a parallel exploration of vulnerability within the Kadazandusun community. Matupai, who resorts to stealing rubber slabs to fund his daughter's education, embodies the stark economic realities of rural life, where financial

hardship often forces individuals into moral dilemmas. This contrast highlights the intersections of mental illness and socio-economic distress, both of which are inadequately addressed within the community's traditional framework.

A central narrative device is the role of the village chief, who serves as a significant person that holds the community together. His measured approach towards Ongkukut and his efforts to mediate communal tensions demonstrate his crucial role in maintaining harmony within the village. His leadership, rooted in patience and restorative justice, reflects the importance of traditional authority in preserving social cohesion. The decision to send Ongkukut to a mental hospital is not a sign of the Kadazandusun community's weakness but rather an act of genuine care for the sick. Recognising that the village lacks the necessary resources to provide proper medical attention, the chief ensures that Ongkukut receives professional help rather than leaving him vulnerable to neglect or misunderstanding. This decision underscores the chief's moral responsibility and his commitment to the well-being of all members of the community, reinforcing the necessity of compassionate leadership in adapting to changing societal needs while maintaining traditional values.



Figure 5.19: The village chief is the first step forward in facing problem. Furthermore, he treats everyone equally, especially those whom outcast by the society (Source: Ramli, 2009)

The film's resolution, marked by Ongkukut's departure, is bittersweet. While it acknowledges the village's evolving perspective on mental health, it also signals an unresolved tension between traditional care and institutional intervention. Rather than signifying a fundamental shift in societal attitudes, the conclusion suggests a reluctant concession to modernity's demands. *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* thus challenges romanticised portrayals of indigenous harmony, instead foregrounding the socio-economic and ethical struggles that shape contemporary Kadazandusun society.

5.22.2 The Mise-en-Scène Analysis of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*

The mise-en-scène of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* plays a crucial role in portraying the authenticity of the Kadazandusun community, reinforcing the film's narrative and cultural significance. The setting is deeply rooted in the rural landscape of Keningau, Sabah, with scenes taking place in the village, inside homes, by the river, in the rubber plantation, and at the village hall. Each location contributes to an authentic depiction of a functioning indigenous village. The rural environment not only provides a realistic backdrop but also enhances the film's thematic elements, reflecting socio-cultural realities while subtly addressing the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity through its portrayal of tradition and modernity.

The attire and costumes effectively mirror the daily lives of the villagers, reinforcing the film's commitment to realism. The villagers are dressed in practical clothing suited to their lifestyle, whether navigating the village or working on their farms and plantations. A notable cultural representation is the depiction of women wearing only sarongs while bathing at the river, a common practice among the Kadazandusun. This aspect of the mise-en-scène is significant as it preserves the authenticity of indigenous traditions. Moreover, Ongkukut's

portrayal as a mentally ill individual is visually distinguished through his appearance. His unkempt hair, dirty clothes, and soiled face create a striking image of his marginalisation within the community, effectively communicating his struggles and societal alienation.

The acting performance contributes significantly to the film's authenticity. Under the direction of Ramli Ahmad, the cast delivers naturalistic performances, with body language and dialogue appearing organic rather than scripted. The indigenous Dusun language is used authentically, avoiding artificial and forced cultural representation. The expanded cast, in comparison to Ahmad's previous work *Esther Esthera*, allows for a more dynamic portrayal of the village as a living, breathing community. The village chief's performance is particularly noteworthy, as he embodies the role of a responsible and compassionate leader, ensuring the well-being of all villagers, including the marginalised. Matupai's portrayal of financial frustration and the extras' engagement as villagers contribute to the immersive depiction of a real Dusun-Muslim community in Sabah. These interactions highlight the broader struggle between traditional Kadazandusun values and external influences, subtly acknowledging the fragmentation of their cultural identity.

Lighting and props play a functional role in the film's visual storytelling. The lighting remains relatively simple, particularly in night scenes, where limited illumination enhances the film's emotional depth. This is exemplified in the night watch sequence, where the interplay of darkness and dim lighting amplifies the villagers' feelings of uncertainty and disbelief as they grapple with the unexpected occurrence of theft. The minimalistic use of lighting intensifies emotions and fosters a suspenseful atmosphere.

Cinematography in *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* employs fundamental techniques, including close-ups, medium shots, full shots, and occasional long shots to showcase the village landscape. Ramli Ahmad strategically frames specific scenes to convey deeper

meanings, demonstrating his growth as a director. One such example is the village chief's confrontation with Ongkukut when he chases the girls from the river. The chief's immediate action of placing himself between Ongkukut and the girls visually underscores his role as a protector and problem solver. His ability to de-escalate rather than intensify the situation reinforces the film's message on the necessity of capable leadership within the Kadazandusun community. Ahmad's emphasis on this dynamic suggests an underlying advocacy for strong, responsible leaders who prioritise the welfare of indigenous people. This scene also reflects the cultural tensions within Kadazandusun identity, as the film navigates the intersection of indigenous customs, leadership, and shifting societal values.

5.22.3 The Textual Analysis of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*

The telemovie *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* explores the tension between tradition and modernity, particularly in language use and leadership roles. The film's extensive use of the Dusun language anchors it culturally, reinforcing the Kadazandusun-Muslim community's identity against the increasing dominance of Malay. This linguistic shift is evident in the generational division, where older villagers primarily speak Dusun, while younger individuals incorporate Malay, reflecting broader socio-cultural integration influenced by national education policy (Noraini & Esmaeil, 2017). This transition is visually represented through mise-en-scène, where intergenerational conversations in communal spaces symbolise the negotiation between preserving linguistic heritage and adapting to contemporary realities.

Leadership emerges as another site of contest. The village chief embodies traditional governance, prioritising dialogue and social cohesion over punitive measures. His response to Ongkukut's disruptive behaviour and Matupai's economic struggles reflects a restorative

approach balancing individual welfare with communal stability. His central positioning in key scenes highlights his role as both mediator and cultural custodian. His decision to send Ongkukut for psychiatric treatment, while pragmatic, signifies external intervention into indigenous mental health practices. This moment encapsulates the broader negotiation between cultural self-sufficiency and the need for external support to address contemporary challenges.

Perseverance is a central theme, reflected in Ongkukut's mental illness and Matupai's economic hardship. Ongkukut's daily struggle for survival is reinforced through mise-en-scène, with repeated imagery of his isolation against the backdrop of communal life. This contrast underlines both his marginalisation and the village's silent tolerance, illustrating the thin boundary between acceptance and alienation. The turning point—Ongkukut's intervention in Matupai's theft—redefines his role, shifting his previously dismissed presence into a significant moral reckoning for the community.

Matupai's lack of perseverance is rooted in economic desperation, driven by his daughter's educational needs. His decision to steal rubber slabs stresses the moral dilemmas faced by economically disadvantaged community, where survival often conflicts with ethical and communal values. His eventual confession, mediated by the village chief, exemplifies the Kadazandusun community's resilience—where moral failings are acknowledged and reconciled through collective responsibility rather than punitive justice.



Figure 5.20: Matupai is troubled because he is unable to pay for his daughter's tuition, which ultimately leads him to steal villager's rubber slabs (Source: Ramli, 2009)



Figure 5.21: The village chief meeting with the villagers to address and find solution for their current problems (Source: Ramli, 2009)

Self-definition within *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* is shaped by both individual transformation and the evolving identity of the Kadazandusun-Muslim community. Ongkukut, initially an outcast, gains recognition as his actions provoke deeper reflections on justice and care. His departure for psychiatric treatment is met with communal sorrow, symbolising the village's recognition of its limitations in addressing mental health. This moment serves as an implicit commentary on cultural fragmentation, highlighting the inadequacy of traditional communal care in the face of medical modernity.

The film's shifting linguistic landscape further emphasises this fragmentation. The younger generation's preference for Malay over Dusun signifies not only a linguistic transition but also an evolving cultural identity increasingly shaped by national narratives rather than indigenous traditions. Mise-en-scène illustrates the elders' role in passing down heritage through communal gatherings and shared labour in rubber plantations. These interactions symbolise intergenerational knowledge transmission, reinforcing the elders' role as cultural custodians. However, challenges in this process are evident, as younger characters are frequently depicted in spaces where Malay dominates, illustrating the struggle to maintain linguistic and cultural continuity amid external influences.

In conclusion, *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* portrays the Kadazandusun community as navigating the delicate balance between preservation and change. Through its narrative structure, mise-en-scène, and linguistic choices, the film highlights the tensions between cultural continuity and transformation, acknowledging both indigenous resilience and the adaptations necessary for survival in a modernising world.

5.23 The Imagined Community in *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*

The telemovie presents a fragmented yet interconnected portrayal of Kadazandusun identity, shaped by socio-economic struggles, cultural traditions, and shifting communal values. Drawing upon Anderson's concept of the Imagined Community, the film illustrates how individual narratives contribute to a collective ethnic image. Despite variations in experience, shared cultural elements reinforce a broader sense of belonging.

Kadazandusun identity is constructed through language, customs, and shared struggles. The predominant use of Dusun serves as a crucial marker, distinguishing the community from external influences while reinforcing heritage connections. Even as

younger generations incorporate Malay into their speech, Dusun remains dominant in communal settings, particularly among elders. Traditional customs, such as conflict resolution and the village chief's role as a moral guide, further cemented this imagined connection. Mise-en-scène, depicting rural life, agricultural work, and collective participation in social matters, visually reinforces cultural continuity despite economic and generational shifts.

Sovereignty is explored through village leadership and decision-making. The village chief's governance prioritises social cohesion and restorative justice, reflecting indigenous authority structures. His mediation in Ongkukut's mental illness and Matupai's economic desperation exemplifies a governance model distinct from external legal frameworks. However, his decision to send Ongkukut for psychiatric treatment acknowledges the limitations of traditional systems. This moment encapsulates the broader reality of maintaining cultural sovereignty while engaging with external institutions to address modern challenges. Rather than signifying erosion, this adaptation reflects an evolving assertion of agency that balances preservation with pragmatic change.

Socio-economic constraints define the community's limitations. The rural setting, reliant on agriculture and rubber plantations, underscores economic marginalisation and restricted access to education and healthcare. Matupai's financial desperation exemplifies these struggles, where survival often necessitates moral compromises. Similarly, Ongkukut's exclusion due to mental illness highlights the constraints of traditional support systems. Despite these hardships, Kadazandusun identity remains resilient, sustained by communal strength and adaptive strategies.

A strong sense of community is evident in collective responses to crises and shared cultural expressions. The village operates as a cohesive unit, where individual actions have

broader communal implications. Matupai's theft is resolved through mediation rather than punishment, underscoring an indigenous justice approach that prioritises restoration. Traditional practices, such as attire, agricultural labour, and river rituals, further establish communal identity. Even Ongkukut, though marginalised, remains a subject of concern rather than outright rejection, reflecting a nuanced approach to social inclusion. His departure for treatment elicits collective sorrow, symbolising both the village's recognition of its limitations and its underlying sense of care and responsibility.

Through these elements, *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* constructs a complex yet unified representation of Kadazandusun identity. While individuals navigate tensions between tradition and modernity, shared cultural markers—language, customs, governance, and communal bonds—forge a cohesive ethnic image. The film's portrayal of resilience, adaptation, and collective responsibility highlights the dynamic nature of Kadazandusun identity, demonstrating that despite fragmentation, a broader sense of belonging endures. Aligning individual experiences with a larger communal narrative, the telemovie contributes to an evolving yet enduring portrayal of Kadazandusun identity within the changing socio-cultural landscape of Sabah.

5.24 The Fourth Cinema in Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau

Filmmaking is a powerful tool for preserving and reinforcing cultural heritage, especially for indigenous communities facing socio-cultural fragmentation. As an example of Fourth Cinema, *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* asserts indigenous identity, navigates modern influences, and confronts the challenges of cultural sustainability. Through its content, production process, and audience reception, the film plays a pivotal role in maintaining the Kadazandusun ethnic group's sense of unity and continuity while

acknowledging the tensions arising from external influences and socio-economic transformations.

The content of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* centres on themes crucial to Kadazandusun identity, including mental health, economic hardship, communal responsibility, and leadership. The film critically portrays the lived experiences of the Kadazandusun-Muslim community, offering an authentic representation of their struggles while simultaneously affirming their cultural resilience. The narrative highlights the fragmentation of traditional support structures, particularly in addressing mental illness and economic despair, yet it also presents indigenous governance through the village chief's role as a mediator. This character embodies the endurance of traditional leadership models, reinforcing cultural identity amidst changing circumstances. Furthermore, the film's extensive use of the Dusun language acts as a counter-narrative to the increasing dominance of Malay in national discourse. Language, as a key cultural marker, is embedded within the dialogues and communal interactions, preserving linguistic heritage while illustrating the generational shift towards bilingualism. This linguistic dynamic reflects the broader struggle of indigenous communities to maintain their cultural essence while adapting to modern realities.

In terms of production, *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* adheres to the principles of Fourth Cinema by prioritising indigenous storytelling, community engagement, and an aesthetic rooted in local authenticity. The mise-en-scène captures the rural environment of Keningau, using natural settings such as the village hall, river, and rubber plantations to reinforce the film's cultural legitimacy. Costuming and daily practices, including traditional bathing customs and agricultural labour, further ground the film in the material reality of Kadazandusun life. *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* employs a naturalistic approach to

performance, with actors delivering organic and believable portrayals. The direction by Ramli Ahmad avoids overt dramatisation, instead allowing the narrative to unfold through everyday interactions, conflicts, and resolutions that reflect the community's internal negotiations between tradition and modernity. By involving local actors and maintaining fidelity to the indigenous socio-cultural landscape, the film asserts the importance of self-representation in sustaining cultural continuity.

Audience reception plays a crucial role in determining the impact of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* in preserving Kadazandusun heritage. As a telemovie produced within a localised framework, the film is primarily intended for Kadazandusun audiences, who engage with its themes on a personal and communal level. Its portrayal of marginalised voices, including those suffering from mental illness and economic distress, challenges dominant narratives that often overlook the complexities of indigenous existence. Through its emphasis on restorative justice and collective responsibility, the film fosters a dialogue within the Kadazandusun community regarding the necessity of cultural adaptation while maintaining core traditions. Moreover, the film contributes to the wider discourse on indigenous representation in Malaysian cinema, serving as an assertion of identity in an industry predominantly shaped by Malay-centric narratives. The reception of the film among indigenous viewers underscores the significance of storytelling as a method of cultural preservation, enabling audiences to see their realities reflected on screen and reinforcing a sense of belonging.

One of the most pressing issues addressed in *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* is the fragmentation of Kadazandusun identity due to socio-economic pressures and linguistic assimilation. The film directly engages with this concern by illustrating the tensions between traditional communal values and the necessity of external interventions, such as professional

psychiatric care for Ongkukut. This decision, while practical, highlights the limitations of indigenous care systems, yet it is framed not as a failure but as an evolution of responsibility. Similarly, Matupai's financial desperation reflects the broader economic challenges faced by rural Kadazandusun communities, where survival often necessitates moral compromises. These narratives serve as a critical reflection on the difficulties of cultural preservation in the face of modern economic and institutional demands. However, rather than portraying this fragmentation as an irreversible loss, the film suggests that cultural resilience lies in adaptability—maintaining indigenous identity while embracing necessary change.

In essence, *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* demonstrates how filmmaking functions as a cultural repository for the Kadazandusun people. By capturing their language, customs, governance, and communal struggles, the film preserves indigenous knowledge and fosters intergenerational dialogue. The engagement with contemporary challenges, rather than a static depiction of tradition, allows the film to serve as a bridge between past and present, ensuring that Kadazandusun identity remains dynamic rather than obsolete. Fourth Cinema, as demonstrated in this work, provides a crucial space for indigenous voices to articulate their histories, experiences, and aspirations on their own terms. As external pressures continue to shape the realities of indigenous community, films like *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* become indispensable in reinforcing cultural cohesion, ensuring that the Kadazandusun identity endures amidst the transformations of the modern world.

5.25 Reinforcing Kadazandusun Identity through Leadership and Community in *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*

Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau strengthens Kadazandusun identity by addressing community fragmentation. Set in a small Dusun-Muslim village in Keningau, the film

explores the complexities of Kadazandusun society through themes of mental health, poverty, and crime driven by desperation. Rather than portraying a monolithic indigenous identity, the telemovie highlights the diverse experiences and challenges faced by its characters, thereby offering a nuanced reflection of the Kadazandusun reality. The interplay between Ongkukut's mental illness, Matupai's economic hardship, and the village's social dynamics underscores the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of this fragmentation, demonstrating how such issues manifest even within a close-knit community.

A key contribution of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* to Kadazandusun identity lies in its portrayal of competent leadership. The village chief emerges as an essential figure who unites the villagers despite their varied experiences and perspectives. His ability to demonstrate compassion, tolerance, negotiation, and decisive action ensures the preservation of social cohesion, exemplifying the qualities necessary for effective governance within the Kadazandusun community. The chief's response to Ongkukut's mental illness—prioritising care over neglect—and his mediation in Matupai's transgression highlight the necessity of balanced leadership. This central theme of leadership extends beyond the film's narrative, serving as an allegory for the broader Kadazandusun community, which comprises 45 distinct ethnic subgroups. Just as the village chief binds his people together, the Kadazandusun require a unifying leader who can bridge differences, foster acceptance, and reinforce a shared identity. The telemovie suggests that while cultural and linguistic variations exist within the community, the ultimate goal is to acknowledge these differences while recognising a common heritage, akin to members of an extended family who share a land, face similar struggles, and work towards collective solutions.

Another crucial aspect of *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* is its portrayal of the Dusun-Muslim community, a subgroup that, despite its religious alignment with the Malay-majority

bumiputera of Peninsular Malaysia, maintains strong indigenous cultural practices. This is evident in the characters' use of the Dusun language, which remains prevalent among the elders, even as younger generations incorporate Malay into their speech. This linguistic dynamic reflects both reassurance and concern—the elders serve as custodians of tradition, yet the gradual shift towards Malay among the youth signals the potential erosion of indigenous linguistic heritage. The film thus highlights the urgent need for cultural preservation, raising awareness of the delicate balance between modernisation and the retention of indigenous identity.

The telemovie further emphasises the role of leadership in safeguarding Kadazandusun culture. While the youth in the film may not be entirely proficient in their indigenous language, they nonetheless respect and adhere to the guidance of the village chief. This dynamic suggests that a strong intergenerational bond remains, which can facilitate the transmission of Kadazandusun traditions, values, and linguistic heritage. The film subtly advocates for a structured approach to cultural preservation, wherein the older generation takes an active role in mentoring and nurturing a sense of identity among the youth. By fostering such relationships, the film implies that the Kadazandusun can reinforce their collective identity and encourage the younger generation to embrace a homogenous Kadazandusun identity, including the adoption of an official dialect. This linguistic and cultural unification is essential in ensuring the continuity of Kadazandusun heritage amidst external pressures and socio-political changes.

Furthermore, *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* contributes to the concept of the Imagined Community by reinforcing a shared Kadazandusun identity, despite the socio-economic and cultural fragmentation within the group. The film's depiction of linguistic diversity and leadership structures reflects the broader negotiations of identity that indigenous

communities face in a modernising society. By illustrating the villagers' interconnected struggles and their reliance on traditional governance, the telemovie frames the Kadazandusun as a collective entity that, despite internal differences, remains bound by shared customs, values, and historical experiences.

Additionally, the film aligns with the principles of Fourth Cinema, a framework that highlights indigenous storytelling and self-representation in filmmaking. *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* asserts the agency of the Kadazandusun people by portraying their lived realities through an indigenous lens, moving away from external narratives that often marginalise or romanticise their experiences. The film's use of the Dusun language, its focus on community-driven solutions, and its nuanced portrayal of leadership exemplify Fourth Cinema's role in cultural preservation and identity assertion.

In conclusion, *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* provides a critical examination of Kadazandusun identity by portraying the tensions between tradition and modernity, fragmentation and unity, as well as linguistic continuity and change. By showcasing the complexities of the community's socio-economic struggles, the necessity of competent leadership, and the evolving linguistic landscape, the telemovie underscores the resilience of Kadazandusun culture. It offers a compelling argument for the importance of leadership in uniting the Kadazandusun people, reinforcing shared cultural values, and ensuring the intergenerational transfer of heritage. In doing so, the film contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse on indigenous identity in Malaysia, highlighting the need for proactive cultural preservation in the face of contemporary challenges.

CHAPTER 6

ILLUMINATING THE KADAZANDUSUN IDENTITY AND BRIDGING ITS FRAGMENTATION THROUGH THE TELEMOVIES OF ALFRED UJIN AND MARC ABBAS

6.1 Alfred Ujin's Background

Alfred Ujin was born in Tambunan in 1978 and has resided in Keningau with his wife since their marriage. Initially working in the tourism industry, he later transitioned into filmmaking, with his first involvement in the industry as an actor in the telemovie *Proton Saga Kelabu* in the early 2000s. This marked the beginning of his journey into Kadazandusun filmmaking.

