The Challenges While Conducting Ethnography Research among Minority Ethnicities in the Malaysian Context

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Abstract

Ethnography is a qualitative technique researchers use to study people in their own environment through participant observation and face-to-face interviewing. It involves witnessing and/or interacting with the participants in their natural settings, in their cultural context, and then creating a narrative description of that culture against a theoretical background. Ethnography is applied in various social sciences. It is challenging and has many difficulties since it is time-consuming and requires highly qualified researchers due to the critical nature of involving diverse people to gain trust. Although the study among minorities in Malaysia is still at the elementary stage, ethnography is gaining pace. This qualitative study aims to 1) analyse the unexpected challenges faced by the researchers during the ethnography research among minority ethnicities in the Malaysian context and 2) to record methods to be applied. The study used purposive sampling to study three minority ethnicities in Malaysia; the *Baba and Nyonya, the Chetties* and the *Iban* communities. This research highlighted the ethnographer's unexpected challenges in gaining trust to gather experience throughout the ethnography study. Conducting ethnographic research can be subject to unexpected circumstances such as the movement control order during the pandemic, the lack of trust between the researcher and the participants, and the language barrier. Several processes are involved to establish the confidence and to gain the trust of the participants. This study reveals the unexpected challenges of conducting an ethnography study among minority ethnicities in Malaysia and the methods such as digital, field and photos to overcome them.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative study procedures are inductive, focused on meaning, and have varying objectives, reflecting distinct ontologies (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013). Ethnography is a qualitative method that seeks to learn about people rather than study them through immersion in native populations (Spradley, 1980; Huot, 2014). Traditionally, ethnography involved closely observing groups of people, taking historical and cultural settings (Streubert and Carpenter, 2011). The researcher can discover the social world's complexity and share cultural nuances and the studied phenomenon with this immersion method and careful examination. For example, researchers understand the process better by observing and engaging with participants and the setting. Contrary to popular belief, ethnography is not merely a data collection approach but an art of perceiving, learning, and interpreting reality through direct or indirect engagement with individuals in their natural surroundings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Huot, 2014).

Redfields (2019) defined ethnography as the branch of anthropology concerned with the scientific description of specific human cultures. It comprises four components: participant observation, natural setting, holism, and subject language use. According to the Encyclopaedia of Research Design (2021), ethnography is typically a cultural anthropology branch focusing on human societies. Ethnography has existed for several decades but became popular in the late 19th century. Many ethnographers adhered to Malinowski's (1944) viewpoint, which holds that researchers should immerse themselves in the lives of the people they are studying. He demonstrated

this belief by travelling to Trobriand Island, where he has lived for several years while conducting fieldwork and learning the local language.

Ethnography studies share these qualitative characteristics, but ethnographers seek to understand what participants do to create their culture and how it evolves. Malinowski (1944) emphasised the importance of detailed participant observation, claiming that anthropologists must maintain daily contact with their informants to adequately record the imponderabilia of everyday life necessary for understanding a different culture. Ethnography is a social science study model and the written result of an investigation. Ethnography observation is a method that entails immersing oneself in a field site of study for an extended time to systemically document a group of people's daily lives, activities, and interactions. An ethnography is a detailed written account of the social life and culture of the group being studied.

Ethnography assumed that various realities existed in the community and that people saw them differently. The epistemological issues of ethnography showed that the interaction of individuals and society is interdependent on the formation of knowledge. People were discursive and constructed knowledge every day. They can express themselves linguistically and have sufficient discourse knowledge to articulate their meanings. Thus, society is understood as produced and reconstructed depending on these interpretative processes. Brewer (2005, p.34) claimed that people are perceived to explain or justify their actions, ideas, or remarks. In this context, ethnography showed how people saw, described, and explained the world to others. The researcher brings people's cultural perspectives and worldviews into their social surroundings by adhering to ethnography study. Society is complicated with cultures inside cultures. There are groups and subgroups inside groups—layers upon layers like an onion. Ideologies shape people's understanding. Many cultural aspects were overlooked in everyday contexts like grammar. For example, a culture's subgroups may have different attitudes toward kinship, religion, and economic systems. Yet, according to Fetterman (2010), they all believed in these cultural aspects' deeper, often subconscious meaning. These cultural complexities shaped how people perceive the world. As a result, ethnography tried to provide cultural interpretations of all the societal complexities. From the people's perspective in the community, an ethnographer must understand and interpret their culture and traditions (Moorthy, 2021).