In 2006, Ujin attended *Perkampungan Filem*, a film workshop organised by renowned filmmaker Tony Francis Gitom, held in Suok, Penampang. He discovered the workshop through a newspaper advertisement and decided to participate— A decision that has profoundly shaped his future career. Under the mentorship of Tony Francis Gitom and Ramli Ahmad, Ujin received essential training in filmmaking, working both as a crew member and an actor in several telemovies produced as part of the workshop.

For the next four years, Ujin actively participated in *Perkampungan Filem*, honing his skills and mastering the fundamentals of filmmaking. By 2009, he took the decisive step of directing and producing his first independent telemovie, *Kobilangan* (translated as *Warrior*). The production posed significant challenges, as it was made on a modest budget of RM5,000 and filmed using a MiniDV camera. Despite these limitations, *Kobilangan* was successfully released on VCD and resonated with local audiences (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018). Drawing on the skills and knowledge acquired from

Tony Francis Gitom's workshop, Ujin successfully completed the film, which became a commercial success in the Kadazandusun market in Sabah. This achievement encouraged him to further pursue filmmaking as a full-time career.

Building on the success of *Kobilangan*, Ujin secured funding from Sky-Laser Enterprise to produce two sequels, *Kobilangan 2* and *Kobilangan 3*. His deep interest in Kadazandusun heritage and culture significantly influenced the *Kobilangan* series. Conducting his own research into the early Kadazandusun warrior culture in the Keningau district, he integrated historical elements into the narrative of the telemovies. The *Kobilangan* series stands as a testament to Ujin's commitment to portray Kadazandusun identity and history through film.



Figure 6.1: Picture of Alfred Ujin during personal interview in 2018

6.2 Alfred Ujin's Perspective on Kadazandusun Filmmaking

By 2019, Alfred Ujin had established himself as a prominent filmmaker in the Kadazandusun community, producing notable telemovies such as *Cinta Budak Kampung, Samsengkah Aku, Jejak,* and *Kadamaian*. His contributions to Kadazandusun cinema were further recognised when he won first place in the 2017 United Sabah Dusun Association (USDA) competition for his short film *Tinaruku* (*My People*). This short feature highlights

the importance of preserving the Kadazandusun language, a recurring theme in Ujin's work. Through *Tinaruku*, he highlighted the declining use of the Kadazandusun language among the younger generation, reinforcing his commitment to cultural preservation. By 2017, he had also established his own production company, Kinabalu Motion Pictures, based in Keningau, Sabah (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018).

Ujin's filmmaking is deeply rooted in his Kadazandusun heritage, using his cultural background as the foundation for his narratives. He consistently portrays Kadazandusun culture as a means of representation, appreciation, and preservation. Ujin has expressed his deliberate efforts to incorporate traditional elements, particularly the indigenous language, into his films:

> I always try to include traditional elements that emphasise the uniqueness of our native language and culture. (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018)

For Ujin, the Kadazandusun language is a central component of his films, serving as a crucial element in preserving and authentically depicting Kadazandusun identity. By prioritising the use of indigenous language, he aims to offer a "traditional" and "authentic" representation of Kadazandusun culture in the medium of film (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018).

Moreover, Ujin distinguishes Kadazandusun culture from other ethnic groups in Malaysia, asserting that each has its own unique forms of cultural expression. He emphasises the importance of specific cultural greetings within the Dusun community, stating:

> If we visit someone's home, we say *assalamualaikum* as a greeting… For the Dusun people, we say *Bah, talib pe* (We're passing through), *manau po* (We're leaving). It

> is a must, because it is a part of our culture, something we learn from an early age. (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018)

By highlighting these everyday cultural practices, Ujin reinforces his dedication to preserving and authentically portraying Kadazandusun identity on screen. His work ensures that these cultural details are not lost but rather passed down through cinematic representation.

Ujin's approach to filmmaking is deeply personal, often drawing inspiration from his surroundings and cultural experiences. However, his commitment to authenticity has not always been shared by other filmmakers. In 2018, he publicly criticised the Astro-produced film *Tombiruo: Penunggu Rimba* (2017), which purported to tell a Sabah indigenous story but, in his view, failed to authentically represent the Kadazandusun people. His criticism focused on factual inaccuracies, including the geographical misplacement of Mount Kinabalu in Keningau and the incorrect depiction of the *Bobolian* (shaman) dialect. Ujin noted that the film used a mixture of Kadazan and Dusun Tindal dialects, which were unfamiliar to people from Keningau. He argued that non-indigenous filmmakers often exhibit a lack of care when portraying Sabah's indigenous communities:

> The negative aspect of a non-indigenous filmmaker making a Sabah indigenous film is the carelessness with which the native people are depicted. (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018).

This statement reflects Ujin's broader concern about the tendency of non-indigenous filmmakers to adapt indigenous narratives to appeal to broader audiences in Malaysia. This often results in the compromise of cultural accuracy and indigenous representation in the process.

Ujin's success with the *Kobilangan* series further underscores his commitment to the authentic portrayal of Kadazandusun culture. His first independent telemovie, *Kobilangan* (2009), was based on his own research into early Kadazandusun warrior culture in the Keningau district. While the sequels, *Kobilangan 2* and *Kobilangan 3*, were fictional, they continued to explore Kadazandusun warrior traditions. Although Ujin exercised some creative licence—particularly in costume design, to comply with Malaysian film censorship standards—he remained focused on accurately depicting Kadazandusun culture. Despite financial constraints, with a budget of RM5,000 for *Kobilangan 1*, RM10,000 for *Kobilangan 2*, and RM30,000 for *Kobilangan 3*, he strived to present his heritage as authentically as possible (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018).

6.3 The Story of *Kobilangan 2* (2011)

The central theme of *Kobilangan 2* is redemption, embodied by the character Gumburod, a bandit whose violent actions have inflicted significant harm on others. The film opens with Gumburod infiltrating another village, where he is confronted by Andasak and his warriors. After a fierce battle, Gumburod is ultimately defeated, outnumbered by Andasak's men. Though they are prepared to execute him, a female elder intervenes, ordering that he be thrown into the river instead. This moment marks the beginning of Gumburod's journey towards redemption, as the narrative shifts to a series of flashbacks depicting his past wrongdoings alongside his gang, including the assault of Lindai, Balang's sister.

Lindai's attack results in overwhelming guilt and shame, ultimately leading her to the tragic decision to take her own life. Her story sets the emotional stakes for the film, illustrating the far-reaching consequences of Gumburod's actions. Meanwhile, Andasak and

his warriors, emboldened by their victory over Gumburod, begin preparing for further conquests under Andasak's command. In their pursuit of power, they engage in rigorous martial arts training and turn to black magic, guided by the *Bobolian* (shaman), to enhance their combat abilities.

However, *Kobilangan 2* does not glorify this cycle of violence and power. As the story progresses, Gumburod begins to question the futility of killing and warfare. His change of heart serves as the film's pivotal moment of redemption. Rather than continuing his path of destruction, Gumburod chooses to promote peace and unity among the villagers he once terrorised. This transformation underscores the film's broader message—that redemption is possible, even for those who have committed grave wrongs.

The conclusion of *Kobilangan 2* sees Gumburod living peacefully within the village, having renounced his former ways. In contrast, Balang, still deeply affected by his sister's tragic fate, decided to leave his village. His departure, as his parents bid him farewell, signals the film's closing moment while setting the stage for future instalments in the *Kobilangan* series.



Figure 6.2: The cover for *Kobilangan 2* VCD (Source: Ujin, 2011)

6.4 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Application on *Kobilangan 2*

6.4.1 The Narrative Analysis of *Kobilangan 2*

The narrative of *Kobilangan 2* provides a compelling exploration of identity, redemption, and the cyclical nature of violence within Kadazandusun cultural history. Alfred Ujin's work presents a deeply rooted engagement with Kadazandusun heritage, particularly through its representation of warrior culture and traditional beliefs. While the film foregrounds individual redemption, it simultaneously offers a broader reflection on fragmentation within Kadazandusun identity, subtly moving towards unity through its storytelling.

At the core of *Kobilangan 2* is the transformation of Gumburod, a bandit whose past misdeeds—particularly the assault of Lindai—serve as the catalyst for his eventual moral reckoning. The film positions his redemption as a central narrative arc, shifting away from a glorification of warrior culture towards an interrogation of its consequences. The

intervention of the female elder, who spares Gumburod from execution, marks a significant departure from the expected cycle of retributive justice, opening a path towards reconciliation and change.

Gumburod's eventual renunciation of violence highlights a thematic move away from the traditional warrior ethos, which has historically shaped Kadazandusun identity. By choosing to leave his past behind and become part of the village, Gumburod shows that change is possible. This suggests that Kadazandusun identity isn't just about past struggles and conflicts but also about growth, renewal, and coming together as a community. This transition offers an implicit critique of the glorification of warrior traditions and suggests that unity can emerge through personal and communal evolution rather than continued violence.

The film's representation of warrior factions and internal conflicts mirrors the historical and cultural fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community. The divisions between Gumburod's past life as a bandit and Andasak's warriors reflect broader tensions within indigenous identity, particularly in the negotiation between tradition and modernity. The fact that Andasak and his men turn to black magic as a means of consolidating their power further complicates the moral landscape of the narrative, raising questions about the ethical implications of power and leadership.

Ujin's decision to weave in elements of spiritual belief, through the role of the *Bobolian* (shaman), highlights the complex interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary identity. Ujin pointed out that many mainstream films get indigenous dialects wrong, which makes it harder to keep cultural identity accurate and authentic (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018). *Kobilangan 2*, however, counteracts this by grounding its dialogue, customs, and narrative conflicts within a distinctly Kadazandusun

worldview, ensuring that its portrayal remains authentic and reflective of the community's own perspectives.

While *Kobilangan 2* does not directly promote a singular Kadazandusun identity, it gently hints that unity can emerge through reflection and the continuation of cultural traditions. Rather than offering a definitive resolution, the film acknowledges that past conflicts leave lasting effects, as reflected in Balang's departure. This unresolved ending recognises the complexities of fragmentation while leaving room for the possibility of future harmony.

Through Gumburod's transformation and his acceptance into the village, Ujin illustrates that healing is possible even within a fractured community. His shift from an outsider figure to an integrated member of society signals a nuanced movement towards unity—not through force or dominance, but through mutual understanding and ethical introspection. This approach aligns with Ujin's broader filmmaking philosophy, which emphasises the importance of preserving indigenous narratives while allowing them to evolve in ways that reflect contemporary Kadazandusun experiences (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018).

Kobilangan 2 serves as both a reflection on and a response to the complexities of Kadazandusun identity. Ujin's narrative choices—particularly in his depiction of redemption, moral ambiguity, and cultural specificity—illustrate the ongoing negotiation between historical tradition and contemporary identity within the Kadazandusun community. By subtly challenging the warrior ethos and presenting an alternative path towards reconciliation, the film moves towards an implicit unity, suggesting that Kadazandusun heritage is not static but continuously reshaped by those who seek to understand and preserve it.

6.4.2 The Mise-en-Scène Analysis of *Kobilangan 2*

Mise-en-scène is a filmmaking technique that shapes everything you see on screen (Napat & Norsiah, 2017), encompassing setting, costume, performance, lighting, and the cinematography. In *Kobilangan 2*, directed by Alfred Ujin, the mise-en-scène plays a crucial role in authentically representing the pre-colonial Kadazandusun community, despite financial and technical limitations. This analysis critically examines the film's mise-en-scène, highlighting how it conveys historical accuracy, cultural identity, and thematic depth.

The film's setting effectively transports the audience to a pre-colonial Kadazandusun village, depicting a remote community deeply embedded within the jungle. The inclusion of simple huts and traditional houses enhances the historical realism of the film, providing insight into the indigenous way of life prior to colonial influence. The natural environment, with its dense foliage and rugged terrain, not only establishes authenticity but also reinforces themes of survival and communal resilience. By grounding the narrative within this landscape, Ujin successfully immerses viewers in the historical and cultural milieu of the Kadazandusun people.

Given the film's modest budget of RM 10,000, the costume design strikes a careful balance between authenticity and practicality. Most characters wear plain, simple garments that reflect the traditional attire of the Kadazandusun people. However, these plain outfits are inspired by historical references, as past evidence confirms the attire of Kadazandusun warriors.



Figure 6.3: A picture of characters in *Kobilangan 2* (left) alongside an image of Si Gunting, a lesser-known Kadazandusun warrior, and his attire. He is remembered for his confrontation with the British North Borneo Chartered Company (Source: Fong, 2018)

Due to financial constraints, creative solutions were employed to achieve the desired physical aesthetic of the characters. Rather than requiring actors to undergo rigorous physical training, makeup was used to create the illusion of muscular physiques among the male warriors. This technique, though unconventional, aligns with the film's intention to depict the Kadazandusun people as strong and courageous. The emphasis on physical strength serves as a metaphor for the community's ability to protect itself from threats, reinforcing values of unity and perseverance that resonate with contemporary Kadazandusun audiences.



Figure 6.4: An example of an alternative method of portraying a desired physique using make-up (Source: Ujin, 2011)

The performances in *Kobilangan 2* are commendable although not without flaw, particularly given that the majority of the cast consists of first-time actors. While some performances may lack refinement, the natural delivery of dialogue ensures an overall sense of authenticity. As both director and actor, Ujin brought prior experience to his role, lending a degree of credibility to the character he portrayed.

One of the film's most striking achievements is its exclusive use of the Dusun language. This linguistic choice is executed seamlessly, with actors such as Ejin Dinting, Primus Gondili, and Meeda Hamzani delivering their lines fluently and convincingly. Their ability to engage in *talaala* (poetic recitation and please refer to the examples in Appendix A, page 332) further enriches the film's cultural authenticity. By prioritising the Kadazandusun language, *Kobilangan 2* functions as a celebration of indigenous identity, ensuring that the language and traditions remain visible in contemporary Malaysian cinema.

As with many independent films, *Kobilangan 2* faces significant challenges in terms of lighting due to budget constraints. Ujin employs a desaturated colour palette, likely as a stylistic decision to evoke a historical tone, though this also reflects the technical limitations

of the production. This approach enhances the film's visual texture, contributing to a sense of antiquity and realism.

However, the limitations become apparent in night scenes, where minimal lighting results in reduced visibility. Despite these constraints, Ujin demonstrates ingenuity in using available resources to evoke mood and atmosphere. He strategically manipulates lighting to enhance the ominous presence of the antagonist, reinforcing the thematic conflict between good and evil. This careful use of lighting underscores the film's central message: while the Kadazandusun community shares a common ancestry, internal divisions and struggles persist, both historically and in contemporary society.



Figure 6.5: Alfred Ujin's use of minimal lighting to create a scene that projects an ominous emotion (Source: Ujin, 2011)

Additionally, the use of props in the telemovie briefly touches on and presents the practice of headhunting (*Sagai*), a historically significant aspect of Kadazandusun warrior culture (Noviatin & Mimi, 2017). Ujin incorporates this element with restraint, acknowledging its importance in representing the historical way of life of the Kadazandusun people. This inclusion highlights their violent past and the survival instincts that defined their ancestors. Through this portrayal, Ujin appears to emphasise the resilience of the

Kadazandusun people, showcasing their ability to endure and thrive in a challenging and often hostile environment.

Cinematography plays a pivotal role in constructing the mise-en-scène, employing a variety of shots—including long, full, medium, and close-ups—to establish visual rhythm. As *Kobilangan 2* is an action movie, the use of handheld camera techniques is evident, bringing the audience closer to the action. Due to financial constraints and the lack of access to affordable camera stabiliser technology during production, handheld cinematography became a practical choice. The shaky camera movement, while sometimes unsteady, serves as an effective stylistic choice to enhance the intensity of fight sequences. Handheld shooting allows for longer takes without disrupting the flow of action, reducing the number of cuts required, particularly in complex fight or brawl scenes. The raw, unfiltered movement of the camera enhances the chaotic and brutal nature of combat, effectively immersing the audience in the disorder of battle. The depiction of fighting is significant, not only as a historical representation of conflict within the Kadazandusun community but also as a symbolic reflection of modern internal struggles within the community—though these now resolved without violence.



Figure 6.6: A handheld technique used in *Kobilangan 2* allows Alfred Ujin to move freely and frame various shots smoothly without the need of cutting (Source: Ujin, 2011)

Ujin's reliance on long takes minimises the need for excessive cuts, particularly during complex fight scenes. This technique ensures continuity and maintains the raw energy of the action. Moreover, the film's cinematography serves a symbolic purpose, mirroring the turbulence of internal strife within the Kadazandusun community. While the historical battles depicted on screen involve physical combat, the underlying theme extends to modern Kadazandusun society, where conflicts manifest in less violent but equally significant forms.

Despite financial and technical limitations, *Kobilangan 2* successfully employs mise-en-scène to convey its historical and cultural narrative. Through authentic settings, carefully considered costumes, and naturalistic performances, Ujin constructs a compelling representation of pre-colonial Kadazandusun society. The film's cinematographic and lighting choices, though constrained by budgetary factors, contribute to its thematic depth and emotional resonance. Ultimately, *Kobilangan 2* stands as an important cultural artefact, preserving and celebrating the identity of the Kadazandusun people through the medium of film.

6.4.3 The Textual Analysis of *Kobilangan 2*

Alfred Ujin's *Kobilangan 2* serves as a cinematic representation of Kadazandusun identity, illustrating a contest/negotiation between historical traditions and contemporary indigenous self-awareness. Through the exclusive use of the Dusun language, the film upholds the importance of linguistic preservation, reinforcing indigenous dialects in an era where national and global languages increasingly dominate. By immersing audiences in a pre-colonial setting, the film allows for a deeper connection with Kadazandusun culture before external influences reshaped linguistic and social practices. Ujin not only resists the erosion of indigenous dialects but also positions the film as a vital cultural artefact that showcases and safeguards Kadazandusun heritage.

The film contextualises the perseverance of the Kadazandusun people by portraying their pre-colonial history, warrior culture, and communal resilience. It critically engages with traditional expectations that Kadazandusun men undergo rigorous martial training from youth, highlighting self-defence as central to their societal roles. The representation of warrior traditions, including headhunting (*Sagai*), reflects the intricate balance between survival, honour, and status in early Kadazandusun communities. The act of taking an enemy's head symbolised martial prowess and communal responsibility for protection. However, Ujin does not romanticise these traditions; rather, he presents them as integral yet evolving aspects of Kadazandusun identity. By showing how the characters struggle with moral choices, the film questions and re-examines these traditions, highlighting how the Kadazandusun people's view of themselves has changed over time.

Self-definition emerges as a central theme, particularly through the character arc of Gumburod. His journey from an outcast bandit to a reintegrated community member symbolises the potential for redemption and unity within a fragmented indigenous identity.

His transformation extends beyond personal redemption, serving as a broader metaphor for the Kadazandusun people's ongoing negotiation of historical and cultural narratives. This aligns with Ujin's filmmaking philosophy, which prioritises the retention and evolution of indigenous storytelling. The inclusion of *Talaala* (Kadazandusun poetry) as an oral tradition further strengthens the theme of self-definition, demonstrating how language and cultural expressions play an essential role in preserving identity.

Fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community is a recurring issue explored in *Kobilangan 2*, particularly in its depiction of internal conflicts among warrior factions. Andasak and his men, who resort to black magic to consolidate power, symbolise divisions within the indigenous social structure. Ujin illustrates how historical tribal conflicts have created lasting fractures, yet he also suggests the potential for reconciliation. The presence of a *Bobolian* (shaman) highlights the spiritual dimension of Kadazandusun identity, portraying both the constructive and destructive aspects of mysticism. This duality reinforces the film's overarching theme of navigating between tradition and moral progression.

Despite acknowledging historical fragmentation, *Kobilangan 2* also highlights the shared cultural heritage of the Kadazandusun people. While internal divisions exist, the telemovie suggests they do not have to define the community's future. The portrayal of unity, particularly in moments of collective decision-making and reconciliation, suggests that cultural preservation is an ongoing process requiring mutual understanding and active participation. The film's mise-en-scène, from historically accurate costumes to its evocative jungle setting, grounds the narrative in a tangible representation of Kadazandusun life, reinforcing its authenticity and cultural significance.

In conclusion, *Kobilangan 2* serves as a critical exploration of Kadazandusun identity through the interconnected themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition.

Ujin's film does not merely depict the past but actively engages with it, interrogating the tensions between historical traditions and contemporary indigenous identity. By foregrounding the Dusun language, warrior customs, oral traditions, and the role of mysticism, the film underscores the necessity of cultural preservation amidst modern challenges. Simultaneously, its narrative—centred on transformation and reconciliation—advocates for a collective indigenous identity that embraces both historical roots and evolving self-awareness. In doing so, *Kobilangan 2* contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous representation in Malaysian cinema, reaffirming the importance of storytelling as a means of cultural continuity and negotiation.