Problem Statement
It is a challenging and crucial condition for researchers to conduct an ethnographic study in Peninsular Malaysia and the two states in East Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. This is because the whole country is made up of multiracial communities with many ethnicities. The ethnography study among minorities in Malaysia is still at the elementary stage, and there is little literature regarding the challenges in conducting it. This paper shares insights into ethnographers' unexpected challenges in building trust and gaining experience during ethnography. The motivation for taking on this challenge stems from a desire to comprehend the evolution of ethnography as a methodology for social science among Malaysian ethnic groups. The study of social science is the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data for various economic, educational, social, and political purposes. The researchers intended to present ethnography studies to ascertain how ethnographies have been incorporated into social science studies, especially among minor ethnicities. The researchers aimed to provide methods of ethnography with a particular emphasis on challenges that emerged among minor ethnicities in Malaysia (Peninsular, Sabah, and Sarawak). Ethnography was evolving and became more prevalent in various social science studies; this study discussed future considerations and challenges associated with ethnography. This paper highlighted issues handling ethnography studies during the pandemic among the Chetty community (2020-2022), sharing personal ethnography experience handling Baba and Nyonya communities (2020-2022) and a one-week experience with the Dayak community at the longhouse and a host family in Sarawak (2019).

Thus, this study intended to analyse the unexpected challenges faced by the researchers during the ethnography of Malaysia's minority ethnicities and to record methods applied in ethnographic research of Malaysia's minority ethnicities. Specifically, the study

Background of Study
Ethnographic Research in Social Science Studies
Van Maanen (1995) defined ethnography as a portrait of people representing a field. Ethnography refers to both the method of social science research and the final written product of that research (Wolcott, 2005). He argued that the two are so inextricably linked that the research process deserved to be called ethnography only when the final product, the research report, adhered to ethnographic conventions, which place a premium on cultural interpretation. Ethnography observation is a method that entails immersing oneself in a field location for an extended time to fully document a group of people's daily lives, behaviours, and interactions. For example, ethnography is a written account of a group's social, cultural, and traditional lives and practices. Sociological

ethnography frequently begins by presenting a problem or issue as a narrative in response to the guiding question. Then, researchers investigated and analysed the situation in light of the fieldwork. Thus, it is beneficial to establish research for the chosen significant problem that deserves investigation. Ethnography writing entails the presentation of numerous detailed descriptions in narrative form (Fetterman, 2010). The purpose of the description is to inform the reader about what occurred in the field, what it was like for the participant to be there, and which specific events or activities were noteworthy and warranted further investigation. Ethnographic accounts must include detailed descriptions.

Theoretical Framework: Methods of Ethnographic Research
There are three distinct methods of ethnographic research: field, digital, and photos (Figure 1). Field ethnography enabled a more in-depth understanding of the target user. The researcher observed an individual or group of individuals as they went about their daily lives. These observations can last anywhere from an hour to several days or weeks. Digital ethnography can potentially be more time-efficient (Pink et al., 2016) than traditional field ethnography. It accelerated the process by utilising digital tools such as computational devices such as tablets and smartphones and interacting with online communities. Then, photo ethnography is highly advantageous when the presence of ethnographers significantly affects people's behaviour. The researchers captured photos to document the experience. The researchers practised these types to write a complete account (Figure 2). These methods helped the researchers to build trust and collect data.
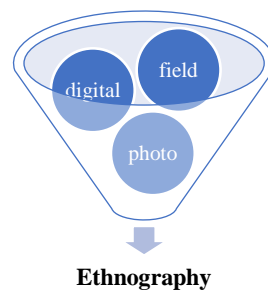

Ethnography

Figure 1: Types of Ethnography Methods

In ethnography, methodology and methods are intertwined. According to the Encyclopaedia of Research Design (2021), ethnography is writing an abstract picture of a group of people. "Ethno" refers to people, and "graph" to a picture. The term was traditionally used to denote the composite findings of social science field-based research. An ethnography represents a monograph (e.g., a written account) of fieldwork (e.g., the first-hand exploration of a cultural or social setting).
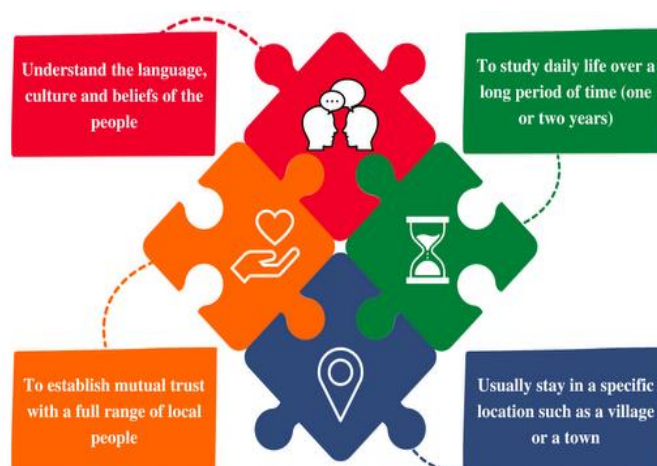

Figure 2: Ethnography Research (ethno = people; graphy = writing)

Previous Studies

According to Hamal (2020), the researchers' field participation in ethnographic research determined the quality of academic work. Yet, the researcher's participation in the field to gather data results from the confidence and/or faith, known as trust, that the researcher built with participants during the research process. The researcher experienced the essential research phenomena of trust-building while conducting fieldwork. This paper, which reflected on the results of fieldwork, described the process of developing trust in the research area the author underwent. Williamson's framework (1993) stated in his paper that trust is primarily developed on repeated good experiences, whether formal or informal, made through time and in long-standing relationships and is based on the initial information of the other. It was inspired and supported by Hamal (2020). The current paper adopted the methods shown in Chart 1 as the most effective ways to foster trust, including how to deal with issues or hurdles in ethnography (e.g., during and post-pandemic). The researchers discussed their difficulties and experiences conducting ethnographic studies among minority ethnic groups.

Ravindran et al. (2020) described two graduate student researchers' field experiences and challenges using the ethnographic methodology, conducting fieldwork, and writing 'post-modern' creative and integrative ethnographies. Two student researchers struggled with epistemology, ontology, reflexivity, auto-ethnography, and writing researchers and participants in and out of accounts as they transformed the texts. Ravindran and Marshall (2020) concluded with pedagogical implications and the value of learning ethnography through practice. Ayala and Koch (2019) stated that while systematic observation and interviews were the most common ethnographic methods, a deep understanding required research tools beyond observation. Non-conventional methods enhanced ethnography and observations, refining meaning. Qualitative research focused on text and presented a structured method for enriched ethnographic analysis based on a case study using non-conventional methods like sociograms and participant-made drawings. Representation, visualisation, and interaction were used to study group dynamics in a structured way and discovered when visual and interactional representations were difficult to translate into words. Spoken language required precision, clarity, and knowledge of the listener's interpretation; structured image analysis helped research participants because they all have a perspective.

Events (remarkable, disruptive happenings) were important study subjects for understanding change processes. Van Dooremalen (2017) considered how ethnography could analyse this social phenomenon. The researcher reviewed three recent ethnographic studies of events and found that it is useful for understanding people's feelings and ideas during events like protests or natural disasters. The 'luck' of an event at the ethnographic fieldwork site made this method difficult. Next, interviews, discourse analysis, and surveys made it easier to follow transformative responses to events in different locations and times, which is better for understanding their meaning-making dynamics.

METHOD
Research Design
The qualitative approach helped to accomplish the aims and goals of the study. This approach allows researching particular topics about meaning and people's subjective experiences and meaning-making processes (Leavy, 2023). This approach allowed the researchers to build a robust understanding of a topic, unpacking the meanings people ascribe to their lives—activities, situations, circumstances, people, and objects of minority ethnicities such as Baba and Nyonya, Chetty and Iban. The qualitative method is used in social and behavioural science to study challenges encountered while conducting ethnography research among minority ethnicities. The researchers conducted a modern example of ethnography to seek information and culture from the respondents through sustained observation and participation via digital platforms. Technography is a subtype of ethnography using digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.

Sampling Method
According to Patton (2015), purposive sampling is based on the premise that seeking out the best cases for the study produces the best data, and research results directly result from the cases sampled, which is information-rich and can address the research purpose and questions. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), researchers used purposeful sampling for the qualitative, arts-based, and community-based studies to gain in-depth insight from a small sample. Therefore, this study used purposeful sampling by only focusing on *Baba and Nyonya*, *Chetties* and Iban communities with minimal samples to report an information-rich paper. Furthermore, researchers relied on their judgement when choosing a minimal population of respondents to participate in the observation. Researchers used purposive sampling to access particular minority ethnicities, as the respondents were selected because they fit a particular profile of the endangered communities in the Malaysian context.

Research Method
This study is conducted through observation such as technography, digital conversations and photos. Observation is gathering data by watching behaviour and events or noting physical characteristics in their natural setting. According to O'Reilly (2012), observations can be overt (everyone knows they are being observed) or covert (no one knows they are being observed, and the observer is concealed). A few selected Baba and Nyonya, Chetties, Sabahans and Sarawakians were interviewed using digital media (WhatsApp). Apart from that, the researchers used secondary resources such as newspapers and journal articles to support the information gained from the respondents for further analysis. In addition, experts from each community were interviewed and verified before writing the report. Acknowledgement references are attached in Appendix A. As a whole, all agreed that gaining trust to penetrate the community was challenging. Now they are the trustworthy ones to help the respective community revive their culture, literature, language, food and many more. As a result, earning a top fan badge for those Facebook pages added recognition and trust as a follower of that particular community in a digital platform to gather more data from the community.