6.5 The Imagined Community in *Kobilangan 2*

The imagined of Kadazandusun identity, though historically fragmented due to geographical, dialectical, and cultural differences, is presented as a unified ethnic group through cinematic representation. *Kobilangan 2* serves as a cultural artefact that reinforces this shared identity by immersing audiences in pre-colonial Kadazandusun traditions. The film's exclusive use of the Dusun language, its portrayal of warrior culture, and its emphasis on communal values contribute to a cohesive vision of Kadazandusun identity. While the various subgroups within the community have distinct dialects and customs, the film presents a broader cultural framework that audiences can relate to, strengthening the perception of a unified ethnic heritage. Through cinema, individual experiences of identity become collective, fostering a wider appreciation of Kadazandusun heritage beyond specific linguistic or regional differences.

The sovereignty of Kadazandusun identity in *Kobilangan 2* is asserted through its resistance to external cultural impositions. Ujin deliberately foregrounds indigenous

narratives, countering mainstream Malaysian cinema's tendency to misrepresent Sabah's indigenous communities. His critique of *Tombiruo: Penunggu Rimba*, for instance, underscores the importance of self-representation in ensuring cultural accuracy. By reclaiming indigenous storytelling, Ujin ensures that Kadazandusun identity is authentically portrayed by members of the community rather than by external filmmakers who lack lived experience of the culture. The film's depiction of the *Bobolian* (shaman) and *Talaala* (poetic recitation) further legitimises Kadazandusun heritage, reinforcing its distinct identity within Malaysia's multicultural landscape. This act of self-representation strengthens the Kadazandusun people's ability to define themselves on their own terms, contributing to a collective sense of cultural sovereignty.

The limited is the extent of the Kadazandusun's culture in Malaysia. Kadazandusun identity is inherently defined by cultural markers that distinguish it from other indigenous and Malaysian ethnic groups. Ujin emphasises this distinction through language and social customs, such as traditional greetings unique to the Dusun people. While Malay greetings such as *assalamualaikum* are widely recognised, the Dusun equivalent (*Bah, talib pe* for arrival and *manau po* for departure) asserts a cultural specificity that differentiates the Kadazandusun from dominant Malay cultural frameworks. The absence of external influences within the film's narrative reinforces this sense of exclusivity, ensuring that Kadazandusun traditions remain central. By focusing on these specific linguistic and cultural elements, *Kobilangan 2* constructs an identity that is distinctly Kadazandusun, affirming its unique place within the broader national context.

While *Kobilangan 2* portrays individual stories of fragmentation—such as Gumburod's journey of redemption and Andasak's moral decline—it ultimately reinforces a collective Kadazandusun identity by highlighting the shared cultural values of the

community. The film's mise-en-scène, including traditional clothing, village settings, and communal rituals, visually unifies different aspects of Kadazandusun life. Despite their internal conflicts, the characters operate within a common cultural framework, particularly through their reliance on the *Bobolian's* spiritual guidance and the warrior ethos central to their historical identity. The film's focus on redemption, respect for elders, and communal survival reflects broader Kadazandusun values, linking personal struggles to a larger cultural narrative. By showcasing these shared traditions, *Kobilangan 2* constructs a cohesive image of the Kadazandusun community, demonstrating that despite historical fragmentation, a collective ethnic consciousness endures through cultural preservation.

Alfred Ujin's *Kobilangan 2* exemplifies how fragmented individual representations of Kadazandusun identity contribute to a unified ethnic image. The film constructs an imagined Kadazandusun identity by reinforcing shared cultural elements, asserts sovereignty through self-representation, defines the community's boundaries, and fosters a sense of belonging through common traditions. While internal conflicts persist, the film ultimately suggests that cultural preservation and storytelling play crucial roles in maintaining ethnic cohesion. In doing so, Ujin's work ensures that Kadazandusun heritage is not only remembered but actively reimagined for contemporary and future generation

6.6 The Fourth Cinema in *Kobilangan 2*

The concept of Fourth Cinema highlights the role of indigenous filmmaking in resisting cultural erasure and reaffirming Indigenous identity. Within this framework, *Kobilangan 2* by Alfred Ujin serves as a critical case study in how filmmaking preserves Kadazandusun heritage, addressing historical fragmentation and reinforcing a collective identity. Through an analysis of content, production, and reception, this paper explores how

Ujin's work exemplifies the core tenets of Fourth Cinema and underlines the significance of film in sustaining the Kadazandusun cultural narrative.

The content of *Kobilangan 2* encapsulates key elements of Kadazandusun identity, particularly through its themes of redemption, warrior culture, and linguistic preservation. Ujin's decision to centre the film on the transformation of Gumburod—a character who evolves from an outcast bandit to a reformed community member—symbolises the potential for Indigenous reconciliation and unity. The film critiques the glorification of warrior traditions while acknowledging their historical significance, presenting a nuanced reflection on identity formation within the Kadazandusun community.

Furthermore, *Kobilangan 2* actively resists the erosion of Indigenous linguistic and cultural practices by incorporating the Dusun language exclusively. This ensures that oral traditions, such as *talaala* (poetic recitation), remain integral to storytelling, counteracting the displacement of native languages by national and global tongues. The inclusion of the *Bobolian* (shaman) in the story shows the clash between modern life and traditional beliefs, an important aspect of Indigenous identity. The film portrays how mystical practices can both help and create divisions, reflecting the real challenge of maintaining cultural traditions while adjusting to contemporary times.

The production process of *Kobilangan 2* aligns with Fourth Cinema principles by demonstrating Indigenous agency in filmmaking. Ujin's background as a Kadazandusun filmmaker, coupled with his experience in the *Perkampungan Filem* workshop, positioned him to challenge dominant cinematic narratives that often misrepresent Indigenous cultures. His critique of the Astro-produced film *Tombiruo: Penunggu Rimba* for its inaccuracies in depicting Kadazandusun dialects and geography reflects a broader concern about the misrepresentation of Indigenous community by non-Indigenous filmmakers. *Kobilangan 2*,

in contrast, reclaims Kadazandusun cultural ownership by prioritising authentic representation in its costume design, language, and setting, despite budgetary constraints.

The film's use of mise-en-scène further reinforces cultural authenticity. The setting—a dense jungle environment reminiscent of pre-colonial Kadazandusun settlements—immerses viewers in a historical context that predates external cultural influences. Additionally, Ujin employs handheld cinematography to evoke an unpolished, documentary-like aesthetic, a technique that enhances the realism of combat sequences while circumventing financial limitations. These stylistic choices mirror the ethos of Fourth Cinema by prioritising Indigenous storytelling methods over mainstream cinematic expectations (Bristowe, 2017).

The reception of *Kobilangan 2* within the Kadazandusun community highlights the role of Indigenous cinema in fostering cultural pride and unity. Its commercial success within the local VCD market illustrates the demand for authentic representations of Kadazandusun history and values. Ujin's decision to independently produce sequels—despite financial constraints—further attests to the film's cultural resonance and the necessity of Indigenous-led storytelling in preserving collective memory.

Moreover, *Kobilangan 2* functions as a counter-narrative to the fragmentation within Kadazandusun identity. The film's depiction of warrior factions, intertribal conflict, and eventual reconciliation serves as an allegory for the community's historical struggles with unity. By centring redemption over retribution, Ujin proposes a model for cultural cohesion that extends beyond the film's diegesis into real-world identity politics. This thematic approach aligns with Fourth Cinema's objective of using film as a site of Indigenous resistance, dialogue, and self-definition.

The film's emphasis on linguistic preservation also resonates with broader efforts to sustain the Kadazandusun language, which faces decline due to increasing linguistic homogenisation. By showcasing everyday linguistic practices—such as traditional greetings unique to Dusun culture—the film ensures that these cultural markers remain visible and valued. This linguistic commitment reflects the ethos of Fourth Cinema, which positions Indigenous languages as critical to the articulation of cultural sovereignty (Murray, 2008).

Kobilangan 2 exemplifies how indigenous filmmaking plays a pivotal role in preserving and reinforcing the Kadazandusun cultural identity. Through its narrative engagement with linguistic heritage, warrior traditions, and Indigenous spirituality, the film actively resists cultural erasure while addressing the historical fragmentation of the Kadazandusun community. The production process, driven by an Indigenous filmmaker with a commitment to authenticity, further ensures that cultural representation remains in the hands of those it seeks to portray. Lastly, the film's reception within Kadazandusun circles underscores its success in fostering a sense of unity and cultural continuity.

By positioning indigenous filmmaking as both a tool for self-definition and a site for cultural negotiation, *Kobilangan 2* aligns with Fourth Cinema's core tenets. It challenges external narratives that misrepresent Kadazandusun heritage while demonstrating how cinema can serve as a repository of cultural knowledge, a means of resistance, and a bridge towards Indigenous unity. In doing so, the film affirms that storytelling remains central to the survival and evolution of Kadazandusun identity in the modern world.

6.7 Redemption in *Kobilangan 2* for Cultural Unity and Resilience in the Kadazandusun Identity

The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework has demonstrated that the Alfred Ujin's *Kobilangan 2* plays a significant role in reinforcing Kadazandusun identity by portraying themes of redemption, cultural unity, and resilience. As a telemovie rooted in Kadazandusun history and traditions, it not only serves as a medium for storytelling but also as a cultural artefact that preserves and strengthens indigenous self-awareness. Through its narrative, character arcs, and mise-en-scène, *Kobilangan 2* contributes to the study of Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema by providing an indigenous perspective on identity formation, historical fragmentation, and collective solidarity.

The telemovie's primary theme revolves around redemption, particularly through the character arc of Gumburod, who initially embodies destruction and violence. As a bandit, Gumburod wreaked havoc on neighbouring villages, perpetuating suffering among his own people. This narrative acknowledges the historical fragmentation of the Kadazandusun community by illustrating the varying moralities exhibited within it. Certain characters, such as Andasak, are willing to harm fellow Kadazandusun for personal gain, highlighting that the community is not free from internal conflicts or ethical corruption. Andasak's use of black magic to assert power highlights the extent of moral decay some are willing to embrace in their pursuit of authority.

However, *Kobilangan 2* does not merely depict internal division—it also foregrounds the potential for self-reflection and transformation. Gumburod's redemption arc is pivotal; he evolves from a violent antagonist to a protector and leader of the very community he once sought to destroy. His character development signifies the Kadazandusun people's capacity for self-improvement, resilience, and moral re-evaluation.

This shift from destruction to unity symbolises the broader necessity for reconciliation within the Kadazandusun community.

Another crucial element of the film is its emphasis on community solidarity through martial arts training. The inclusion of both young and elderly villagers in the training sequences highlights the necessity of intergenerational collaboration in the protection and preservation of Kadazandusun identity. This is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions on indigenous unity, where the effort to foster a cohesive community must extend beyond the leadership of elders to include active participation from younger generations. *Kobilangan 2* suggests that true resilience lies in collective action rather than individual heroism.

The telemovie also conveys the idea that the outside world is inherently dangerous and unfamiliar. However, it simultaneously asserts that the Kadazandusun people are equipped to face such external challenges through unity and preparedness. This theme resonates with modern concerns surrounding the preservation of indigenous culture in an era of rapid globalisation and cultural homogenisation.

While *Kobilangan 2* is deeply rooted in the Dusun identity, Ujin subtly extends the narrative to include the broader indigenous community. Although the Murut ethnic group is not explicitly represented in the film, Ujin's intent to incorporate them into the wider discourse of peace and harmony is evident. By doing so, he advocates for unity among indigenous groups rather than the continued in-fighting. This reinforces the idea that film serves as a powerful medium for fostering collective identity and solidarity among historically fragmented community.



Figure 6.7: Gumburod seeks to bring peace among the warring Indigenous groups in *Kobilangan 2* (Source: Ujin, 2011)

Subtitle translation

Left picture: I*t does not matter whether we are Dusun or Murut.*

Right picture: *We must unite our strength to defend our people.*

The inclusion of *talaala* (poetic recitation) within *Kobilangan 2* underscores the intellectual and artistic depth of pre-colonial Kadazandusun society. Poetry is used not only for emotional expression, such as Besinau's lamentations for his people, but also as a courtship tool between Gumburod and Mindai. This highlights the integral role of oral traditions in indigenous storytelling and social interaction.

However, *Kobilangan 2* also serves as a stark reminder of the declining proficiency in the Kadazandusun language among younger generations. The film implicitly warns that, without active preservation efforts, significant aspects of Kadazandusun heritage—including poetic traditions like *talaala*—risk fading into obscurity. In this sense, the telemovie functions as both a celebration of cultural richness and a call to action for linguistic and artistic preservation.

Beyond individual transformation, *Kobilangan 2* underlines the necessity of unity for the survival of Kadazandusun identity. Without a foundational understanding of shared heritage and a collective approach to cultural preservation, fragmentation will continue to

threaten the community's continuity. The film suggests that without cooperation, the Kadazandusun people risk self-destruction rather than progress. This message is particularly relevant to contemporary indigenous struggles, where divisions—whether linguistic, regional, or ideological—pose significant barriers to collective advancement.

The concept of Imagined Community is particularly evident in *Kobilangan 2*, which constructs a cohesive image of Kadazandusun identity through its exclusive use of the Dusun language, its portrayal of warrior traditions, and its emphasis on communal values. Despite historical and regional fragmentation, the film fosters a unified ethnic consciousness by immersing audiences in a shared cultural framework. This demonstrates how cinema can transform individual experiences of identity into a collective, Imagined Community, strengthening cultural belonging among indigenous audiences.

Furthermore, *Kobilangan 2* aligns with the principles of Fourth Cinema, which centres on indigenous agency in storytelling as a form of cultural resistance. Ujin's critique of the Astro-produced *Tombiruo: Penunggu Rimba* (2017) highlights the tendency of non-indigenous filmmakers to misrepresent Kadazandusun culture. In contrast, *Kobilangan 2* prioritises authentic representation, reinforcing the sovereignty of Kadazandusun identity by ensuring that indigenous narratives are told by indigenous voices. The film's emphasis on linguistic preservation, spiritual beliefs, and historical resilience aligns with the Fourth Cinema's goal of reclaiming indigenous identity through self-representation in media.

Kobilangan 2 serves as both a reflection on and a means of strengthening Kadazandusun identity. Through its exploration of redemption, communal solidarity, and linguistic preservation, the telemovie addresses the historical fragmentation of the Kadazandusun people while advocating for unity and resilience. By incorporating elements

of *talaala*, martial arts training, and Kadazandusun warrior traditions, the film ensures that indigenous cultural practices remain visible in contemporary discourse.

Moreover, its contribution to the study of Imagined Community highlights the power of cinema in constructing a shared cultural identity, while its alignment with Fourth Cinema reinforces the necessity of indigenous-led storytelling. As *Kobilangan 2* demonstrates, without a collective effort towards unity and cultural preservation, the Kadazandusun risk cultural erosion. However, by embracing redemption and cooperation—both within the narrative and beyond—it becomes possible to move towards a future of cultural prosperity rather than fragmentation.

6.8 The Story of *Kobilangan 3* (2012)

The central theme of *Kobilangan 3* is recovery, explored through Balang, a minor character in the previous telemovie who becomes central in this instalment. Having witnessed traumatic events, Balang embarks on a journey of healing by venturing into the jungle to train under a powerful martial arts master. His personal recovery intertwines with the village's broader struggles when a *Bobolian* (Shaman) falls under the influence of a *Rogon* (evil spirit). This possession leads the *Bobolian* to infiltrate Gumburod's village, spreading a mysterious illness among the villagers.

The local healer recognises the illness but explains that the cure lies at the summit of Mount Kinabalu, a perilous journey. Balang volunteers to retrieve it, departing immediately. Meanwhile, Andasak, the antagonist from the previous telemovie, believes Gumburod holds the key to break the curse. He allies with a Murut warrior and launches an attack on Gumburod's village, resulting in a massacre. Many villagers, including Gumburod's wife, are killed, forcing Gumburod to flee into the forest with his newborn son.

As events unfold, Andasak faces opposition from his former disciple, leading to a climactic duel in which Andasak is killed. Balang successfully returns with the cure, administering it to the afflicted and ultimately saving the community. Recovery is symbolised not only through Balang's journey but also through the village's restoration and triumph over mystical and physical threats. The telemovie concludes with the villagers recovering from their ailments, providing a hopeful resolution.

Recovery in *Kobilangan 3* operates on multiple levels—personal, communal, and spiritual. Balang's transformation into a figure of strength and healing contrasts with the destruction wrought by Andasak and the *Bobolian*, emphasising the Kadazandusun community's resilience against internal and external adversities.



Figure 6.8: *Kobilangan 3* DVD cover art (Source: Ujin, 2013)

6.9 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Application on *Kobilangan 3*

6.9.1 The Narrative Analysis of *Kobilangan 3*

The *Kobilangan* series serves as an exploration of Kadazandusun warrior culture, blending historical research with mythological storytelling. Ujin's deliberate integration of

traditional elements—such as the portrayal of warrior customs, spiritual beliefs, and healing practices—positions his films as cultural archives that seek to reconnect audiences with their heritage. In *Kobilangan 3*, the narrative follows Balang's journey of recovery, which is inextricably linked to the fate of his village. His personal transformation, guided by traditional martial arts training, becomes a symbolic restoration of communal strength (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018).

The depiction of the *Bobolian* (shaman) and the Rogon (evil spirit) in *Kobilangan 3* further reflects the duality present in Kadazandusun cultural narratives—the struggle between preservation and erosion as well as tradition and modernity. The *Bobolian's* possession by a malevolent force serves as an allegory for the vulnerability of indigenous traditions to external influences. However, the resolution of the film—where Balang retrieves a cure from Mount Kinabalu and restores harmony—suggests a form of cultural resilience. By anchoring the story in Kadazandusun cosmology, Ujin's film subtly moves towards the idea that reconnecting with the tradition can heal not only individuals but the collective cultural psyche.

At its core, Ujin's storytelling framework follows the archetypal hero's journey, yet his protagonists' struggles are deeply rooted in Kadazandusun cultural identity. The structure of *Kobilangan 3*—where Balang's journey mirrors the village's struggle for survival—can be read as a metaphor for the Kadazandusun community's ongoing negotiation of identity in contemporary Malaysia. His emphasis on traditional customs, greetings, and linguistic nuances reflects an effort to affirm a distinct cultural space within a rapidly changing national landscape (Sibangan, personal communication, 29 December 2018).

Moreover, the conflict between Balang and Andasak, as well as the intrusion of external threats, signifies an internal reckoning within the Kadazandusun community.

Andasak's alliance with a Murut warrior to attack Gumburod's village hints at the historical complexities of interethnic relationships within Sabah. However, the eventual triumph of the village and the restoration of order suggest an underlying movement towards unity, not through the erasure of differences but through the reinforcement of shared traditions and values.

Alfred Ujin's films serve as a counterpoint to mainstream depictions of indigenous communities, prioritising cultural accuracy and indigenous storytelling. While his work does not explicitly present a singular vision of Kadazandusun unity, it engages with the nuances of fragmentation, suggesting that recovery—whether personal, communal, or cultural—lies in a return to tradition. His storytelling foregrounds themes of resilience, historical consciousness, and linguistic preservation, positioning cinema as a tool for reinforcing a shared heritage. The *Kobilangan* series, in particular, constructs a narrative space where Kadazandusun identity is both reclaimed and reaffirmed, ultimately moving towards cohesion through the preservation of cultural knowledge.

6.9.2 The Mise-en-Scène Analysis of *Kobilangan 3*

Alfred Ujin expands the mise-en-scène of *Kobilangan 3*, incorporating multiple locations across Sabah to create a more immersive and culturally rich setting. His depiction of a village with various traditional houses led by Gumburod reflects an authentic representation of Kadazandusun architecture and community structure. Filming key scenes in the Ranau district, particularly in Kundasang, allows the majestic presence of Mount Kinabalu to function as both a backdrop and a narrative device, symbolising endurance and the sacred nature of the land within the Kadazandusun belief system.

The costume design plays a crucial role in reinforcing cultural identities and distinguishing various ethnic groups. While Gumburod and his villagers retain their simple, plain clothing from *Kobilangan 2*, the Murut tribe is depicted with distinct attire, showcasing their unique cultural heritage. This contrast not only highlights the diversity within the Kadazandusun community but also subtly alludes to underlying social and ethnic divisions. The careful attention to costume design contributes to the film's visual storytelling by deepening the historical and cultural authenticity of the mise-en-scène.