Data Analysis Method
The researchers conducted a library study to gather information about the minorities in Malaysia and the theoretical framework for the analysis—the information gained from *Peranakan* (*Baba Nyonya* and *Chetties*) magazines. The researchers verified and gathered information using purposive sampling. The rationale behind choosing minority communities; Baba Nyonya and Chetty are on the brink of critically endangered language (Lee, 2022), gasping to revive its vitality. In Sarawak, where an estimated 30 ethnic groups live with their languages and dialects, the loss of many of these languages is imminent. According to Ethnologue (NST, 2023), two (2) languages are already extinct in Malaysia, fifteen (15) are dying, and a hundred and one (101) are in danger. The researchers studied the language, literature, and culture of the respective communities, and this paper revealed the hardship behind doing ethnography while conducting those studies.

After viewing the various sources via technography, the researcher recorded the respective communities' language, literature, and culture for further analysis. In between those studies, the researchers intend to record the challenges while conducting the ethnography among minority ethnics. The researchers interviewed representative researchers of these minorities' ethnicities to validate the data collected that may help support or fine-tune the study results. Then, the researchers recommended the digital research method (Pink et al., 2016) as a supportive tool to observe the progress of the communities even after the report writing, which strengthens the community's bonding with the researcher and will uphold the trust among them—the processes of the analysis as in Figure 3.
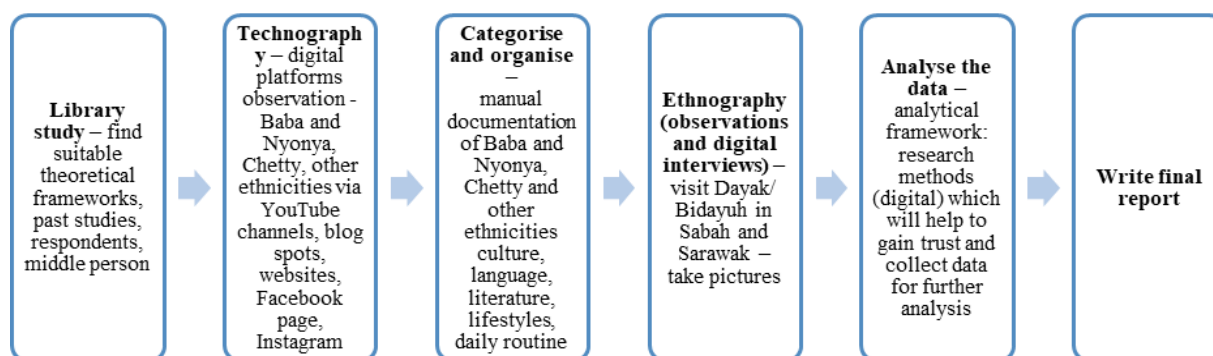

Figure 3: Data Analysis Methods

Ethical Considerations
This ethnography study deals with people from various minority ethnicities from Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysia. The researchers asked for consent from the respondents verbally and in written form before starting the conversation. The researchers seek permission before clicking pictures to ensure it does not violate the norms or sentiments of the ethnicities (O'Reilly, 2012). The researcher ensures that every process is done by asking permission, especially in front of Datu, since misbehaving may lead to a big drawback for the observation process. Furthermore, prior consent will be asked before using the data in certain circumstances (e.g., notice from the FB post). The researchers also will get the respondents' permission before visiting, recording or taking pictures of them during the study. This study will be conducted with proper guidelines to ensure a safe and secure environment for the respondents to be protected from psychological, physical or emotional harm.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

When in Rome, do as the Romans do.
Masuk ke dalam kandang kambing, mengembek,
Masuk ke dalam kandang kerbau, menguak.

Both the sayings above, one in English and the second, a Malay adage or proverb, are typically related to how the ethnographers should blend and tune to the situation to study ethnicities in the Malaysian context. Mainly, the ethnographers should understand and prepare to enter the particular ethnicities by knowing all the challenges they might face while conducting the study. Additionally, the subjective nature of ethnography aids in identifying and analysing unexpected issues; ethnography is instrumental in eliciting and analysing relevant user attitudes and emotions. Ethnography is studying people through writing, as 'ethno' means people and 'graphy' means writing. Writing a journal article or journal entry is not synonymous with writing an ethnography. An ethnography is a lengthy written account that raises awareness and comprehension of social patterns within a particular cultural context. Social scientists, such as anthropologists and sociologists, use ethnography to communicate their fieldwork to a broader audience. While journalists and social scientists frequently compare their work because ethnography is distinct because both observe and examine human behaviours and experiences. They can connect their findings to social theories and provide layered content. In this section, the researchers employ autoethnography (O'Reilly, 2012), a method of research that draws on personal experience (auto) to describe and interpret (graphy) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and behaviours (ethno).

Thus, the five challenges encountered in this study while conducting ethnography research among minor ethnicities were: (1) Handling the Pandemic using Technography, (2) WhatsApp Conversation with *Chetty* Respondents (3) Drinking Culture – *Air Tuak* (4) Attending a Brunei Chinese and Iban Wedding – *Tuak* and Pork offering, and (5) The Longhouse Experience – Language Barrier

Challenges While Conducting Ethnography Research among Minor Ethnicities
Challenge 1: Handling the Pandemic using Technography
Method: Digital
A digital (technography) method was approached due to participant's refusal and delay in conducting the research/ study [which is time-consuming] during the pandemic. At first, the respondent hesitated to be part of even the WhatsApp conversation, but due to a trustworthy middle-person recommendation managed to get a reply to collect. This approach was an alternative because this study started in 2020 and continued until 2022 due to the movement control order (MCO) during the pandemic. The researchers continue to observe the communities' practices and activities via social media (Facebook) until 2023.

The *Chetty* community settled in the town Gajah Berang, in the state of Malacca and made it their hometown since they did not know the origin of their ancestors in India. Mostly, the *Chetty* families dwell in the four Land Lots (28, 94, 118, and 138) collectively said to be *Kampung Chetti,* including the villages of Gajah Berang and Tranquerah. They have preserved their lifestyle and cultural heritage in the village because they settled there. The Indian *panchayat* or village council system governs the community's affairs and the temple property under the authority of the community's headman. Sri Poyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple Trust has received donations from several *Chetti* Melaka family members following Hindu custom. In the 1980s, scholars estimated that Melaka was home to 400 families. However, the Melaka Chetti Melaka community has now decreased to less than fifty families in its current form. *Chetties* are typically only found in Malacca in Malaysia, while some migrated to Singapore. Second and third-generation diaspora *Chetti* families from Kuala Lumpur and Singapore visit the kampung regularly to keep in touch with their roots.

First and foremost, it took several weeks for one of the researchers to find a *Chetty* respondent. The researcher contacted a few people with some recommendations and the influence of close friends. However, it was not easy because the respondent was the one who interviewed the researcher before revealing their details. The respondent was searched using technography, social media, and digital platforms. At its simplest, technography (technology + ethnography) is an ethnography of technology. Technography is used in social sciences studies to account for the detailed description of human-to-human communication. Due to the travel restrictions during the pandemic, the researcher postponed the intention to interview the respondents face-to-face, thus the technography method was approached as an alternative to proceed with the study. The researcher then joined and became a part of the social media of the Chetty community on Facebook to observe and learn about their activities, beliefs, and practices. After the MCO was lifted, meeting the participant face-to-face during this time became a big challenge since the participant still hesitated to give an appointment.

Challenge 2: WhatsApp Conversation with *Chetty* Respondents
Method: Digital
The participant initially refused to meet or be a respondent due to a lack of trust and only agreed to have a conversation after a strong recommendation made by a middle person with the condition not to reveal their identity. Therefore, the technography method was used to communicate with the respondent. A translator may be needed for foreign researchers to translate Malay conversations if the *Chetty* respondent only converses in Malay. The *Chetty* or *Chetti Melaka* is a separate Tamil ethnic group in Malacca, Malaysia, known as Peranakan Indians. They have assimilated elements of Chinese and Malay cultures while retaining their Hindu roots. The southern Indian community of *Chetty* or *Chettiar* is devoted to Hinduism.

The *Chetty* community's mother tongue is Malay Creole, representing the community's multiple linguistic origins. According to Moorthy (2021), the *Chetty* have mostly adapted sociocultural to their predominantly ethnic Malay surroundings; they embraced Malay cultural traits and practices and the *Bazaar Malay* language as their mother tongue. They have lost their roots in India and have lost the knowledge of the Tamil language, their mother tongue. The exposure to other cultures and the adaptive nature of *Bazaar Malay* (Malay Creole) had hastened the sociocultural adaptation of the Chetty. *Bazaar Malay* mainly consists of Malay words infused with lexicons and syntax structures of other languages spoken in Malacca, making it easier for communication among ethnic groups. It is also widely used in family and community interactions. Moorthy (2021) referred to it as 'Chetty Creole' because it is a unique combination of the main Straits languages of Malay, Tamil, and Chinese. It is uncommon to see phrases like '*nenk'* (grandmother in Malay), '*Tata'*, and *'Mama'* (grandfather and uncle in Tamil) used to call family members in different languages.

Baba Malay is a creole language of the *Peranakan* Chinese. The *Melayu Ambon* Creole and the Jakarta Malay Creole languages shared similarities with *Chetty* Creole (Betawi Malay). Creole languages spoken by Sri Lankan Malays were likewise similar to this one. Although the *Chetties* are still praying in Malay while preserving some standard Sanskrit and Tamil religious phrases, the importance of the Malay language in the *Chetty* Creole language can be seen. *Chetties* can speak English because of British influence. Other ethnic groups and *Chetties*, who have intermarried outside the community, used English as a regular means of communication every day.