Figure 6.9: The leader of the Murut warriors in *Kobilangan 3* (Source: Ujin, 2013)

The performances in *Kobilangan 3* contribute significantly to the realism of the mise-en-scène. Ujin's direction ensures that both primary and supporting cast members deliver naturalistic performances, whether portraying protagonists or antagonists. The actors' physicality, expressions, and interactions enhance the film's authenticity, particularly in high-tension sequences. The inclusion of large-scale fight scenes is particularly notable, requiring precise choreography to maintain credibility and intensity. These action sequences serve as more than mere spectacle, instead reinforcing the narrative's themes of conflict and survival within the Kadazandusun community.

Lighting and props are meticulously crafted to enhance the film's visual appeal and thematic depth. The increased budget of approximately RM30,000 allows for improved lighting techniques, ensuring that entire villages are illuminated during night scenes and battle sequences. The strategic use of lighting accentuates the atmosphere, particularly in moments of tension and supernatural occurrences. Props, especially those belonging to the Murut people, are carefully designed to reflect historical accuracy. Their weaponry and accessories symbolise the warrior ethos of the Kadazandusun people, reinforcing the film's commitment to cultural representation.

Cinematography plays a pivotal role in constructing the mise-en-scène, employing a variety of shots—including long, full, medium, and close-ups—to establish visual rhythm. Handheld camera techniques are utilised effectively in combat scenes, creating a sense of raw energy and chaos. This choice enhances the immersive experience, placing viewers in the midst of battle without the need for stabilisers or dollies. The integration of green screen technology marks a notable improvement in the film's technical execution, particularly in depicting supernatural elements. This advancement underscores the evolving filmmaking expertise of Ujin and his team.



Figure 6.10: The application of green screen technology in *Kobilangan 3* (Source: Ujin, 2013)

The acquisition of 3 CCD cameras capable of shooting in 720p enhances the overall image quality, allowing for sharper resolution and more refined framing. The meticulous composition of scenes ensures that visual details contribute meaningfully to the narrative. One particularly striking example is Balang's journey to the peak of Mount Kinabalu. The cinematography captures the grandeur and peril of the mountain, symbolising the arduous trials Balang must endure. This imagery encapsulates the film's underlying themes of resilience and the co-existence of beauty and danger within nature.



Figure 6.11: The framing of Balang and Mount Kinabalu signifies the challenges that Balang must endure (Source: Ujin, 2013)

In conclusion, *Kobilangan 3* exemplifies a well-executed mise-en-scène, where setting, costume, performance, lighting, props, and cinematography coalesce to enrich the narrative. Alfred Ujin's directorial choices reflect a commitment to cultural authenticity and technical progression, making the film a significant contribution to Kadazandusun storytelling. The careful construction of visual and thematic elements ensures that *Kobilangan 3* is not merely an extension of its predecessor but a refined cinematic experience in its own right.

6.9.3 The Textual Analysis of *Kobilangan 3*

Kobilangan 3 continues Alfred Ujin's dedication to representing the Kadazandusun community through language, tradition, and historical elements, reinforcing themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition. By incorporating linguistic diversity, indigenous customs, and historical conflict, the telemovie examines the Kadazandusun identity and its interactions with other indigenous groups in Sabah.

The use of the Kadazandusun language throughout the *Kobilangan* series is a deliberate choice by Ujin to enhance cultural authenticity and ensure the accurate representation of the community. This linguistic commitment serves as a means of self-definition, allowing audiences to engage with a story deeply rooted in the indigenous worldview. The dialogue in *Kobilangan 3* reflects traditional speech patterns, honourifics, and cultural nuances, as seen in Huguan's guidance to Balang: *"Posorohon ku ika, kada pisangot. Nung asasagan, mesti noh kamanang"* ("I want to remind you, don't get into a fight. But if you have to, you need to make sure you win"). Such exchanges reinforce not only the cultural ethos of the Kadazandusun but also the warrior mentality and values passed down through generations. Additionally, Ujin's inclusion of the Murut language highlights historical contest/negotiation between indigenous communities. The dialogues between the Dusun and Murut characters, where they communicate and strategise together, showcase long-standing interethnic relationships, reinforcing Porodong's argument that linguistic and cultural exchanges among Sabah's indigenous groups signify their deep-rooted connection to the land (Jeffrey, 2019).

Perseverance is another key theme embedded in *Kobilangan 3*, particularly through the accurate representation of traditional attire and warrior customs. Ujin's meticulous attention to costume design distinguishes the Dusun and Murut ethnicities while visually reinforcing their unique cultural identities. The depiction of headhunting, albeit symbolised through warriors attaching the hair of their defeated enemies to their machetes, reflects the Kadazandusun's historical warrior traditions. The presence of the *Bobolian* (shaman) further deepens the spiritual dimension of the narrative, underscoring the Kadazandusun's mystic traditions. In the film, the *Bobolian*'s failure to appease a malevolent spirit results in a devastating plague, aligning with Porodong's assertion that dissatisfaction of supernatural

entities could lead to calamities (Porodong, 2001). This supernatural aspect does not merely serve as a plot device but reflects genuine Kadazandusun beliefs regarding the spiritual balance and the interdependence of the human and spiritual realms.

The telemovie's emphasis on self-definition is further exemplified through its portrayal of the Kadazandusun warrior heritage. Ujin draws inspiration from historical figures like Monsopiad, a legendary Kadazandusun warrior renowned for his bravery in defending his people (Noviatin, 2016). By weaving such historical elements into *Kobilangan 3*, Ujin seeks to preserve and revitalise indigenous narratives, reinforcing the Kadazandusun's sense of identity. Additionally, the depiction of martial arts training serves as a cultural marker, emphasising the necessity of combat skills for survival and self-preservation. The training sequences, expanded due to an increased budget, illustrate how indigenous knowledge is transmitted across generations, highlighting the resilience of the Kadazandusun in preserving their heritage despite external influences.

Beyond its focus on self-definition, *Kobilangan 3* also engages with the theme of contest/negotiation, particularly in its depiction of interethnic tensions and the broader historical struggles faced by Sabah's indigenous communities. The film presents the conflicts between the Dusun and Murut groups, reflecting historical realities where indigenous communities engaged in both alliances and disputes. The brutal attack on Gumburod's village by Andasak and the Murut warriors, resulting in significant casualties, serves as a stark reminder of these tensions. However, Ujin does not merely depict these conflicts as an act of violence; rather, he contextualises them within the broader historical narrative of indigenous self-determination. The colonial imposition of governance, beginning with the North Borneo Chartered Company in 1881, disrupted traditional practices and introduced external pressures that reshaped indigenous identities (Evans, 2007). The

film subtly alludes to these historical struggles, showcasing how indigenous groups navigated external rule while striving to maintain their cultural sovereignty.

Moreover, *Kobilangan 3* highlights the issue of fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community while simultaneously advocating for a shared cultural identity. The portrayal of conflict between the Dusun and Murut, alongside the scenes of negotiation and cooperation, reflects Sabah's indigenous groups' historical struggle between unity and maintaining distinct ethnic identities. While the film acknowledges these divisions, it ultimately suggests that reconciliation lies in embracing shared traditions and values. The symbolic retrieval of the cure from Mount Kinabalu, an act that restores balance and healing of the afflicted, metaphorically represents the Kadazandusun people's ability to recover from both historical and contemporary challenges.

In essence, *Kobilangan 3* functions as a cinematic vessel for preserving and reinforcing Kadazandusun identity. Through its intricate portrayal of language, traditional attire, warrior customs, mysticism, and historical conflicts, the film engages with the themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition. Ujin's commitment to cultural accuracy ensures that *Kobilangan 3* is not merely an action-driven telemovie but a vital contribution to indigenous storytelling, reaffirming the importance of cultural preservation in contemporary Sabah. By illustrating both the fragmentation and shared cultural foundations of the Kadazandusun, Ujin provides a nuanced representation of identity, demonstrating that true resilience lies in the conscious effort to remember, respect, and sustain one's heritage.

6.10 The Imagined Community in *Kobilangan 3*

The imagined aspect in *Kobilangan 3* is demonstrated through the fragmented identity of the Kadazandusun people. As represented in telemovie, this fragmentation contributes to the construction of a cohesive ethnic image through the shared cultural elements embedded in the narrative. In line with Anderson's concept of the Imagined Community, the telemovie portrays the Kadazandusun as a collective entity despite their internal divisions. While the Dusun and Murut characters exhibit differences in attire, language, and warrior customs, their interactions reflect a broader cultural interconnectivity that reinforces a collective identity. The film's emphasis on traditional rituals, the role of the *Bobolian*, and the significance of Mount Kinabalu as a sacred site foregrounds a shared belief system that transcends sub-ethnic distinctions. These cultural markers function as symbols of unity, allowing the Kadazandusun to *imagine* themselves as part of a larger historical and spiritual continuum, even if they have never met all members of their community.

The concept of sovereignty in *Kobilangan 3* is expressed through the film's depiction of self-governance and resistance against external influences. The village, led by Gumburod, operates within a traditional structure that emphasises communal decision-making and self-sufficiency. Andasak's alliance with a Murut warrior to launch an attack introduces an external threat that challenges the village's sovereignty, echoing historical struggles faced by the Kadazandusun people. The eventual restoration of order, achieved through Balang's retrieval of the cure and the villagers' resilience, signifies an assertion of sovereignty over their cultural and physical space. This representation mirrors the Kadazandusun's broader historical experience of negotiating their autonomy within the Malaysian nation-state, highlighting their agency in maintaining indigenous traditions while resisting erasure.

The notion of limited in *Kobilangan 3* emerges through the film's delineation of boundaries—both geographical and cultural—that define the Kadazandusun community. While the film acknowledges interethnic exchanges, such as the communication between the Dusun and Murut characters, it also emphasises the distinctiveness of Kadazandusun traditions. The retrieval of the cure from Mount Kinabalu, a sacred site within Kadazandusun cosmology, reinforces the idea of a territorial and spiritual boundary that signifies their unique cultural identity. Furthermore, the linguistic specificity of the film, with dialogue primarily in the Kadazandusun language, marks a clear distinction between the community and the broader national or global landscape. This linguistic and cultural framing constructs a limited yet deeply rooted identity, ensuring the preservation of Kadazandusun heritage within the larger context of Sabah's multiethnic society.

As a community, the Kadazandusun are depicted in *Kobilangan 3* as people bounded by shared traditions, collective memory, and resilience in the face of adversity. The village's struggle against the supernatural affliction and external threats symbolises the broader historical and contemporary challenges faced by the Kadazandusun people. The film's portrayal of communal healing—both physical and spiritual—suggests that the strength of the Kadazandusun lies in their ability to uphold their traditions while adapting to new circumstances. The interdependence between individuals, such as Balang's personal transformation that contributed to the village's survival, reinforces the notion that the Kadazandusun identity is sustained through collective action and shared cultural practices. This aligns with the idea that ethnic identity is not merely inherited but continuously reaffirmed through communal engagement and storytelling.

Through the interplay of imagined, sovereign, limited, and community, *Kobilangan 3* constructs a collective Kadazandusun identity that transcends internal divisions. The

telemovie illustrates that while the community may be fragmented in terms of sub-ethnic distinctions and historical contestations, their shared cultural practices, language, and belief systems contribute to a cohesive ethnic image. By grounding the narrative in indigenous cosmology and traditions, the film reinforces the idea that the Kadazandusun people, despite their differences, belong to a unified cultural sphere. The construction of this collective image through cinema not only preserves but also strengthens the Kadazandusun identity, ensuring its continuity in an evolving socio-political landscape.

6.11 The Fourth Cinema in *Kobilangan 3*

Kobilangan 3 illustrates how indigenous cinema can function as a medium for cultural preservation, particularly when examined through the key components of content, production, and reception within the framework of Fourth Cinema. By addressing themes of fragmentation and resilience, the film highlights the importance of indigenous narratives in reinforcing communal identity and continuity.

The content of *Kobilangan 3* reflects an intentional effort to document and sustain Kadazandusun traditions, beliefs, and linguistic heritage. The film's narrative, centred on Balang's journey of recovery and his village's struggle against supernatural and external threats, aligns with the broader theme of cultural endurance. The depiction of traditional healing practices, warrior customs, and spiritual beliefs demonstrates a deliberate attempt to reconnect audiences with indigenous knowledge. Moreover, the presence of interethnic tensions, particularly between the Dusun and Murut, addresses historical fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community while simultaneously advocating for unity through shared traditions. This thematic exploration aligns with the Fourth Cinema's principle of resisting colonial narratives, which places indigenous experiences at the forefront. By

embedding Kadazandusun cosmology and oral traditions into its storytelling, *Kobilangan 3* serves as a cinematic archive that reinforces cultural identity amidst external influences.

The production of *Kobilangan 3* further exemplifies the role of filmmaking in cultural preservation. Alfred Ujin's directorial choices prioritise authenticity, as seen in the film's meticulous attention to traditional attire, language, and architectural representation. The use of Kadazandusun language throughout the dialogue ensures that the film functions as a linguistic repository, preserving indigenous speech patterns and expressions. The film's mise-en-scène, particularly its setting in Ranau and Kundasang, reinforces the sacred relationship between the Kadazandusun people and their ancestral lands, with Mount Kinabalu serving as both a geographical landmark and a narrative device. Additionally, the strategic incorporation of martial arts training and headhunting symbolism reflects a conscious effort to represent warrior traditions within an indigenous framework rather than through a Westernised action aesthetic. The increasing technical capabilities of Ujin's production team, such as the use of green screen technology and improved cinematography, demonstrate an evolving indigenous filmmaking practice that remains committed to cultural integrity while embracing advancements in cinematic techniques. This aligns with Barry Barclay's vision of indigenous filmmakers having control over their own representation, ensuring that their stories are told from within rather than dictated by external influences.

The reception of *Kobilangan 3* among local and indigenous audiences further reinforces the significance of filmmaking in sustaining Kadazandusun cultural heritage. The film's engagement with traditional narratives and language fosters a sense of belonging among viewers, particularly within the Kadazandusun community, which offers an alternative to mainstream media portrayals that often marginalise indigenous perspectives. By highlighting the consequences of internal discord and the necessity of cultural

reclamation, the film encourages self-reflection and dialogue among its audience. Additionally, its depiction of Kadazandusun resilience against both mystical and human threats serves as a broader metaphor for indigenous survival in contemporary Malaysia. As Fourth Cinema advocates for storytelling that resonates with indigenous experiences, the reception of *Kobilangan 3* highlights its role in fostering a renewed appreciation for cultural heritage and strengthening communal ties.

Beyond its narrative and technical execution, *Kobilangan 3* demonstrates how indigenous cinema can address historical and contemporary fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community. The portrayal of conflict between the Dusun and Murut, while rooted in historical realities, ultimately gestures towards reconciliation through shared customs and mutual respect. The retrieval of the cure from Mount Kinabalu symbolically represents the restoration of balance—not only within the village but within the broader indigenous consciousness. In this sense, the film does not merely depict cultural traditions; it actively engages in the process of their preservation and revitalisation. By integrating oral histories, spiritual beliefs, and warrior customs into cinematic form, *Kobilangan 3* asserts the importance of filmmaking as a means of safeguarding indigenous identity.

Through its content, production, and reception, *Kobilangan 3* illustrates the indispensable role of filmmaking in preserving Kadazandusun cultural heritage. By addressing themes of fragmentation and resilience, the film reinforces the notion that cultural continuity is not merely about remembrance but about active engagement with tradition. As indigenous cinema evolves, its role as a tool for self-representation and identity affirmation remains paramount. In the context of the Kadazandusun community, films like *Kobilangan 3* offer a powerful medium through which cultural knowledge is preserved, shared, and strengthened for future generations.

6.12 The Journey of Recovery in *Kobilangan 3* and its Role in Kadazandusun Identity

Through the application of the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, *Kobilangan 3* serves as a crucial cultural artefact, reinforcing Kadazandusun identity by showcasing the community's resilience and collective strength in the face of ongoing challenges. As a continuation of the *Kobilangan* series, the telemovie centralises the theme of recovery, particularly through the character of Balang. His journey embodies the struggle of an individual navigating personal trauma while simultaneously representing the wider Kadazandusun community's efforts to sustain unity and cultural continuity.

One of the key ways *Kobilangan 3* addresses the fragmentation of the Kadazandusun community is by depicting the aftermath of unification and reconciliation. In the previous instalment, Gumburod—a former notorious bandit responsible for immense harm—achieved peace with the villagers, urging them to cease hostilities and work together as a community. However, rather than presenting unity as an ultimate resolution, *Kobilangan 3* acknowledges that challenges persist even after reconciliation. This is exemplified by the emergence of a mysterious plague that once again threatens the stability of Gumburod's village. The film emphasises that unity alone does not guarantee survival; rather, it requires a continuous collective effort and vigilance to sustain the community.

Balang, as the protagonist, represents an individual deeply affected by past events, choosing to move forward by strengthening himself through martial arts training. His willingness to embark on a perilous journey to retrieve the cure for the plague signifies the resilience of the Kadazandusun people. Balang's struggle to reconcile with his past while striving to protect his community mirrors the broader Kadazandusun experience. Currently, certain factions within the contemporary Kadazandusun community continue to resist the

idea of a unified identity. Through Balang's character, Alfred Ujin advocates for a broader outlook, encouraging the Kadazandusun to prioritise collective well-being. The film suggests that prolonged internal divisions could weaken the community, making them more susceptible to external threats. Without adequate preparation and cooperation, the Kadazandusun may struggle to address significant challenges effectively.

The inclusion of the Murut people in *Kobilangan 3* further enriches the film's cultural representation. By featuring an ethnic group distinct from the Dusun, Ujin bridges the gap of indigenous awareness, fostering familiarity among viewers. Scenes involving dialogue between the Dusun and Murut highlight linguistic differences while simultaneously showcasing similarities. This interaction underscores the possibility of collaboration between different ethnic groups within the Kadazandusun umbrella. Despite historical and cultural distinctions, *Kobilangan 3* suggests that these communities can work together towards a common goal. Although in the film this goal involves attacking Gumburod's village, in a broader and more idealistic sense, the narrative implies that the Kadazandusun can strengthen their identity through collective efforts, embracing their shared cultural heritage despite internal differences.

While *Kobilangan 3* is a work of fiction, Alfred Ujin draws inspiration from his surroundings and his own Kadazandusun heritage. The telemovie represents Ujin's vision of an ideal Kadazandusun individual—compassionate and community-oriented yet courageous and wise in times of crisis. These values are embedded in the film's narrative, extending beyond Balang as a singular character to encompass the entire community. The portrayal of Kadazandusun individuals striving for the betterment of their people reinforces the idea that cultural preservation is a collective responsibility. Ujin's work encourages the

Kadazandusun to embrace their heritage while also preparing for future challenges, highlighting the importance of communal unity and resilience.

A particularly commendable aspect of Ujin's directorial approach is his commitment to linguistic authenticity. By using Dusun language throughout the film and incorporating Murut dialogue, he attempts to reconstruct an image of the pre-colonial Kadazandusun society. This representation of a strong and thriving indigenous culture prior to colonial influence highlights the uniqueness of the Kadazandusun heritage. The film serves as a reminder that this cultural richness should be preserved and celebrated in contemporary times. However, *Kobilangan 3* also acknowledges the necessity for negotiation and collaboration to forge a cohesive and inclusive Kadazandusun identity. By depicting historical tensions and resolutions, the film advocates for unity without erasing individual ethnic distinctions, reinforcing the notion that shared cultural values can serve as a foundation for a collective identity.

Kobilangan 3 significantly contributes to the discourse on Imagined Community by illustrating both the fragmentation and unity within the Kadazandusun ethnic identity. Despite internal differences, shared traditions, language, and collective memory serve as unifying elements, reinforced through the portrayal of the *Bobolian*, the cultural significance of Mount Kinabalu, and the use of indigenous languages. The film also explores sovereignty, depicting Gumburod's village as a self-sufficient community governed by traditional structures, with Andasak's attack symbolising external threats to their autonomy. The villagers' resilience and Balang's quest to restore order reflect the broader historical struggles of the Kadazandusun people in asserting and negotiating their agency within the Malaysian nation-state, highlighting their enduring efforts to preserve indigenous traditions and cultural sovereignty.

Kobilangan 3 epitomises Fourth Cinema by centring indigenous storytelling and prioritising Kadazandusun experiences through culturally authentic content, production, and reception. Ujin's commitment to accuracy is evident in the film's role as a cinematic archive, preserving Kadazandusun customs, beliefs, and oral traditions through meticulous depictions of traditional attire, language, and warrior customs. Its production further reinforces this cultural preservation, with the use of the Kadazandusun language serving as a linguistic repository, and on-location filming in Ranau and Kundasang strengthening the connection between the people and their ancestral lands. By blending traditional storytelling with modern cinematic techniques, the film demonstrates the evolving nature of indigenous filmmaking while maintaining cultural integrity. Its reception among local audiences highlights the significance of indigenous cinema in sustaining cultural heritage, fostering a sense of belonging, self-reflection, and cultural pride within the Kadazandusun community, ultimately reinforcing heritage preservation amid internal struggle and external influences

Kobilangan 3 contributes significantly to the strengthening of Kadazandusun identity, providing a cinematic platform for cultural preservation and indigenous self-representation. Through its engagement with themes of recovery, resilience, and unity, the film underlines the importance of collective effort in maintaining cultural heritage. By integrating linguistic authenticity, historical conflicts, and shared traditions, the telemovie constructs an Imagined Community that reinforces Kadazandusun identity. Moreover, its alignment with Fourth Cinema principles ensures that it remains a crucial cultural artefact, offering future generations an opportunity to connect with and celebrate their heritage. Alfred Ujin's work highlights the power of cinema as a tool for cultural reclamation, ensuring the continued vitality of Kadazandusun identity in an ever-evolving socio-political landscape.