The researcher personally experienced the situation while interviewing *Chetty* respondents. Malacca *Chetty*, also known as Indian *Peranakan*, is a unique minority community of Indians (Figure 4). The researcher noticed that the *Chetty* respondent didn't speak Tamil while conducting the session. She conversed in Malay with only a few Tamil words because she could not speak Tamil and accepted Bazaar Malay as her first language. She didn't accept Indians as their community; she kept addressing that it was about them and not us (not including the researcher, who was also an Indian) in the communication context. *Chetties* embraced the Bazaar Malay language as their mother tongue (Moorthy, 2021). The study didn't get disrupted since the researcher could speak and understand the Malay language. *Chetties* speak Malay patois with their family and friends. For example, they conversed in Malay with the priest in the temple to do the prayers. The respondent prays and speaks to the priest in Malay. The priest who has been there for many years can understand them and do the prayers accordingly. She further recorded that it is sometimes difficult to go to different temples because of the language barrier because not all temple priests can understand Malay since they mostly come from India. Furthermore, they dislike if anyone talks to her in Tamil. They (Malacca *Chetties*) firmly believe that they are different and unique in Malaysia, carrying all three races' DNA in Malaysia (Moorthy, 2021).

Figure 4: The Chetty Community

Malacca *Chetties* speak Malay patois with Tamil loanwords and cannot communicate in Tamil fluently. The spoken language is Malay, but the accent is not like the Malay accent. Today, English is present in the Malay *Chetty* creole, but it is not as prominent as the other two languages, Malay and Tamil. *Chetty* Creole is similar to other Malay dialects, especially the Middle Malacca Malay dialect, because of its strong influence on Malay. For two reasons, pidgin becomes a creole once a community adopts it; unlike pidgin, it developed vocabulary, structure, style, and others to accommodate its role as a mother tongue rather than a mother tongue imitating other dialects (Mohamed, 2009; Moorthy, 2021). Malaysians were oblivious to the *Chetty* community because they were not prominent in business and politics, unlike their *Peranakan* cousins, the *Baba and Nyonyas.* Mostly, they migrated to Singapore for survival.

Challenge 3: Drinking Culture – *Air Tuak*
Method: Field and Photo
The researcher visited the Dayak ethnicity to understand their culture and beliefs. Since the researcher had a limited time frame to conduct the study, a quick visit was made to the village to observe the nature of the setting and the importance of drinking air *tuak* (fermented rice wine). The Kampung Annah Rais Bidayuh Longhouse located along the upper reaches of the Rejang, Baleh, Belaga, Balui, and Baram rivers in the state of Sarawak, East Malaysia was chosen as the site of study. The longhouse has over 100 doors, meaning it has 100 families with a perfect traditional look.

Upon arrival at the entrance, it was surprising that everyone had to drink '*tuak*' made traditionally by the Dayak people of the village (see Figure 3). At first, the researcher refused to drink but was convinced because it was a part of their ritual. In the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, on the island of Borneo, indigenous people traditionally drink a very potent homemade fermented rice wine called *tuak* in conjunction with harvest celebrations and social or communal gatherings. Everyone is expected to drink at these functions, especially during the harvest festival, which is significant for these rural folk. So, the refusal to drink by the guests can be said as a breach of etiquette. Since the researcher is a non-Muslim, drinking air *tuak* was not an issue. However, Muslim researchers, who are not allowed to consume any alcoholic beverages, should politely refuse or inform the community mediator beforehand to avoid misunderstanding or inconvenience. The researcher took photos as evidence to record the *tuak* drinking culture.

According to Ernesto Kalum, an amateur anthropologist, the Dayak people of Sabah and Sarawak have a long history of brewing concoctions of ingredients from their gardens and jungles wickedly. A staple of Gawai Dayak culture, *tuak* is a refreshing drink every visitor to a host's home must consume (Malaysiakini, 2020). It is considered to be a 'must-have' for Hari Gawai. *Tuak* is a fermented rice product made from glutinous rice, sugar, and yeast fermented for an extended time. The preparation of *tuak* for Gawai is something that the women of the community take great pride in preparing. Another indigenous people of Sarawak, the Ibans, prayed for God's blessings before drinking *tuak* during the *Hari Gawai*; a ritual blessed the visitors while eliminating evil spirits. *Tuak* is often served to guests visiting longhouses as a communication tool. If the guest refuses the drinks when entering the longhouse, they will pour the *tuak* onto the ground as a sign of gratitude and ask *Petara* (God) for more blessings, long life, and prosperity. However, drinking *tuak* is mandatory, and refusing to drink dishonoured the host (among the remote tribes).

Figure 3: Tuak Drinking Culture

Challenge 4: Attending a Brunei Chinese and Iban Wedding – *Tuak* and Pork offering
Method: Digital and Photos
Since the researcher missed the previous events before attending the wedding and attended only one side wedding (non-Malay side), the researcher approached the mediator (via digital) to gather the pre-wedding events and validated the information with the field work experts before writing the report. The photos were from digital platforms. The researcher experienced attending a wedding of a Brunei Chinese (the groom) and Iban (the bride) who opted for animism belief. Many people participated in the marriage (Brunei Chinese, Brunei Muslims, Ibans); a mixed ethnicity gathering is a unique combination of cultural differences and clashes between Brunei Chinese and Iban.

The Ibans are a branch of the Dayak peoples of Borneo, also known as the Dayaks. Most Ibans live in Sarawak, with a small number in Sabah and a few scattered throughout western Malaysia. During the colonial period, the British called them Sea Dayaks, which means 'sea people'. Iban (derived from the Iban language) means 'human' or 'person', well-known for headhunting and tribal/territorial expansion. A long time ago, being a powerful and successful warring tribe, the Ibans were a very feared tribe in Borneo and spoke the Iban language. The researcher took the opportunity to conduct an ethnography study to observe their language use. During the process, the researcher encountered some unexpected norms of them.

The wedding is a significant event for both partners and families. The bridegroom's family prepared a feast for the groom's family. The wedding representative took strands of rope with knots that showed the days left before the wedding ceremony. If the rope has 7 knots, the wedding is in 7 days. Every day the knots will be untied. The groom arrived at the bride's house by boat decorated with 'Pua Kumbu,' an Iban traditional multicoloured woven material, then walked down the road, bumping into 'Gongs'. Once he reached the bride's front door, the cannon was discharged, and the couple was escorted to the river to bathe together before donning their traditional attire. When the couple arrived at the longhouse, a pig was slaughtered with a gunshot as a sign of respect. Before entering the house, the groom's head toured the couple from the top stairs to the bottom. The feast commenced, and guests were served wine and *tuak*. Traditionally, pork meal was served at Iban weddings because it can feed a big feast and is easily found meat at their nativity. Alternatively, beef, chicken, and lamb were served. The marriage seems unique due to the assimilation of the culture and beliefs. For example, non-Muslim guests must drink wine and *tuak* before entering the bride's (Iban) house. The wedding dinner was divided into two sessions; the food served was halal for all guests since there were Muslim guests, and another special feast for the family only so they could consume non-halal food. This arrangement showed how they respect and understand the culture and norms of Muslims who do not consume non-halal food such as pork or alcohol. It was also a great relief for the non-Muslims since the researcher does not consume pork.

Figure 4: Iban Fusion Wedding

Challenge 5: The Longhouse Experience – Language Barrier
Method: Field and Photos
The researcher could not manage to have conversations with the Iban people just by knowing Malay and English since the language has huge differences (see Table 1). Learning the basic greetings and Iban language according to the districts is highly recommended to smoothen communication. Following their norms is appreciable and helpful in gaining trust in the longhouse. For instance, removing one's shoes before entering the longhouse's common area, passing the gifts or provisions to the chief to distribute, not overriding him, asking permission before photographing, and checking the backdrop to avoid nude photos. *Panggah* is where the hunted skulls will be placed in the longhouse (Figure 4). Hence, ethnographers should remain calm and brave in facing unexpected and exotic things in the longhouse.

The researcher took the opportunity to have a longhouse (*rumah panjang* in Sarawak) visit, perhaps one of the unique experiences. The farther from the city, the more traditional the longhouse is. The journey to the longhouse was adventurous because going into the jungle was exciting for city people. The concept of the longhouse lifestyle is something people do not expect because of its size, and it happened to be home to many families under one roof. Most importantly, they were living peacefully and united. Iban people seem to be shy but warmly welcome outsiders. The families happily hosted because of the researcher's curiosity and received a financial incentive. The chief was rewarded for letting the researcher stay, which will be used for their longhouse member's welfare. Getting the chief's approval is significant as he has the final say in all matters, including the stay. The researcher called the chief '*bapa*', father in Malay, to recognise his title. Although the chief is amiable and welcoming, he can chase the guests away if they are suspicious of intruding. Gaining the chief's trust is necessary to make the stay and study smooth because he can be furious if the outsider misbehaves or dishonours them. For example, always let the chief eat or drink first, show utmost respect by avoiding standing over him, and do not refuse if he offers to sit, eat or drink as his guest. This includes the '*tuak*' drinking norm with the chief; refusal to drink can be considered dishonouring the host. The researcher accepted good-natured food and drink offerings from as many people as possible to avoid causing potential offence.

Most importantly, it is not advised to visit or stay in the longhouse if there are sick people, even with minor illnesses in the house. This is because they live in close contact, and the location of these longhouses is far from any medical assistance. Planning a study or staying at the longhouse is a big no during this pandemic since it's unsafe for both parties. The longhouse members live close quarters, and their immune systems have adapted. The guests have to share drinking glasses and eating utensils with many people. Therefore, maintaining hygiene is not easy. So, avoid visiting the longhouse if one is sick or could potentially spread undesirable microorganisms to the families. Apart from that, only a few longhouse members can speak English, and the Iban language can be subdivided into different sub-ethnic groups, each of which speaks in different dialects. Therefore, having a guide or translator would be a better option since no one can speak English or standard Malay. The Malay language has become challenging to understand because of its dialects and pronunciation.