6.13 Marc Abbas' Background

Marc Abbas, also known as Marcellus Abbas, is the most recently established Kadazandusun filmmaker, despite being the oldest. Born on 30 October 1965, he resides in the Putatan district and, like Tony Francis Gitom, is of Kadazan descent. His filmmaking journey began in 2010 as a cast member before joining Gitom's film workshop, where he remained active until 2012. In 2013, Abbas produced his first telemovie, *Home of Hope* (also titled *Homophobe*), made on a limited budget with a small crew, similar to Alfred Ujin's early work. Its success encouraged him to pursue filmmaking further (Sibangan, personal communication, 6 December 2018).

Following this, Abbas produced several telemovies, including *Hood*, *Lintah Darat*, *The Photographer*, and *Van Lihing*, while also participating in other productions as an actor. Expanding his repertoire, he ventured into short films, producing *Avakas the Headhunter* in 2016 for a film competition, which later evolved into a feature film. By 2018, Abbas was the only Kadazandusun filmmaker in Sabah distributing DVD copies of *Van Lihing* in the local market (Sibangan, personal communication, 6 December 2018).

That same year, he secured a FINAS film grant for *Avakas*, an action film centred on the Kadazandusun community. His perseverance culminated in a major milestone when *Avakas* (2020) was screened nationwide, a significant achievement for a Kadazandusun filmmaker. It was among the first films in recent years by a local filmmaker to reach such a broad audience, cementing Abbas' status as a key figure in the Kadazandusun filmmaking scene.



Figure 6.12: Marc Abbas' picture taken during a personal interview in 2018

6.14 Marc Abbas' Perspective on Kadazandusun Filmmaking

Abbas is committed to creating authentic and relatable films that resonate with the Kadazandusun community. He believes the cultural and historical heritage of indigenous people provides a rich foundation for compelling narratives. For him, film is a powerful medium to promote positive moral values, particularly those rooted in the indigenous community. Drawing inspiration from his Catholic background, he asserts that films should uphold good moral principles, even when addressing difficult issues. As he stated, "Yes, we do not glorify bad values. Do not promote bad practices" (Sibangan, personal communication, 6 December 2018).

Morality plays a central role in Abbas' storytelling, often leading him to portray the protagonist in his films. He acknowledges that while negative moral values can be part of a plot, they should ultimately contribute to a narrative where good triumphs over evil. This approach provides audiences with a moral framework from which they can learn or find inspiration. For Abbas, storytelling extends beyond entertainment; it serves as a means to reinforce ethical values.

His respect for his community is deeply embedded in his filmmaking, which relies on the goodwill and support of those around him. His first telemovie, *Home of Hope* (2013), was produced with minimal resources using only a camcorder. Without financial compensation, his cast and crew volunteered their efforts, demonstrating the community's eagerness to participate. Recognising this support, Abbas made the film publicly accessible on YouTube as a gesture of gratitude, stating, "I gave it to the public; I prefer to do it like that. Giving back to the community" (Sibangan, personal communication, 6 December 2018).

This approach highlights Abbas' desire for his films to have a meaningful impact, whether by involving the community directly in the filmmaking process or making them the primary audience. His works consistently depict good prevailing over evil, presenting heroes the Kadazandusun community can admire. His vision is to create content that not only entertains but also to inspires and uplifts the indigenous community, reinforcing their values and cultural identity

6.15 The Story of *Home of Hope* (2011)

Home of Hope is a telemovie about hope, redemption and second chances. The story follows Hope (played by Marc Abbas), an ex-felon diagnosed with a terminal illness. Returning to Sabah to reconnect with his estranged son, he intervenes in a bag-snatching incident, choosing mercy over violence—signaling his transformation.

Encouraged by his niece Maria (Queennera Kitingan), Hope converts his home into a shelter for troubled youth, offering guidance to those struggling with addiction, trauma, and despair. Meanwhile, he unknowingly crosses paths with his long-lost son, Marc (Marc

Marciano), during a street race dispute. Instead of revealing their connection, he quietly protects and mentors him.

Hope's mission puts him in conflict with Johnny, a local gangster. When Johnny's gang kidnaps Marc and another youth, Hope launches a daring rescue. Though victorious, the effort worsens his health. Before his death, Marc learns the truth about his father, bringing emotional closure. However, as Johnny's gang reappears, the film hints that the battle is far from over.

Inspired by Marc Abbas's brother, a Catholic priest, *Home of Hope* highlights themes of community, hope and redemption, and the responsibility of elders to guide the younger generation. Through his storytelling, Marc reinforces the power of hope and second chances.



Figure 6.13: The telemovie title is displayed at the beginning of the film (Source: Abbas, 2013)

6.16 The Indigenous Fim Analysis Framework Application on *Home of Hope*

6.16.1 The Narrative Analysis of *Home of Hope*

Marc Abbas' *Home of Hope* is a telemovie that foregrounds the theme of hope and redemption, with its protagonist, Hope, embodying the struggle for personal and communal transformation. The film engages with traditional storytelling structures that emphasise moral growth, while simultaneously incorporating elements of contemporary societal issues. Through its depiction of fractured familial ties, social reintegration, and generational responsibility, *Home of Hope* subtly addresses the fragmentation within Kadazandusun identity, offering a vision of unity through acts of guidance and reconciliation.

The narrative begins with Hope's return to Sabah, marking a literal and symbolic homecoming. His journey is motivated by an urgent need for closure and reconnection, yet his home is no longer what it once was. The absence of his estranged son reflects a broader disconnection within familial and communal structures. His transformation from an ex-felon to a mentor of troubled youth serves as a microcosm of Kadazandusun resilience—an attempt to rebuild what has been lost. The home that he establishes, "Hope's Home," becomes a sanctuary for those who have been cast adrift, mirroring the historical disjunctions experienced by the Kadazandusun people due to modernisation and shifting cultural landscapes.

The character of Maria (Queennera Kitingan) acts as a bridge between past and present, embodying the younger generation that still seeks wisdom from elders. While she cannot provide Hope with information about his son, she facilitates his role as a community leader, reinforcing the traditional belief in collective responsibility. Her actions demonstrate the Kadazandusun ethos of mutual aid, suggesting that identity is not solely preserved through blood ties but also through shared responsibility and moral guidance.

A significant narrative device used to explore identity fragmentation is Hope's decision not to reveal himself to Marc (Marc Marciano) upon discovering that he is his son. Rather than claiming authority over him, Hope chooses the path of quiet mentorship, ensuring that Marc finds his own way before learning the truth. This restraint highlights the shift in Kadazandusun identity from hierarchical structures to a more fluid, guidance-based system that prioritises self-discovery. Hope's reluctance to impose himself on Marc reflects the delicate balance between tradition and modern individualism—a tension often felt in indigenous communities navigating cultural transformation.

The conflict with Johnny and his gang introduces an external force that threatens the fragile unity Hope is trying to cultivate. Johnny operates as an antagonist whose interests lie in perpetuating discord rather than fostering stability. The climactic confrontation, in which Hope sacrifices his own health to protect the younger generation, underscores the idea that elder figures must sometimes suffer for the sake of the future. This act of selflessness echoes traditional Kadazandusun leadership values, where chieftains and elders were expected to prioritise the wellbeing of the community over personal gains.

Despite Hope's eventual death, Maria's resolve to continue his mission ensures that his legacy endures. The film closes with a moment of ambiguity—Johnny's gang re-emerges, hinting that societal struggles persist. However, the establishment of Hope's shelter suggests a shift towards long-term solutions rather than temporary reprieves. In doing so, the film acknowledges that unity within the Kadazandusun identity is an ongoing process, one that must be continuously reinforced through active participation in community-building.

Home of Hope draws inspiration from Marc Abbas' own brother, a Catholic priest, whose commitment to social service profoundly shaped the film's moral centre. While the narrative is deeply rooted in hope and redemption, it also serves as an allegory for the

Kadazandusun experience, portraying the struggles of a people navigating between tradition and contemporary realities. By advocating for mentorship, responsibility, and reconciliation, the film subtly gestures towards unity—not as an absolute state but as a continuous effort to bridge generational and ideological divides. In this way, Abbas' storytelling does not merely lament fragmentation but actively proposes a means of addressing it through acts of care and communal responsibility.

6.16.2 The Mise-en-Scène Analysis of *Home of Hope*

The setting of *Home of Hope* effectively contrasts urban and rural landscapes in Sabah, particularly in Putatan. The film opens at Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA), marking the protagonist, Hope's, return to his hometown. This transition from an international hub to the local village and the town's commercial centre highlights the duality of modernisation and tradition in Sabah. By showcasing both urbanised and non-urbanised areas, the film underscores the socio-economic divide within the Kadazandusun community. This visual juxtaposition serves as a backdrop for exploring contemporary issues affecting the community, making the setting not only a physical space but also a thematic element that reinforces the film's narrative.

The costumes in *Home of Hope* reflect the modern and westernised culture of the Kadazandusun people living in Putatan. The characters' attire signifies the evolving identity of the community, as it embraces modernity while retaining its indigenous roots. Through these costume choices, the film subtly addresses the ongoing struggles of the Kadazandusun people in maintaining cultural identity amid globalisation. The contemporary dress style serves as a visual cue to the audience, indicating the film's engagement with present-day issues rather than a nostalgic or historical representation of the community.

Veteran actors Marc Abbas and Johnny Damius lead the cast, bringing extensive experience gained from their work in Tony Francis Gitom's *Perkampungan Filem*. Their performances provide depth and authenticity to the protagonist and antagonist roles, respectively. Abbas, in his directorial debut, emphasises the moral dichotomy between good and evil, a recurring theme in his filmmaking. His portrayal of Hope embodies the virtues of compassion and responsibility, whereas Damius's antagonist role represents the challenges and moral dilemmas faced by the Kadazandusun people. The supporting cast consists mainly of first-time actors, adding a raw and organic quality to the performances. This choice enhances the film's realism, making it an educational and reflective piece for the community. The film's acting style prioritises moral storytelling, reinforcing the significance of unity and ethical values within the Kadazandusun society.

Given the film's minimal budget, the lighting and props were utilised with resourcefulness. Abbas primarily relied on natural and available lighting, including household lights, to create the visual tone of the film. This approach, while constrained by budgetary limitations, adds an element of realism to the mise-en-scène, allowing the audience to engage with the narrative as it unfolds in a familiar environment. The use of everyday objects as props, mostly provided by the cast, further enhances the film's authenticity. The production's reliance on community support exemplifies the collective spirit of the Kadazandusun people and reinforces the film's themes of mutual assistance and resilience. The naturalistic lighting and minimal props do not detract from the storytelling but rather contribute to the grounded, documentary-like feel of the film.

Abbas employs a *run-and-shoot* cinematographic approach, using a single CCD camera with low-resolution imagery. Despite its technical limitations, this method aligns with the film's themes, as it evokes an observational, almost voyeuristic perspective. The

cinematography consists of long shots, full shots, medium shots, and close-ups, primarily executed through handheld camerawork. This technique, while practical due to the lack of elaborate equipment, also enhances the film's thematic focus on unveiling the often-overlooked struggles within the Kadazandusun community. The shaky, handheld visuals create a sense of urgency, placing the audience in the midst of the characters' experiences. One of the most poignant shots in the film features Hope helping a young person in need, and later, that same young person returns the favour by taking care of him. This touching moment highlights the film's message about kindness and the importance of different generations supporting each other. Through this, *Home of Hope* conveys a broader message to the Kadazandusun community—advocating for unity, support, and the reinforcement of moral values rather than exploitation and division.



Figure 6.14: Hope offers help to a youth to prevent her from committing suicide, and later, the same youth helps him in return. (Source: Abbas, 2013)

The mise-en-scène of *Home of Hope* demonstrates how resourcefulness and narrative depth can compensate for budgetary constraints. The film's setting, costumes, performances, lighting, props, and cinematography collectively create an immersive experience that reflects the realities of the Kadazandusun community. By employing a naturalistic approach, Abbas successfully highlights contemporary issues while reinforcing traditional values, making *Home of Hope* a significant cultural and moral commentary within indigenous filmmaking.

6.16.3 The Textual Analysis of *Home of Hope*

In *Home of Hope*, language plays a crucial role in shaping Kadazandusun identity as a part of contest/ negotiation. While the film predominantly uses Malay, Marc Abbas ensures that it reflects Sabah's distinct dialect and accent, rather than the standard version spoken in Peninsular Malaysia. This decision enhances the film's authenticity and accurately represents how Sabahan people naturally speak (Sibangan, personal communication, 6 December 2018). Abbas believes that language is a fundamental part of culture, and by using Sabahan's Malay, he resists the dominance of Peninsular Malaysian media, where the standard accent is more commonly heard. Additionally, the Kadazan language appears in a flashback scene between Hope and his late wife. Although brief, this moment is powerful as it connects the character to his Kadazan roots. It also reflects a broader issue—many indigenous people are losing their native language in everyday life. By including Kadazan in a deeply emotional scene, the film highlights the importance of preserving indigenous culture, even as modernisation influences the way people communicate.

Another key theme in the film is perseverance, particularly regarding the role of elders in guiding the younger generation. Hope, the protagonist, assumes the responsibility of helping troubled youth, a role traditionally held by elders in the Kadazandusun community. Abbas believes that older generations should continue to instil strong moral values in younger people (Cosmas et al., 2015), ensuring they do not succumb to negative influences. Hope's actions embody this belief—he rescues a woman named Baby from exploitation, prevents young people from engaging in crime and drug abuse, and helps them find a better path in life. These challenges are real issues affecting indigenous youth in Sabah today. By portraying Hope as a mentor and protector, Abbas shows that perseverance is not

just about enduring hardship but also about helping others to rebuild their lives and reconnect with their community.



Figure 6.15: Hope is protecting and saving the character Baby from being sexually assaulted (Source: Abbas, 2013)

At the heart of the story is self-definition, which explores what it means to be Kadazandusun in the modern world. The film highlights the tension between tradition and contemporary life, illustrating how people must balance cultural heritage with changing societal norms. This is evident in Hope's relationship with his son, Marc—rather than immediately revealing the truth, he guides him from a distance, allowing him to mature first. This reflects a shift in Kadazandusun identity, where mentorship and guidance are now prioritised over strict family hierarchy. The film's setting reinforces this cultural struggle, transitioning from the modernity of Kota Kinabalu's airport to the village landscapes of Putatan. This contrast between urban and rural environments represents the economic and social division within the Kadazandusun community, illustrating how some have adapted to modernisation while others remain deeply connected to their ancestral traditions.

Beyond being a story of hope and redemption, *Home of Hope* also addresses the fragmentation of Kadazandusun culture. It does not merely depict the challenges faced by the community but also proposes a solution through mentorship, strong moral values, and

communal support. The film encourages the Kadazandusun people to preserve their heritage, protect their youth, and maintain their distinct identity, even as societal changes continue. Through its narrative and visuals, *Home of Hope* serves as both a reflection of contemporary Kadazandusun life and a reminder that unity, perseverance, and cultural pride are essential to safeguarding their heritage for future generations.

6.17 The Imagined Community in *Home of Hope*

The fragmented identity of the Kadazandusun people, as represented in *Home of Hope*, contributes to the creation of an imagined and collective image of the ethnic group by reinforcing shared cultural values and moral principles. Although the film portrays individual struggles, particularly through the protagonist Hope, it reflects a broader communal experience of navigating modernisation while preserving indigenous identity. This aligns with the concept of the Imagined Community, where members of an ethnic group may never meet in person but perceive themselves as part of a larger, cohesive collective. In *Home of Hope*, this sense of belonging emerges through the characters' engagement with traditional values such as mutual aid, mentorship, and moral responsibility, which are practices that deeply embedded in Kadazandusun culture. Despite personal hardships, these shared principles foster a connection between individuals and the wider community, illustrating how fragmented identities contribute to an overarching sense of unity.

The film's depiction of Kadazandusun society also reflects the sovereign nature of indigenous identity, positioning it as an entity striving for cultural continuity amidst external pressures. The protagonist's return to Sabah and his attempt to rebuild a place of refuge for troubled youth symbolise the resilience of the Kadazandusun people in maintaining their distinct heritage. Sovereignty in this context is not defined by political autonomy but by the

ability of the community to sustain its traditions, language, and values despite socio-economic transformations. Hope's journey parallels the broader Kadazandusun experience of cultural negotiation, where modern influences challenge indigenous customs. By portraying mentorship and communal responsibility as key solutions to social fragmentation, the film presents sovereignty as an internal force—one that resides in the collective efforts to uphold cultural integrity rather than in external political structures.

While *Home of Hope* presents a cohesive image of the Kadazandusun, it also acknowledges the limited scope of this identity. Like all ethnic groups, the Kadazandusun are bound by certain cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries, distinguishing them from other communities. The film subtly addresses this limitation through its language choices, particularly in the contrast between standard Malay and the distinct Sabahan's dialect. By incorporating elements of the Kadazan language in an emotionally significant scene, the film reinforces the boundaries of Kadazandusun identity, acknowledging that cultural survival depends on the retention of linguistic heritage. However, this limited scope does not equate to exclusivity; rather, it serves as a marker of uniqueness within the wider Malaysian context. The juxtaposition of urban and rural settings further emphasises the challenges of maintaining cultural identity in a rapidly modernising world, illustrating how Kadazandusun heritage, while distinctive, is also subject to external influences.

At its core, the film highlights the strength of community as a binding force that enables individuals to contribute to a collective ethnic image. Hope's establishment of a shelter represents the traditional Kadazandusun ethos of communal support, where the well-being of individuals is inseparable from the welfare of the group. This notion is reinforced through the film's production itself, which relied on the voluntary participation of local actors and crew members, demonstrating a real-life extension of Kadazandusun solidarity.

The involvement of first-time actors from the community adds authenticity to the narrative, reinforcing the idea that Kadazandusun identity is not merely depicted on screen but actively lived and sustained by its people. The film's moral message—that good must prevail over evil—further underscores the ethical foundation upon which the Kadazandusun community is built.

By framing individual experiences within a shared cultural framework, *Home of Hope* contributes to the imagined collective identity of the Kadazandusun. While each character grapples with personal challenges, their actions ultimately reflect a common moral and cultural ethos, reinforcing the continuity of indigenous traditions. The film demonstrates that despite the fragmentation caused by modernisation and socio-economic change, the Kadazandusun identity persists through the reinforcement of shared values. In this way, the telemovie functions as both a reflection of reality and a means of cultural preservation, offering an alternative to the dominant national narratives that often marginalise indigenous perspectives. Through its depiction of mentorship, resilience, and communal responsibility, *Home of Hope* illustrates how individual stories contribute to the construction of a unified Kadazandusun identity within the broader Imagined Community.

6.18 The Fourth Cinema in *Home of Hope*

Filmmaking is essential for preserving the cultural heritage of the Kadazandusun ethnic group, strengthening their identity amid modernisation and socio-cultural fragmentation. *Home of Hope*, in line with Fourth Cinema principles, demonstrates how indigenous filmmakers assert cultural sovereignty through narrative, production, and audience engagement. Analysing the film's content, production, and reception highlights how filmmaking reinforces Kadazandusun identity and addresses cultural fragmentation.

The content of *Home of Hope* reflects the Kadazandusun people's struggle to maintain their traditions within an evolving socio-economic landscape. The film's protagonist, Hope, serves as both a narrative and symbolic representation of cultural perseverance, embodying the ethos of mentorship and moral responsibility central to indigenous values. The story's focus on intergenerational relationships and community support highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, illustrating the need to balance ancestral wisdom with contemporary realities. The use of Sabahan's Malay and brief Kadazan dialogue reinforces linguistic identity, resisting the homogenisation of language in mainstream Malaysian media. Through its emphasis on hope, redemption and communal responsibility, the film presents a framework for cultural continuity, aligning with Fourth Cinema's objective of creating stories that prioritise indigenous perspectives over dominant cinematic narratives.

The production of *Home of Hope* further emphasises its role in cultural preservation. Unlike mainstream Malaysian films that often adhere to commercial or state-driven narratives, *Home of Hope* was made independently, with minimal resources and strong community involvement. Abbas' reliance on volunteer actors, local settings, and natural lighting reflects the Kadazandusun tradition of collective storytelling and resourcefulness. This grassroots approach is indicative of Fourth Cinema's rejection of external commercial influences, instead prioritising indigenous agency in the filmmaking process. The film's mise-en-scène, particularly the juxtaposition of urban and rural landscapes, visually highlights the fragmentation experienced by the Kadazandusun people. By situating the narrative within familiar locations such as Putatan, the film provides an authentic representation of contemporary Kadazandusun life while subtly critiquing the socio-economic disparities within the community.

The reception of *Home of Hope* is equally significant in its role as a cultural artefact. Unlike films produced for mass entertainment, Abbas made the film accessible to the public via YouTube, ensuring that it reached a local audience without financial barriers. This decision reflects an indigenous approach to storytelling—one that prioritises communal access and knowledge-sharing over profit-driven motives. Furthermore, the film's reception within the Kadazandusun community highlights its effectiveness in fostering a sense of shared identity. By portraying characters and struggles that resonate with indigenous audiences, *Home of Hope* encourages self-reflection and dialogue about cultural preservation. The film's themes of guidance and moral resilience offer a counter-narrative to the displacement and cultural erosion often depicted in mainstream media, reinforcing the importance of indigenous storytelling in sustaining identity.

Through its content, production, and reception, *Home of Hope* exemplifies how filmmaking serves as a vital tool for the preservation of Kadazandusun heritage. The film actively addresses cultural fragmentation by depicting intergenerational mentorship, community solidarity, and the complexities of modern indigenous identity. Its production process embodies Fourth Cinema's emphasis on indigenous autonomy, demonstrating how resourcefulness and collective participation can lead to meaningful cultural representation. The reception of the film within the Kadazandusun community highlights its function as more than mere entertainment—it becomes a medium for cultural dialogue, continuity, and resistance against assimilation.

Barry Barclay's concept of Fourth Cinema highlights the necessity for indigenous peoples to control their own narratives, ensuring that their histories and values are represented authentically. *Home of Hope* aligns with this vision by asserting Kadazandusun identity through both its storytelling and filmmaking approach. As indigenous communities

face increasing challenges due to globalisation and cultural homogenisation, filmmaking emerges as a powerful tool for safeguarding traditions, enabling future generations to engage with their heritage in meaningful ways. In doing so, Abbas' work not only preserves Kadazandusun culture but also reinforces a collective identity that continues to evolve while remaining deeply rooted in indigenous values.

6.19 The Hope in *Home of Hope* for the Kadazandusun Identity

Marc Abbas' telemovie *Home of Hope* is a significant cultural work that reinforces the Kadazandusun identity through its themes of hope, community, and moral resilience. By addressing the socio-economic challenges within the Kadazandusun community, the film not only reflects contemporary indigenous struggles but also provides a framework for unity and collective perseverance. As a piece of Fourth Cinema, *Home of Hope* functions as a means of indigenous storytelling, resisting mainstream commercial narratives while fostering a sense of Imagined Community among the Kadazandusun people.

The central theme of *Home of Hope* is hope itself, particularly within the Kadazandusun community. Marc Abbas envisions this telemovie as a beacon of hope during times of hardship and turmoil, encouraging the Kadazandusun to be both the source and the answer to the struggles faced by their brothers and sisters. This vision fosters a compassionate and caring community that prioritises the well-being of others. By portraying the Kadazandusun as an interconnected group working towards collective progress, the film suggests that solidarity can serve as a means to address fragmentation and social disintegration within the community.

Home of Hope confronts the fragmentation of the Kadazandusun people by highlighting pressing modern issues that hinder their integration into a functional society.

These challenges include drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, theft, and violence—problems that afflict marginalised individuals who struggle to find their place within their own community. By bringing these issues to the forefront, the telemovie initiates a crucial discourse on the necessity of social reintegration and communal responsibility.

The telemovie reinforces the need for a compassionate Kadazandusun community that actively cares for its vulnerable members rather than abandoning them. It advocates for intervention, treatment, and rehabilitation for those struggling with social vices. By encouraging Kadazandusun people to extend support to those in need, *Home of Hope* reinforces the values of kindness, empathy, and communal solidarity as essential to preserving indigenous identity.

Another key message of *Home of Hope* is the understanding that doing good is not easy; it requires sacrifice and perseverance. This is exemplified through the protagonist, Hope, who ultimately gives his life while protecting the youth under his care. His death serves as a powerful testament to the idea that positive change often demands personal hardship. Through this narrative choice, Abbas conveys that the path to social and cultural restoration is challenging but necessary.

While *Home of Hope* promotes unity and compassion, it does not shy away from depicting the presence of exploitation and moral corruption within the community. The antagonist, Johnny, symbolises individuals who take advantage of others' suffering for personal gain. His willingness to cause harm in order to protect his illegal business highlights the existence of internal threats that undermine Kadazandusun solidarity. Johnny's actions ultimately lead to Hope's death, illustrating the ongoing struggle between good and evil within the community.

The title itself, *Home of Hope*, reinforces the idea that hope should remain a central force in the Kadazandusun consciousness. Hope serves as both motivation and unifying factor, encouraging the community to persevere through adversity. By portraying hope as the catalyst for resilience and progress, the film suggests that it can be the foundation upon which the Kadazandusun rebuild their sense of identity and collective purpose. Furthermore, it calls on individuals to be active participants in creating hope for others, ensuring self-sufficiency without reliance on external forces.

Christian values, particularly those associated with Catholicism, are deeply woven into *Home of Hope*, particularly in its emphasis on caring for outcasts. The film reflects the Christian teachings of providing for the needy, sheltering the homeless, and aiding the afflicted paralleling the example of Jesus ministering to the sick and sinners. Given that the Kadazandusun, particularly the Kadazan, predominantly practise Catholicism (Barlocco, 2010), Abbas uses these values to inspire action within the community. The telemovie encourages all Kadazandusun, regardless of religious belief, to embody these principles of service and kindness. By making compassion a unifying cultural trait, *Home of Hope* positions care for others as a crucial means of addressing fragmentation and reinforcing a shared Kadazandusun identity.



Figure 6.16: Hope offers food to a youth who has just been beaten. The image on the left shows Hope showing mercy to a thief by choosing not to harm him (Source: Abbas, 2013)

Abbas' portrayal of masculinity in *Home of Hope* presents an alternative to toxic notions of manhood, perhaps inspired by his Christian faith. As an elder, the character Hope embodies responsible and protective masculinity—shielding the young instead of leading them to ruin (Biffert, 2016). His selflessness serves as a moral standard for the Kadazandusun community, emphasising the importance of nurturing the younger generation. This representation promotes the idea that the Kadazandusun must actively safeguard the future of their youth, ensuring that their cultural identity remains meaningful and intact for generations to come.

Home of Hope contributes to the concept of an Imagined Community by fostering a sense of collective identity among the Kadazandusun, despite geographical and social divisions. Through shared values of care, resilience, and morality, the film portrays the Kadazandusun as a people bound by mutual responsibility. Although not every individual may know each other personally, the film constructs an overarching sense of unity and belonging.

Additionally, as a work of Fourth Cinema, *Home of Hope* asserts indigenous agency by prioritising Kadazandusun narratives and storytelling methods. The film focus on community-driven production and ethical storytelling. Its low-budget, grassroots approach aligns with Fourth Cinema's emphasis on self-representation, empowering indigenous filmmakers to reclaim their stories from dominant media industries.

Marc Abbas' *Home of Hope* is more than just a telemovie; it is a cultural artefact that strengthens Kadazandusun identity through its messages of hope, unity, and moral responsibility. By addressing social fragmentation, advocating for communal care, and reinforcing indigenous values, the film provides a roadmap for overcoming contemporary challenges. Furthermore, its contribution to the study of Imagined Community and Fourth

Cinema solidifies its significance as a work of indigenous storytelling. Through *Home of Hope*, Abbas not only preserves but also revitalises Kadazandusun identity, ensuring that future generations inherit a culture rooted in compassion, resilience, and collective strength.

6.20 The Story of *Van Lihing* (2018)

Van Lihing is a localised and indigenised adaptation of Bram Stoker's renowned vampire hunter, Abraham Van Helsing. However, in Marc Abbas's telemovie, only the name and profession are loosely inspired by the original character. The storyline significantly diverges, incorporating a comedic tone and plot that set it apart. By integrating Kadazandusun cultural elements, *Van Lihing* becomes a distinct and culturally rich reinterpretation of its source material.

The name *Van Lihing* itself is a playful combination of *van* (a type of transportation) and *lihing* (a traditional Kadazandusun alcoholic drink made from fermented rice). The film opens with Van Lihing (played by Marc Abbas) lying unconscious on the ground, clutching a bottle of *lihing*. A passerby attempts to rob him, but a fairy (played by Ivy Michelle) intervenes, using her powers to drive the thief away and revive Van Lihing. Upon regaining consciousness, Van Lihing suffers from amnesia and cannot remember his name or origins. Observing that he had been struck by a van and was holding a bottle of *lihing*, the fairy names him "Van Lihing". Though bewildered, Van Lihing quickly realises that the fairy is no ordinary being and hastily leaves the scene.

As the story unfolds, Van Lihing discovers he possesses supernatural abilities that allow him to see paranormal entities. Initially terrified when confronted with ghosts and monsters, he is soon revisited by the fairy, who explains that these abilities are part of a gift she has bestowed upon him. She reveals that the world is teeming with evil spirits and

supernatural creatures, and that Van Lihing has been chosen to eradicate them. Despite his initial reluctance, he agrees to become the fairy's champion—on the condition that the ghosts and monsters be given the chance to redeem themselves.

Throughout his journey, Van Lihing encounters various malevolent spirits and supernatural beings, including the *Congkak* demon, *Buakar* (a water demon), a fire demon, and a cross-dressing spirit. He also performed several exorcisms. Rather than destroying these entities, he offers them alternative ways to use their paranormal abilities for good, encouraging them to cease frightening or harming others and instead contribute to society.

The film's climax features Van Lihing's confrontation with a werewolf and a vampire in his quest to reunite the fairy's spirit with her physical body. Alongside his companion (played by Natasha Albert), he successfully defeats these creatures, ultimately restoring the fairy's corporeal form. The telemovie concludes with Van Lihing and his companion walking through the city, ready for their next adventure.

Van Lihing stands out for its comedic and light-hearted approach to the supernatural genre, blending Kadazandusun cultural references with a humorous narrative. Marc Abbas's interpretation not only reimagines Van Helsing's traditional role but also emphasises themes of benevolent, redemption, kindness, and reformation—even for paranormal beings. The film serves as a creative expression of Kadazandusun identity, offering a unique and culturally rooted perspective on classic supernatural tales.



Figure 6.17: The art cover for *Van Lihing* DVD (Source: Abbas, 2018)

6.21 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework Application on *Van Lihing*

6.21.1 The Narrative Analysis of *Van Lihing*

Marc Abbas' filmmaking, rooted in Kadazandusun identity and moral storytelling, presents a compelling approach to indigenous narratives. His works, particularly *Van Lihing*, entertains while serving as a means of cultural expression and cohesion. Through his films, Abbas addresses the fragmentation within Kadazandusun identity, weaving elements of shared heritage, mythology, and moral values that contribute to a unifying cultural consciousness.

Abbas' narrative approach follows a linear structure, adhering to the traditional hero's journey while incorporating comedic and cultural nuances. His protagonists, including Van Lihing, embody moral fortitude, reinforcing a storytelling tradition where good ultimately triumphs over evil. This structure ensures that his films remain accessible to a broad audience, particularly within the Kadazandusun community, who find familiarity

and resonance in his themes. His perspective aligns with his assertion that "We should uphold good moral principles" (Sibangan, personal communication, 6 December 2018).

The thematic core of Abbas' films revolves around benevolence. While malevolent forces exist within his stories, they are rarely absolute; instead, his protagonists provide opportunities for antagonists to reform. This moral stance is evident in *Van Lihing*, where the protagonist does not simply destroy supernatural entities but offers them a chance to utilise their abilities for good. This approach subverts conventional supernatural narratives, replacing destruction with rehabilitation and promoting a moral framework deeply tied to indigenous communal values.

A key aspect of Abbas' storytelling is the indigenisation of global narrative archetypes. *Van Lihing*, though loosely inspired by Bram Stoker's *Van Helsing*, is fundamentally a product of Kadazandusun cultural reinterpretation. The integration of lihing (a traditional rice wine) and the protagonist's comedic amnesia establish a uniquely localised character, distinct from its Western counterpart. The name itself—blending *van* (a transport vehicle) with *lihing*—demonstrates Abbas' playful yet intentional grounding of his work in Kadazandusun culture.

The supernatural elements in *Van Lihing* serve as more than just narrative devices; they symbolise the coexistence of tradition and modernity within Kadazandusun identity. The inclusion of spirits and demons from local folklore, such as the Buakar, revitalises indigenous mythologies within a contemporary cinematic space. These elements serve not merely to evoke fear but to reflect the community's historical engagement with the supernatural as part of their cultural identity. This approach helps sustain Kadazandusun mythology in a modern context, fostering continuity across generations.

Although Abbas does not explicitly position his films as instruments of cultural or political activism, his storytelling inherently fosters a sense of unity among the Kadazandusun people. By presenting indigenous mythology and moral values as central to his narratives, he creates a shared cultural reference point that spans different generations and local subgroups within the community.

His approach to characterisation—particularly through the lens of morality—reinforces an idealised vision of Kadazandusun identity, where ethical integrity and cultural pride coexist. Van Lihing's commitment to redemption rather than destruction, his acceptance of his newfound identity, and his willingness to engage with supernatural forces all reflect a broader commentary on the Kadazandusun people's resilience and adaptability.

The film's light-hearted tone and comedic elements make these cultural narratives more accessible, ensuring that they reach a wider audience without feeling didactic. This balance between entertainment and cultural reinforcement makes Abbas' work an effective medium for subtly strengthening Kadazandusun unity.

Marc Abbas' telemovie, especially *Van Lihing*, show his thoughtful way of telling Kadazandusun stories. His films focus on strong moral messages while also helping to bring the community together. By adapting well-known story ideas to fit local culture, using traditional storytelling methods, and reinforcing good values, Abbas highlights the struggles within Kadazandusun identity. His films present a world where old traditions, ethics, and modern life blend, offering a more connected and unified sense of Kadazandusun heritage.

6.21.2 The Mise-en-Scène Analysis of *Van Lihing*

The telemovie *Van Lihing* is set in various locations across Kota Kinabalu, Putatan, and Penampang, incorporating diverse landscapes such as rivers, jungles, and recreational

areas. Each setting is carefully selected to correspond with a specific supernatural entity, enhancing the film's thematic depth. Notable examples include the *Orang Minyak* inhabiting the jungle, *Buakar* (a water monster) emerging from the river, and *Hantu Congkak* residing in a recreational setting. The mise-en-scène reflects broader themes of coexistence and unity within a diverse society, where various groups interact while maintaining their individual identities. Similarly, the protagonist, Van Lihing, symbolises a bridge between different realms, encouraging mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence between humans and supernatural beings.

The telemovie adopts a predominantly Westernised aesthetic, with the exception of the *Buakar*, whose design retains indigenous influences. Marc Abbas enlisted a skilled makeup artist to create convincingly terrifying supernatural entities, including *Buakar*, *Valak* (a demonic figure resembling a nun), and *Orang Minyak*. The makeup and costume design contribute significantly to the visual storytelling, enhancing the horror elements and reinforcing the film's suspenseful atmosphere.

Particular attention was given to Van Lihing's costume, which closely resembles the Western archetype of Van Helsing. His attire consists of a tall, well-rounded hat and a trench coat, symbolising his role as a seasoned monster hunter. Likewise, the *Valak* character required an outfit that accurately mimicked a Christian nun's habit, further deepening the film's eerie tone. However, due to budgetary constraints, some costumes, such as that of the *Mummy monster*, appeared less refined, relying on simple white linen wraps. This financial limitation highlights the challenges of independent filmmaking, where compromises must be made between visual fidelity and narrative integrity.



Figure 6.18: The variation in costume quality was a decision Marc Abbas had to make during the production of *Van Lihing* to prevent overspending (Source: Abbas, 2018)

Marc Abbas delivers a compelling performance as Van Lihing, portraying both wisdom and heroism with an engaging blend of comedy and authority. His natural charisma as an elder lends authenticity to his character, reinforcing his role as a bridge between human and supernatural realms. His portrayal is enriched by his ability to balance humour with seriousness, making his interactions with both monsters and humans believable and engaging.



Figure 6.19: Van Lihing casually advises Buakar to change his ways and stop harming others (Source: Abbas, 2018)

To enhance the telemovie's appeal, Abbas cast notable local figures, including internet influencer Adam Shamil and former *Unduk Ngadau* (Beauty pageant) participant Claryssa Henry Ogodong, in cameo roles. Additionally, he recruited a talented young ensemble, whose performances contribute to the film's realism and emotional depth. This casting approach highlights the film as a product of community collaboration, incorporating individuals from diverse backgrounds to create an inclusive cinematic experience.

The lighting in *Van Lihing* represents a significant improvement from Abbas's earlier work, such as *Home of Hope*. Particular emphasis is placed on night scenes, where strategic lighting enhances the horror aesthetic. Indoor lighting is meticulously designed to evoke an ominous atmosphere, reinforcing the supernatural themes. The interplay of light and shadow effectively blends horror and comedy, a hallmark of Abbas's directorial vision.

The props used in the telemovie reflect a mix of high and low-budget acquisitions. Certain key items, such as Van Lihing's weapons is being given attention due to Marc Abbas wanting to show the lethality of Van Lihing, adding authenticity to the mise-en-scène. However, due to financial constraints, other props were either purchased commercially or handmade, leading to a variance in quality. Abbas places a strong emphasis on storytelling rather than production value, maintaining the film's engagement even within financial constraints.



Figure 6.20: The props used by Van Lihing include a firearm that imitates the real-life MP5, which was costly to acquire (Source: Abbas, 2018)

The cinematography in *Van Lihing* favours handheld camera techniques, utilising Digital Single Lense Reflex (DSLR) camera equipped with various lenses to achieve a dynamic visual style. This approach enables Abbas to manipulate depth of field effectively, drawing attention to specific subjects or objects within the frame. Unlike his previous productions, which employed CCD camera, this telemovie benefits from the enhanced sensitivity of DSLR sensors, allowing for a richer visual aesthetic.



Figure 6.21: The use of a DSLR with varied lenses and its utilisation of depth of field creates a bokeh effect in the frame, drawing focus to the subject (Source: Abbas, 2018)

Filmed in 1080p Full HD, *Van Lihing* surpasses the resolution quality of Abbas's earlier works, such as *Home of Hope*, which was produced in 480p. The increased resolution contributes to sharper imagery, particularly in low-light scenes, as demonstrated in the confrontation between Van Lihing and the *Hantu Congkak*. The use of lighting in

conjunction with DSLR capabilities enables the director to craft an immersive atmosphere, reinforcing the horror-comedy blend central to the film's narrative.



Figure 6.22: The DSLR's sensor capabilities, combined with proper lighting, contribute to the creation of a visually sharp low-light scene (Source: Abbas, 2018)

Van Lihing efficiently balances storytelling, visual execution, and budgetary constraints to deliver a compelling telemovie. Through meticulous attention to setting, costume, performance, lighting, and cinematography, Marc Abbas created a film that overcomes budget constraints by skilfully mixing horror and comedy genres with meaningful cultural elements. The visuals do not only make the film engaging but also reflect the shared identity of the Kadazandusun community, highlighting the value of coming together despite differences.

6.21.3 The Textual Analysis of *Van Lihing*

Marc Abbas' *Van Lihing* serves as a significant cultural text that encapsulates the complexities of Kadazandusun identity through its narrative structure and mise-en-scène. The telemovie negotiates indigenous representation by employing the Malay language as its primary medium, ensuring broader accessibility while incorporating the Kadazan language selectively for comedic effect. This linguistic choice reflects a contestation between cultural

preservation and pragmatic storytelling, as the use of Malay facilitates a wider reach while simultaneously highlighting the marginalisation of indigenous languages in mainstream media. Through dialogue, such as Van Lihing's playful rejection of the term *pak cik* (uncle), the film subtly critiques the encroachment of dominant national narratives on indigenous identity, asserting the protagonist's self-awareness and resistance to imposed labels. However, while Kadazan phrases appear sporadically, their relegation to humour rather than meaningful discourse suggests an ongoing negotiation of cultural expression within a larger national framework. The film, therefore, positions itself within the discourse of linguistic hybridity, reflecting the reality of many Kadazandusun people who navigate multiple languages in their daily interactions.

Perseverance is central to *Van Lihing*, both thematically and in its production ethos. Unlike conventional good-versus-evil narratives that rely on retributive justice (Noletto, 2018), the telemovie advocates reconciliation, with Van Lihing offering supernatural entities an opportunity for reformation rather than destruction. This approach aligns with Abbas' storytelling philosophy, where morality serves as a guiding principle, reinforcing a belief that positive transformation is preferable to punitive measures. This is exemplified in a pivotal scene where Van Lihing persuades the *Buakar* (water monster) to abandon its violent tendencies and instead establish a fish barbecue business, demonstrating the film's emphasis on rehabilitation over eradication. Beyond its narrative, the production itself embodies perseverance, as Abbas, working within financial constraints, relied on community support to bring the telemovie to life. The involvement of local actors and limited technical resources highlights the resilience of independent Kadazandusun filmmaking, showcasing how creative storytelling can thrive despite economic limitations. The film's ability to balance horror and comedy through careful lighting choices—especially in night scenes—further

demonstrates Abbas' perseverance in refining his cinematic techniques, contrasting the improved mise-en-scène of *Van Lihing* with the more rudimentary aesthetics of his earlier work, such as *Home of Hope*.

Self-definition emerges as a key theme in *Van Lihing*, with the titular character symbolising a reimagined Kadazandusun hero. While loosely inspired by the Western figure of Van Helsing, Van Lihing is indigenised through cultural reinterpretation, blending local traditions with global archetypes. The very name *Van Lihing*—a fusion of *van* (a transport vehicle) and *lihing* (a traditional rice wine)—reflects a playful yet deliberate assertion of indigenous identity within the framework of popular cinema. This self-definition extends beyond the protagonist to the film's portrayal of supernatural beings, where international horror influences are recontextualised through a Kadazandusun lens. For instance, the inclusion of the *Buakar* alongside the *Orang Minyak* (Malay folklore) and a possessed nun (inspired by Western horror) illustrates the blending of indigenous, national, and global mythologies. However, this synthesis is not a passive absorption of external influences but rather an act of cultural agency—Abbas reclaims these narratives, embedding them within a distinctly Kadazandusun worldview. The film's mise-en-scène further reinforces this self-definition, with costumes and settings carefully curated to reflect both indigenous and broader cultural signifiers. Van Lihing's attire, modelled after classic monster hunters, aligns with Western cinematic tropes, yet his mannerisms and dialogue firmly root him within the Kadazandusun cultural sphere.

Beyond these categories, *Van Lihing* also addresses the issue of fragmentation within Kadazandusun identity while simultaneously reaffirming shared cultural values. The telemovie presents a world where traditional beliefs and modernity coexist, reflecting the real-life challenges faced by the Kadazandusun people in maintaining their heritage amid

cultural assimilation. Through Van Lihing's interactions with both supernatural and human characters, the film highlights the importance of unity in preserving indigenous identity. The inclusion of diverse supporting characters—men and women of different backgrounds joining Van Lihing in his quest—demonstrates the collective strength of the Kadazandusun community, reinforcing their shared cultural heritage despite socio-political divisions. Moreover, the film's balanced use of humour and horror makes these cultural narratives accessible, ensuring their transmission to younger generations without feeling didactic.

Ultimately, *Van Lihing* stands as a testament to the evolving landscape of Kadazandusun storytelling, demonstrating how indigenous filmmakers negotiate cultural representation, persevere against structural limitations, and define their own narratives within a globalised world. By integrating contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition, the telemovie not only entertains but also asserts a Kadazandusun cinematic voice that is both adaptive and deeply rooted in its heritage. Through its engagement with fragmentation and unity, *Van Lihing* reinforces the notion that indigenous identity is not static but continually reshaped through storytelling, making it a crucial cultural artefact in contemporary Sabah cinema.

6.22 The Imagined Community in *Van Lihing*

Marc Abbas' *Van Lihing* presents an indigenous cinematic experience that, while narratively individualistic, contributes to the creation of a cohesive collective identity for the Kadazandusun people. Through storytelling, shared mythology, and moral values, the film illustrates how fragmented representations of Kadazandusun individuals and subgroups are woven into a broader sense of ethnic unity. This analysis applies concept of the Imagined

Community, examining how the telemovie reflects an imagined, sovereign, limited, and community representation of the Kadazandusun people.

The imagined nature of the Kadazandusun community in *Van Lihing* is constructed through its use of cultural mythology and moral narratives. Despite existing as a diverse group with multiple dialects, traditions, and sub-ethnic distinctions, the telemovie provides a unifying cultural reference that allows Kadazandusun audiences to collectively recognise themselves in the story. The inclusion of supernatural elements, such as the *Buakar* and *Orang Minyak*, recontextualises indigenous folklore within a contemporary framework, ensuring cultural continuity across generations. Furthermore, the film's protagonist, Van Lihing, embodies a distinctly Kadazandusun hero—one who does not simply eradicate supernatural threats but seeks rehabilitation, reinforcing communal values of coexistence and reconciliation. By integrating these familiar cultural elements into its narrative, *Van Lihing* enables audiences to engage with a shared identity that extends beyond personal or village-based affiliations, strengthening an imagined cohesion among the Kadazandusun people.

The film also speaks to the sovereign aspirations of the Kadazandusun people in defining their own cultural narratives. Although Kadazandusun identity has historically been marginalised within mainstream Malaysian cinema, *Van Lihing* asserts a form of narrative sovereignty by centring indigenous experiences, beliefs, and moral frameworks. The film does not merely adopt global horror conventions but instead indigenises them, as seen in the transformation of Van Helsing into Van Lihing—a character whose name itself integrates a local cultural element (*lihing*, a traditional rice wine). This creative reinterpretation highlights the agency of Kadazandusun filmmakers in reclaiming representation on their own terms, rather than conforming to external portrayals. Furthermore, the film's reliance

on community-driven production, with local actors and grassroots collaboration, reinforces the autonomy of Kadazandusun storytelling traditions. By asserting control over its own cinematic discourse, *Van Lihing* affirms the sovereignty of the Kadazandusun in shaping their own cultural image, countering historical narratives of erasure or misrepresentation.

Despite this assertion of cultural autonomy, *Van Lihing* also illustrates the limited nature of Kadazandusun identity, particularly through language and cultural hybridity. The telemovie primarily utilises Malay as its medium of communication, with Kadazan phrases appearing sporadically, often for comedic effect. This linguistic choice reflects a broader negotiation between cultural preservation and accessibility, mirroring the reality of many Kadazandusun individuals who navigate multiple languages in daily life. While this limits the direct transmission of Kadazan as a dominant cultural marker, it simultaneously highlights the adaptability of the community in retaining indigenous identity within a broader national context. Additionally, the film's blend of Western horror archetypes with Kadazandusun storytelling methods—such as the hero's journey and moral resolution—demonstrates the selective incorporation of external influences while maintaining a distinctly indigenous essence. This strategic hybridisation ensures that Kadazandusun culture remains visible within modern narratives, albeit within the constraints imposed by dominant linguistic and cinematic conventions.

Most crucially, Van Lihing constructs a sense of community through its representation of shared cultural values, reinforcing the moral and ethical frameworks that unify the Kadazandusun people. The film's emphasis on benevolence over destruction reflects a deeply ingrained communal philosophy, where reconciliation is favoured over punitive action. Van Lihing's approach to supernatural entities—offering them opportunities for redemption rather than outright elimination—mirrors the Kadazandusun value of

fostering harmony within the collective. Moreover, the inclusion of diverse characters from different backgrounds, who come together in support of Van Lihing's quest, symbolises the collective strength of the community. Even the film's production process, which relied on volunteer actors and community goodwill, reflects a communal approach to storytelling that prioritises collective participation over individual recognition. This intrinsic reliance on shared cultural participation highlights the idea that Kadazandusun identity is not merely a static heritage but an evolving, participatory construct.

In essence, *Van Lihing* demonstrates that while Kadazandusun identity may appear fragmented at an individual level—expressed through linguistic hybridity, regional variations, and external influences—it contributes to the formation of a cohesive Imagined Community. By embedding shared mythology, moral frameworks, and community-driven storytelling into the narrative, the telemovie constructs a collective image of the Kadazandusun people that transcends individual differences. It reinforces the notion that indigenous identity is not defined by rigid homogeneity but by the ability to adapt, reinterpret, and sustain cultural continuity across generations. As such, *Van Lihing* stands as both a cultural artefact and a medium of unity, demonstrating how indigenous storytelling remains a vital force in shaping the collective consciousness of the Kadazandusun people.

6.23 The Fourth Cinema in *Van Lihing*

The concept of Fourth Cinema, as articulated by Barry Barclay, provides a critical lens for examining Marc Abbas' *Van Lihing*. This framework considers indigenous filmmaking beyond conventional industry structures, focusing on storytelling that upholds the values, histories, and experiences of indigenous communities. Through the interplay of

content, production, and reception, Abbas' film serves as an essential medium for preserving Kadazandusun cultural heritage while addressing the fragmentation of indigenous identity.

Content in *Van Lihing* reflects a deeply rooted Kadazandusun worldview, interweaving folklore, mythology, and moral storytelling to reinforce a shared cultural consciousness. The narrative follows a traditional hero's journey but subverts conventional supernatural tropes by prioritising redemption over destruction. Van Lihing, as the protagonist, acts as a mediator between the human and supernatural realms, mirroring the community's historical engagement with spiritual beliefs. The film's use of indigenous mythological entities such as the *Buakar* revitalises oral traditions, ensuring their continuity in contemporary storytelling. Furthermore, linguistic choices play a crucial role in negotiating cultural representation. While Malay serves as the primary medium to enhance accessibility, the strategic use of Kadazan phrases injects authenticity, demonstrating the delicate balance between cultural preservation and pragmatic storytelling. This hybridity mirrors the lived experiences of many Kadazandusun people, who navigate multiple linguistic and cultural identities in daily life. By embedding these elements within its narrative, *Van Lihing* functions as a cinematic artefact that reinforces the resilience of indigenous identity.

The production of *Van Lihing* highlights the challenges and innovations within independent Kadazandusun filmmaking, exemplifying Abbas' commitment to cultural preservation despite financial limitations. Abbas relies on community participation to bring his stories to life, ensuring that indigenous voices remain central to the filmmaking process. The film's mise-en-scène integrates familiar landscapes—rivers, jungles, and recreational areas—aligning supernatural elements with real-world locations that hold cultural significance for the Kadazandusun. Costuming further reflects the interplay between local

identity and global influences, with Van Lihing's attire drawing from Western monster-hunter archetypes while remaining grounded in indigenous reinterpretation. The use of DSLR cameras enhances the film's visual appeal, marking a significant evolution from Abbas' earlier productions. Despite budgetary constraints, the film's cinematography and lighting exhibit technical refinement, illustrating the perseverance of indigenous filmmakers in overcoming industry barriers. This approach embodies the principles of Fourth Cinema, where indigenous directors operate outside dominant production systems, creating films that remain deeply tied to their community's lived realities.

Reception plays a crucial role in determining the impact of *Van Lihing* on Kadazandusun identity, reinforcing the importance of film as a medium for cultural continuity. By integrating humour with supernatural horror, Abbas ensures that his work is accessible to a broad audience, making cultural narratives more engaging for younger generations. The film's popularity within local circles highlights the growing demand for indigenous representation in media, demonstrating how storytelling can foster unity amidst cultural fragmentation. Furthermore, the decision to distribute DVD copies locally, as well as making past works available online, exemplifies Abbas' commitment to community-oriented filmmaking. The participation of local internet influencers and cultural figures further strengthens audience engagement, ensuring that the film remains a relevant and celebrated part of Kadazandusun cultural discourse. While *Van Lihing* does not explicitly position itself as a political statement, its emphasis on communal storytelling and moral integrity inherently strengthens the presence of indigenous voices in film.

Through content, production, and reception, *Van Lihing* exemplifies the role of filmmaking in preserving Kadazandusun heritage, providing a platform for indigenous identity to thrive. The film addresses cultural fragmentation by reinforcing shared

mythologies, language, and values, ensuring that Kadazandusun traditions remain visible within contemporary media. Abbas' approach aligns with the broader objectives of Fourth Cinema, where indigenous storytelling is not merely an act of artistic expression but a means of safeguarding and revitalising cultural identity. In an era of increasing cultural homogenisation, independent filmmaking serves as a crucial mechanism for indigenous communities to reclaim their narratives, fostering a more cohesive and unified sense of self.

6.24 The Benevolence of *Van Lihing* in Nurturing the Kadazandusun Identity

A central aspect of *Van Lihing* is encouraging the Kadazandusun community to embrace benevolence and bridge-building, fostering meaningful relationships despite differences. The protagonist, Van Lihing, embodies this principle, serving as an arbiter of good for both humans and supernatural beings, even as he struggles with amnesia. Through his character, Abbas highlights the Kadazandusun's potential to extend kindness even to those who may cause them harm, reinforcing a cultural ethos of reconciliation and communal support. This aligns with Abbas' directorial preference for storytelling that upholds moral values over the glorification of wickedness.

A pivotal theme in the telemovie is redemption and transformation, wherein even the most malevolent beings are given the opportunity to change. This is exemplified in Van Lihing's interaction with the *Buakar* (Water Monster), whom he persuades to cease harming people and instead to contribute positively to the community. This act of guidance mirrors Abbas' aspirations for the Kadazandusun—to be a people who gently advise and uplift one another, fostering collective growth and harmony. By promoting rehabilitation over destruction, *Van Lihing* offers a vision for addressing the fragmentation of the Kadazandusun community, illustrating how a shared moral compass can unify diverse subgroups.

The telemovie also advocates for the Kadazandusun to become mediators between different groups, overcoming internal divisions by emphasising common values. Given that the Kadazandusun comprise over 45 distinct ethnic groups, unity is often challenged by cultural and linguistic differences. *Van Lihing* suggests that by focusing on shared goals and mutual understanding, these groups can be united, strengthening their collective identity. Abbas' narrative underscores the need for a common culture and shared purpose, elements that are currently lacking but essential for building a cohesive Kadazandusun identity in Sabah.

As seen in Abbas' earlier work, *Home of Hope*, the role of elders as protectors and guides is reaffirmed in *Van Lihing*. The telemovie suggests that senior members of the Kadazandusun community must lead and mentor the younger generation, ensuring the preservation of cultural knowledge and ethical principles. By depicting an elderly protagonist who embodies wisdom, justice, and compassion, Abbas reinforces the idea that the future of the Kadazandusun relies on strong moral guidance from its elders.

Drawing from Imagined Community, *Van Lihing* contributes to the construction of a unified Kadazandusun identity by integrating shared mythology, moral values, and community-driven storytelling. Despite the diversity within the Kadazandusun, the film provides a common cultural reference point, allowing audiences to see themselves within the narrative. The inclusion of supernatural entities such as the *Buakar* and *Orang Minyak* modernises indigenous folklore while ensuring its relevance for future generations.

The film also asserts Kadazandusun cultural sovereignty, challenging how mainstream Malaysian cinema has often overlooked indigenous voices and stories. Abbas transforms the Western archetype of Van Helsing into a localised hero, Van Lihing, whose name itself embodies Kadazandusun culture (*lihing*, a traditional rice wine). This creative

reimagining highlights Abbas' intention to establish a distinct Kadazandusun cinematic identity within a globalised media landscape.

However, the film also highlights the linguistic challenges faced by the Kadazandusun. While Malay is the primary language used, Kadazan phrases appear selectively, often for comedic effect. This reflects the reality of many Kadazandusun individuals who navigate multiple languages in daily life. Though this increases accessibility, it also underscores the ongoing struggle for linguistic preservation in contemporary media.

Aligned with Fourth Cinema, *Van Lihing* embodies indigenous storytelling that prioritises self-representation and community participation over conventional industry structures. Abbas ensures that Kadazandusun perspectives remain central to the filmmaking process, integrating local landscapes, folklore, and traditions into the visual and narrative design of the film.

The telemovie's production relies on community involvement, with local actors and grassroots support playing a crucial role in its creation. The use of familiar landscapes—rivers, jungles, and villages—aligns supernatural elements with real-world locations, reinforcing the film's authenticity. Despite financial constraints, Abbas enhances the film's quality through effective cinematography, natural lighting, and DSLR technology, marking an evolution from his earlier productions.

In terms of audience engagement, *Van Lihing* effectively uses humour and horror to make Kadazandusun cultural narratives accessible to a wider audience. The film's success within local circles indicates a growing demand for indigenous representation in Malaysian cinema. Abbas' approach to distribution—selling DVDs locally and making past works

available online—demonstrates a commitment to community-oriented filmmaking, ensuring that Kadazandusun stories reach and resonate with their intended audiences.

Van Lihing strengthens Kadazandusun identity, addresses fragmentation, and contributes to the study of Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema. Through its themes of benevolence, redemption, and unity, the film encourages the Kadazandusun to act as mediators and problem solvers, bridging division within their community. Abbas' storytelling affirms the sovereignty of Kadazandusun narratives, countering cultural erasure while fostering a collective identity.

By integrating mythology, ethical values, and community participation, *Van Lihing* provides a model for a stronger, more cohesive Kadazandusun identity. The film highlights the role of elders as guides, the need for linguistic and cultural negotiation, and the power of storytelling to unite diverse subgroups. Through *Van Lihing*, Marc Abbas not only entertains but also ensures the preservation and revitalisation of Kadazandusun heritage in contemporary cinema.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

7.1 Introduction

This research has thoroughly explored the portrayal of Kadazandusun identity in selected telemovies, utilising the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Community, and the principles of Fourth Cinema as analytical tools. By exploring themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition, the research has demonstrated how Kadazandusun filmmakers navigate historical fragmentation, cultural erosion, and socio-political challenges to assert indigenous narratives. The analysis highlights how these films function as both cultural artefacts and catalysts for self-determination, reinforcing collective identity while adapting to contemporary reality.

Through the Imagined Community theoretical framework, the study has illustrated how Kadazandusun filmmakers construct a cohesive ethnic identity despite linguistic and socio-economic divisions. The telemovies has constructed an imagined cultural continuity, fostering a shared consciousness among the 45 ethnic groups under the Kadazandusun umbrella. Fourth Cinema theoretical framework has further contextualised the role of indigenous filmmaking as a form of cultural resistance, demonstrating how grassroots production methods, community involvement, and alternative distribution strategies sustain Kadazandusun storytelling in an increasingly commercialised industry.

Although these theoretical approaches have notable strengths, they also come with certain limitations. The Imagined Community framework, originally developed within a nation-state paradigm, does not adequately address the complexities of postcolonial

indigenous identity formation. Similarly, Fourth Cinema's emphasis on anti-commercialism may conflict with the financial sustainability required for long-term indigenous filmmaking. Nevertheless, integrating these frameworks has provided a nuanced understanding of how Kadazandusun telemovies articulate identity, cultural resilience, and self-representation.

Moving forward, there are several areas that merit further exploration. Cross-cultural collaborations—within the Kadazandusun community, across Sabah and Sarawak, nationally, and internationally—could expand indigenous narratives and strengthen cultural exchange. The role of digital technology in Kadazandusun filmmaking is also critical, with streaming platforms offering new opportunities for wider distribution while raising questions about cultural integrity. Additionally, policy support and financial sustainability continue to be urgent issues. Increased government investment, reserved cinema slots for indigenous films, and expanded funding opportunities could empower Kadazandusun filmmakers to produce higher-quality works and reach broader audiences.

In essence, Kadazandusun filmmaking is more than an artistic endeavour—it is a means of cultural preservation, resistance, and adaptation. As globalisation and socio-political shifts continue to challenge indigenous identity, these telemovies serve as vital repositories of cultural memory and agency. Future research should focus on sustaining and strengthening this identity, ensuring that Kadazandusun narratives endure for generations to come. By embracing digital innovation, fostering collaborative storytelling, and advocating for institutional support, Kadazandusun filmmakers can continue to shape a resilient and evolving cinematic tradition.

7.2 Research Findings

7.2.1 The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework and Kadazandusun Filmmaking

This thesis has examined the representation of Kadazandusun identity in selected telemovies through the themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition. By applying the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework to the works of Tony Francis Gitom, Ramli Ahmad, Alfred Ujin, and Marcellus Abbas, this analysis has demonstrated how these films address the complexities of Kadazandusun identity, reflecting historical fragmentation, cultural erosion, and resilience.

Through the theme of contest and negotiation, the telemovies highlight the internal and external challenges faced by the Kadazandusun community, including socio-economic disparities, linguistic decline, religious differences, and historical traumas. *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* and *Esther Esthera* address these divisions by portraying characters who navigate their indigenous heritage amidst the rapid modernisation of Malaysia. *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau* further explores intra-community tensions, emphasising the necessity of competent leadership in fostering unity. Similarly, *Kobilangan 2* and *Kobilangan 3* depict internal conflicts within the Kadazandusun community, illustrating the need for reconciliation and collective identity-building.

Perseverance emerges as a key theme, demonstrating the community's resilience in preserving cultural traditions, navigating socio-political challenges, and sustaining indigenous filmmaking. *Assanggup Minta Puji* presents filmmaking as an act of cultural assertion, emphasising self-reliance and collective effort. Likewise, *Home of Hope* reinforces the importance of compassion, advocating for social responsibility as a means of addressing community fragmentation. These narratives highlight that Kadazandusun identity

is not merely a relic of the past but an evolving construct shaped by contemporary struggles and aspirations.

Self-definition is central to these telemovies, with indigenous filmmakers reclaiming their narratives to challenge marginalisation and reinforce a sense of belonging. *Van Lihing* exemplifies this process by reimagining Kadazandusun mythology within a framework of moral guidance and community solidarity. Through characters such as Van Lihing and Hope, the telemovies present alternative portrayals of leadership and masculinity, advocating for benevolence and mentorship as vital components of identity preservation. Furthermore, *Kobilangan 3* expands the discourse on indigenous unity by incorporating the Murut community, fostering a broader indigenous consciousness that extends beyond the Kadazandusun.

In summary, these telemovies function as both cultural artefacts and catalysts for indigenous self-determination, reinforcing the Kadazandusun's agency in shaping their identity. By engaging with themes of contest/negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition, the films articulate the ongoing struggle for cultural continuity while promoting unity, resilience, and adaptive identity formation. As the Kadazandusun continue to navigate modernisation and socio-political shifts, these telemovies serve as a vital medium for preserving indigenous narratives, fostering collective memory, and strengthening cultural pride.

7.2.2 The Imagined Community and Kadazandusun Filmmaking

The thesis explores how the fragmented Kadazandusun identity, as portrayed in eight telemovies, contributes to the formation of a collective ethnic image. Using Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community framework, the analysis identifies how filmmakers

employ shared cultural elements to construct a cohesive Kadazandusun identity despite linguistic, historical, and socio-political divisions. By exploring the components of imagined, sovereign, limited, and community, these telemovies reinforce cultural continuity, resilience, and unity among the Kadazandusun people.

The imagined aspect of identity is crafted through storytelling that weaves together different historical periods, fostering a sense of shared heritage. The portrayal of pre-colonial, post-independence, and modern Kadazandusun realities highlights an evolving cultural identity that endures despite external influences. Linguistic shifts, particularly the contrast between fluent Dusun speakers in the past and Malay-dominant speakers in the present, illustrate the erosion of indigenous language while reinforcing connections among the 45 ethnic groups under the Kadazandusun umbrella.

Sovereignty is a recurring theme, with the telemovies highlighting the Kadazandusun's political and economic struggles, while stressing the importance of cultural protection and preservation. The narratives illustrate shifts from self-sufficiency in pre-colonial times to contemporary struggles against land dispossession and external dominance, underscoring the need for cultural and political reclamation. This portrayal of sovereignty reflects both historical reality and contemporary aspirations.

The concept of limitation is evident in how Kadazandusun identity is framed within distinct geographical and cultural boundaries. While outside influences are recognised, the telemovies highlight the internal divisions within the Kadazandusun community caused by differences in language, economic status, and generational changes. However, shared cultural markers, such as traditional attire, communal dining, and indigenous languages, reinforce the idea of a singular yet diverse ethnic community.

A strong sense of community is established through collective struggles and cultural heritage. Character interactions reflect interdependence in resisting external threats, preserving oral traditions, and maintaining indigenous practices. The narrative structures create an ongoing dialogue between past and present generations, illustrating an intrinsic cultural unity. Additionally, the production processes of these telemovies, rooted in community collaboration through the *rukut-rukut* system, mirror their on-screen representation, demonstrating that Kadazandusun identity is actively constructed rather than passively inherited.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that these telemovies play a crucial role in unifying fragmented representations of Kadazandusun identity into a collective ethnic image. By showcasing shared language, historical struggles, and cultural practices, the films construct an Imagined Community that transcends individual differences. Despite internal divisions and external challenges, the telemovies affirm that Kadazandusun identity remains intact, continuously shaped by historical memory and contemporary realities. This research highlights the significance of cultural preservation and collective resilience, showing that indigenous storytelling is a powerful means of sustaining and reinforcing a cohesive ethnic identity.

7.2.3 The Fourth Cinema and Kadazandusun Filmmaking

The thesis examines the vital role of filmmaking in preserving Kadazandusun cultural heritage and reinforcing a unified sense of indigenous identity through the framework of Fourth Cinema. By analysing the content, production, and reception of eight Kadazandusun telemovies, the research demonstrates how filmmaking serves as both a medium of cultural resistance and an avenue for indigenous storytelling authority. The

findings affirm that indigenous cinema not only captures but also actively revitalise Kadazandusun traditions, values, and languages, countering the effects of cultural fragmentation and socio-political marginalisation.

In terms of content, these telemovies reclaim historical narratives, depict linguistic struggles, and address socio-political issues relevant to the Kadazandusun community. Films such as *Orang Bilang Ah Chong* and *Esther Esthera* navigate historical and contemporary tensions, highlighting the complexities of identity negotiation. Similarly, *Van Lihing* and *Kobilangan 3* reinstate indigenous mythologies and oral traditions, reinforcing cultural continuity through narrative cinema. These works challenge dominant representations, allowing Kadazandusun voices to take control of their own histories and experiences.

The production processes of these films exemplify the principles of Fourth Cinema, emphasising community involvement, indigenous agency, and self-sufficiency. Directors such as Tony Francis Gitom, Alfred Ujin, and Marc Abbas employ alternative filmmaking methods, including collective resource-sharing, guerrilla-style cinematography, and grassroots funding. This approach ensures that filmmaking remains accessible despite financial constraints, fostering a sustainable indigenous cinema movement. Moreover, the aesthetic and technical choices within these films—ranging from naturalistic mise-en-scène to the use of local dialects—reinforce authenticity, aligning with Fourth Cinema's rejection of mainstream commercialisation.

Audience reception plays a crucial role in validating the cultural significance of Kadazandusun telemovies. As evidenced in *Home of Hope* and *Ongkukut Sebagu Keningau*, these films resonate deeply with local viewers, encouraging discourse on indigenous identity, socio-political challenges, and cultural preservation. The strategic incorporation of Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, languages fosters inclusivity, allowing fragmented indigenous

groups to reconnect through shared narratives. Despite limited mainstream distribution, the increasing local demand for Kadazandusun films signals a growing recognition of indigenous storytelling as an essential component of cultural survival.

This study confirms that filmmaking is more than an artistic endeavour for the Kadazandusun—it is a form of cultural advocacy, ensuring that indigenous narratives are not only documented but actively sustained. By structuring critical discourses around content, production, and reception, the research highlights how Kadazandusun telemovies function as repositories of cultural memory while simultaneously adapting to contemporary realities. The alignment with Fourth Cinema principles underscores the necessity of indigenous self-representation in resisting external influences and reinforcing cultural cohesion.

As globalisation and cultural homogenisation continue to challenge indigenous identities, the role of Kadazandusun filmmaking becomes increasingly vital. These telemovies serve as more than entertainment; they act as tools of resistance, education, and community engagement, safeguarding the storytelling authority essential to indigenous self-determination. Moving forward, expanding access to indigenous cinema through policy support, funding, and digital platforms could further empower Kadazandusun filmmakers, ensuring that their narratives endure for future generations.

7.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, along with the Imagined Community and Fourth Cinema Theoretical Frameworks

This study has demonstrated that Kadazandusun telemovies serve as a vital medium for indigenous self-determination, cultural preservation, and identity construction. By applying the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework as well as Benedict Anderson's Imagined

Community and Fourth Cinema theoretical frameworks, the research has critically examined how these films negotiate the complexities of Kadazandusun identity amidst historical fragmentation and socio-political marginalisation. Each theoretical approach offers distinct strengths while also presenting certain limitations in addressing the nuanced realities of Kadazandusun representation in cinema.

The Indigenous Film Analysis Framework provides a culturally grounded lens that prioritises indigenous perspectives, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how Kadazandusun telemovies articulate themes of contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition. Its strength lies in its ability to highlight indigenous agency and the reclamation of narratives that challenge dominant representations. By centring on cultural continuity and resilience, this framework effectively reveals how filmmaking functions as both an artistic and political act. However, its limitation lies in the risk of essentialising indigenous identity, potentially overlooking the fluid and hybrid nature of cultural expression in contemporary Kadazandusun society. Additionally, while it excels in analysing content and thematic structures, it is less effective in addressing broader socio-political and economic factors influencing indigenous media production.

Anderson's Imagined Community offers valuable insights into how Kadazandusun telemovies contribute to the construction of a collective ethnic identity despite linguistic, historical, and socio-political divisions. It effectively demonstrates how shared cultural markers, historical narratives, and cinematic storytelling reinforce a sense of belonging among a fragmented ethnic groups. The framework's strength lies in its capacity to explain the role of media in forging symbolic connections between diverse subgroups, thereby promoting cultural unity. However, it is primarily a theoretical construct developed within a nation-state paradigm, which may not fully account for the unique dynamics of indigenous

identity formation in a postcolonial context. Its emphasis on national consciousness can inadvertently downplay the internal complexities of Kadazandusun identity, such as the interplay between tradition and modernity or the tensions arising from economic disparities and external influences.

Fourth Cinema provides a critical framework that foregrounds indigenous self-representation, community-based production, and resistance against mainstream commercialisation. It aligns closely with the reality of the Kadazandusun filmmaking, where directors employ grassroots methods, local dialects, and communal storytelling traditions to sustain an autonomous cinematic movement. This framework's strength lies in its emphasis on filmmaking as an act of cultural advocacy, reinforcing indigenous agency and storytelling sovereignty. It effectively captures the interplay between content, production, and reception, demonstrating how Kadazandusun telemovies function as repositories of collective memory. However, Fourth Cinema's primary limitation is its focus on resistance and opposition to dominant cinematic forms, which may not fully acknowledge the strategic adaptations indigenous filmmakers employ to navigate mainstream distribution channels. Additionally, its emphasis on anti-commercialism may conflict with the practical need for financial sustainability in Kadazandusun fillmmaking.

Despite these theoretical limitations, the integration of these frameworks provides a comprehensive understanding of how Kadazandusun telemovies engage with identity formation, cultural resilience, and community representation. The study confirms that filmmaking is more than an artistic endeavour; it is a critical tool for indigenous self-definition, ensuring that Kadazandusun narratives are preserved and adapted in the face of modernisation and socio-political shifts. Moving forward, further research could explore how digital platforms, policy support, and cross-cultural collaborations can expand the reach

of Kadazandusun filmmaking, reinforcing its role as a dynamic and evolving medium of cultural expression.

7.4 Suggestions for Future Study

An in-depth exploration of cross-cultural collaborations could enhance Kadazandusun filmmaking. This can be approached from four perspectives. Firstly, intra-Kadazandusun collaboration involves fostering partnerships among the 45 ethnic groups under the Kadazandusun identity. For instance, Alfred Ujin's telemovie *Kobilangan 3* integrates Dusun and Murut cultures. Expanding this concept to incorporate diverse Kadazandusun ethnicities could create narratives that celebrate differences while highlighting shared histories, cultures, and values. Such efforts would help bridge fragmentation and strengthen collective identity.

Secondly, inter-state collaboration between Kadazandusun filmmakers in Sabah and their counterparts in Sarawak could enrich indigenous storytelling and promote cross-cultural exchange. Thirdly, national collaboration with filmmakers from Peninsular Malaysia could strengthen national unity while providing Kadazandusun filmmakers with opportunities to negotiate their identity between indigenous and national spheres, thus enhancing their presence on the national stage. Lastly, international collaboration, whether with global indigenous communities or the wider film industry, could propel Kadazandusun filmmaking to international recognition, offering access to new storytelling techniques, technical expertise, and broader distribution networks.

The role of digital technology in Kadazandusun filmmaking warrants further study. The increasing accessibility of affordable digital equipment has significantly impacted production quality, with many filmmakers transitioning from CCD to DSLR and eventually

mirrorless camera, allowing for greater creative flexibility. Future research could critically examine how digital platforms influence the production and distribution of Kadazandusun films, particularly through the internet. The advancement of filmmaking technology provides benefits in cinematography, lighting, and overall production quality. Moreover, online distribution and marketing have become crucial, as demonstrated by the success of *Sinakagon-Bloodline* (2024), which secured a release on Netflix.

Future studies could explore strategies for effectively leveraging internet streaming services, evaluating their advantages and limitations compared to conventional cinema screenings. Such research would benefit emerging filmmakers as well as established directors seeking to expand their reach. Additionally, digital platforms and international film festivals present viable alternatives for showcasing Kadazandusun films that may face local censorship challenges due to cultural or religious sensitivities.

Policy support and financial sustainability remain critical areas for Kadazandusun filmmakers. Limited funding often results in low-budget productions, affecting overall quality. Given the relatively small Kadazandusun population, these filmmakers face challenges competing with more established Malaysian counterparts, particularly when federal funding is limited. One possible solution is for the Sabah state government to become a primary financier for Kadazandusun and Sabahan filmmakers. Another policy proposal involves Sabah local cinemas reserving screening slots for Kadazandusun films. Research in this area could offer valuable insights for filmmakers in advocating for government and industry support, fostering collaboration between cultural and commercial stakeholders.

A final consideration is the long-term sustainability of Kadazandusun identity in filmmaking. If the community reaches a unified consensus on this identity, maintaining and strengthening it will require further research, not only in policy but also in cultural studies.

Bridging intra-community differences and fostering a deeper understanding among the 45 ethnic groups under the Kadazandusun umbrella is essential. Developing systematic strategies for preserving and promoting this identity could contribute to its long-term sustainability. In the future, this may extend to the broader *Momogun* identity, reinforcing indigenous representation through a collective and unified voice.

7.5 Conclusion and Closing Remarks

This study has critically examined the representation of Kadazandusun identity in selected telemovies, employing the Indigenous Film Analysis Framework, Benedict Anderson's Imagined Community, and Fourth Cinema as analytical lenses. By exploring themes of contest/ negotiation, perseverance, and self-definition, the research has demonstrated how Kadazandusun filmmakers navigate historical fragmentation, cultural erosion, and socio-political challenges to assert indigenous narratives. The findings confirm that these telemovies serve as both cultural artefacts and catalysts for self-determination, reinforcing collective identity while adapting to contemporary realities.

Through the Imagined Community theoretical framework, the study illustrates how Kadazandusun filmmakers construct a cohesive ethnic identity despite linguistic and socio-economic divisions. The films showed an imagined cultural continuity, fostering a shared consciousness among the 45 ethnic groups under the Kadazandusun umbrella. Fourth Cinema theoretical framework further contextualises the role of indigenous filmmaking as a form of cultural resistance, demonstrating how grassroots production methods, community involvement, and alternative distribution strategies sustain Kadazandusun storytelling in an increasingly commercialised industry.

Even though these theoretical approaches have significant strengths, each also comes with its own limitations. Applying these frameworks to the eight telemovies has given valuable insights into how Kadazandusun identity is shaped and expressed. Benedict Anderson's concept of the Imagined Community was originally applied to nation-states, but for the indigenous community in Sabah, the idea of a Kadazan's nation has long faded (Barlocco, 2013). This study explores its relevance in Kadazandusun telemovies, highlighting how shared histories, values, and cultural elements help shape a cohesive Kadazandusun identity. It also reflects past efforts to unify the indigenous community in Sabah under the Kadazan identity before the state's integration into the Malaysian federation.

This demonstrates that a shared culture existed among the indigenous community in Sabah long before the Kadazandusun identity was conceptualised. However, ongoing fragmentation necessitates bridging cultural gaps, as the annual Kaamatan celebration alone is insufficient to foster unity. Examining the Imagined Community through Kadazandusun representation in telemovies helps identify shared values that can serve as a unifying bond. By highlighting similarities among the 45 ethnic groups under the Kadazandusun's umbrella, these telemovies help individuals to recognise their cultural connections. Kadazandusun filmmakers have contributed to this unity by portraying fragmented identity while integrating shared cultural values. Their deliberate efforts to depict a cohesive Kadazandusun identity reflect a long-standing aspiration for unity.

The Fourth Cinema framework further supports this study by examining how Kadazandusun filmmakers preserve and sustain their identity through film. From production to reception, they consistently prioritise Kadazandusun representation. A challenge within Fourth Cinema is its traditional rejection of commercialisation due to concerns over external influence on indigenous filmmaking. However, Kadazandusun filmmakers do not entirely

reject collaboration with outsiders or external investments. Their unconventional production methods are driven by necessity rather than ideological resistance. Nonetheless, they ensure their films retain cultural authenticity by negotiating and navigating external influences.

Barry Barclay envisioned Fourth Cinema as a global indigenous movement (Murray, 2008), yet indigenous communities worldwide have interpreted it differently based on their unique circumstances. The indigenous Maori, for instance, have successfully embedded their identity within New Zealand's national framework, resulting in distinct recognition and treatment from both their government and society, including their representation in national media (Ngata, 2006). In contrast, the Kadazandusun encounter unique challenges in Malaysia, where Malay culture is officially recognised as the national identity, as the Kadazandusun only make up a small portion of the population. Additionally, the Kadazandusun community is concentrated solely within Sabah, making it challenging to replicate the Maori's achievements. Despite these challenges, Kadazandusun filmmakers continue to assert their cultural identity within Sabah, engaging with the broader Malaysian community while preserving their heritage.

Kadazandusun telemovies serve a greater purpose beyond entertainment or documentation. They function as cultural reaffirmation, reminding the Kadazandusun people of the intrinsic value of their identity, heritage, and stories. By reinforcing these values, these films unite the various ethnic groups under the broader Kadazandusun identity. In doing so, Kadazandusun filmmaking becomes a powerful tool for cultural preservation, identity formation, and community strengthening.

Moving forward, several areas warrant further exploration. Cross-cultural collaborations—within the Kadazandusun community, across Sabah and Sarawak, nationally, and internationally—could expand indigenous narratives and strengthen cultural

exchange. The role of digital technology in Kadazandusun filmmaking is also critical, with streaming platforms offering new opportunities for wider distribution while raising questions about cultural integrity. Additionally, policy support and financial sustainability remain pressing concerns. Increased government investment, reserved cinema slots for indigenous films, and expanded funding opportunities could empower Kadazandusun filmmakers to produce higher-quality works and reach broader audiences.

The Kadazandusun are undoubtedly fortunate to be part of Malaysian society, as they continue to enjoy freedoms and additional privileges enshrined in the Malaysia Agreement of 1963. Nonetheless, this does not imply that they are without obstacles. Past federal and state policies have significantly impacted the Kadazandusun, particularly in terms of cultural autonomy. Moreover, the ongoing issue of fragmentation within the community has further exacerbated the situation. This study proposes that film can serve as a bridge, fostering unity and a cohesive identity among the Kadazandusun.

This research aims to address the fragmentation of the Kadazandusun and offer solutions to reach a unanimous consensus in the near future. The researcher, as a member of the Kadazandusun community and a film enthusiast, hopes to see a more united Kadazandusun identity in the future. As the world changes rapidly, both nationally and internationally, it is imperative for the Kadazandusun to remain steadfast, embrace their differences, and recognise their shared land, histories, values, and culture. As expressed in the Kadazandusun language: *"Miiso id pisompuruan"* (Together in unity). A strengthened and cohesive identity will enable the Kadazandusun to face challenges concerning indigenous matters, both now and in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The examples of the *talaala* recitation in *Kobilangan 2*

Besinau's *talaala*:

Potiyaso ku ilo sayat (I sprinkled the seeds)

Dilo duntu ie timadang (Up till the tip of "Tarap" tree)

Otutunan ku dogo ie tinaru (I know well my people)

Madang dogo disuminding (We have been singing together)

Gumburod and Mindai's *talaala*

Gumburod:

Bayu mayu bayu (It is natural)

Roun do pinosusun (For the leaves to be scattered on the ground)

Kada oku sunsuyai (Don't brush me aside)

Sontoun oku mangayu (It is a year I have been trying)

Mindai:

Do kili-kili bimbilang (My bracelet is dancing)

Om kili tompuriyo (Dancing vivaciously while removing the bran of unripe rice)

Nunu kara'i nu dogon (Why are you chasing me?)

Tinan ku milang-bilang (I have nothing to offer)

Gumburod:

Sunsuyon id dumo (A bridge at the orchard)

Pinawantai id tiningkuyusan (Build on the slippery soil)

Amu ko nangku osianan (Don't you feel pity for me?)

Tinanku mantai-wantai (I want to run towards you)

Mindai:

Do mangawon di sinuku (Cleaning up the orchard)

Mongowit ih lohowon (Bringing the fruits together)

Kada owit doho (I am not worth it)

Yoku tondu alawong (I am a dense woman)

Gumburod:

Pais ku sisip lantai (I placed my knife on the floor)

Angkapan ku pomikir (I made an engraving on the scabbard)

Pomikir no koti umandak (Please reconsider oh fair lady)

Ika no ih nangkapanku (You are the knife for my scabbard)