Figure 4: The Iban Headhunted Culture

Table 1: Comparison between Standard Iban and Remun (dialect)

Malay	Standard Iban	Remun/Milikin	English
Tidak	*Enda*	*Entai*	No
Tengok	*Meda*	*Ngilau*	See
Tahu	*Nemu*	*Badak*	Know

CONCLUSION

Ethnography is a key method in anthropology and is a systematic approach to defining a culture's beliefs, rituals, patterns, and institutions. Etic scholars did classic ethnography in previously undiscovered remote regions of the globe to utilise knowledge of isolated cultures to uncover universal connections among all cultures. This paper successfully revealed the challenges the researchers experience while studying ethnicities in Malaysia. Some fruitful suggestions and solutions were tagged to smoothen the process of ethnography study among ethnicities in Malaysia. As mentioned in the Introduction, building trust is a crucial element in ethnography study since it deals with different groups of people. For example, not everyone was hailed for sharing their beliefs and culture with a stranger; therefore, the researchers underwent some challenges to gain their trust and confidence to head a step to peel a layer of onion each time they achieved their trust.

Malaysian ethnic respondents are likelier to be transparent if they feel trusted and willing to divulge information that could be embarrassing or sensitive. Trust will ensure that the respondent's data will not be mocked, misused, or shared inappropriately. Ethnographic research uses a cultural lens to study people's lives in their communities (Fetterman, 2010). An anthropological approach focused on the social and cultural aspects of small communities in foreign countries, and this is where the roots of ethnography can be traced. The researchers conducted ethnography to understand people's way of life better. Therefore, the classic anthropologists were strangers in their own country when they entered the field. It could take a long time for them to fully immerse in the way of life of the community they were studying. They had to learn the language to socialise with the inhabitants and understand their beliefs, culture, norms and rituals.

Trust is the key to opening the door for communication to gain information from the respondents. The relationship between researchers and respondents will be challenging without building amicability and trust. Trust is crucial in convincing respondents to gather information and motivating them to share sensitive or potentially embarrassing information they would not share otherwise. It assured respondents that their data was safe and would not be misused, mocked, or shared. For that, proper communication with a convenient language is necessary to get the gist of communication. However, having a mediator or translator who knows the basic language of that ethnicity will add confidence to elongate their communication duration without any language barrier, for example, the Iban language, according to its district.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This paper recorded the challenges of dealing with ethnicities in the Malaysian context. The researchers experienced and conducted the physical and virtual ethnography studies, which resulted in a fruitful output with proper execution with the help of a mediator or translator (in the case of language barriers). Both have given the researchers a great experience with unexpected nuisances and challenges while conducting ethnography studies. Ethnography studies among ethnicities aren't easy since they deal with people from different beliefs and cultures. However, a decent rapport will open the key to unlocking their mouth to talk and share their life with the researcher. For this reason, the researcher's mutual understanding and respect for the ethnicities will smoothen the process. In Malaysia, a multiracial community country rich with beliefs, culture, norms, and dialects, it becomes challenging yet gives a great experience and knowledge to share.

The pandemic changed the mode of conducting ethnography studies as it needed an alternative alteration in dealing with people. The ethnographers need to change the research mode to achieve the aim of the study. The advancing technology and increased globalization necessitate social science studies to adapt and change; similarly, approaches to undertaking qualitative research must evolve. The increased use of web-based platforms to share information, offer support networks, and communicate through digital media creates opportunities for social science researchers to study the naturally occurring and vast amount of online data. For instance, the researchers executed the communication and observation with respondents through technography. Research methodologies such as netnography have been developed because of advances in online communities (Costello et al., 2017) to understand better social interactions in virtual communities (Kozinets, 2012).

Due to the pandemic, science and technology empowered the world and proved that communication has no borders. People continued their respective works by finding reliable tools and mediums to execute by sitting at home. Similarly, the researcher managed and successfully collected sufficient information via technography. Researchers have been encouraged to do virtual ethnography or ethnography as the Internet, and social media have grown popular (Hine, 2000), and this current study is evidence that this method of study is doable and effective in observing and strengthening the relationship of community-based studies. In virtual ethnography, the ethnographer should actively participate in their subjects' social interactions regardless of the medium used. Therefore, future studies under the ethnography method can expand their fieldwork execution and evaluation using technography. The researchers intend to conduct technography observation using Google Meet to reach minority ethnicities from Sabah and Sarawak to study their lifestyles, culture, and language. The researcher can observe the community event in virtual environments (e.g., live streaming when they go hunting, attending events from the Peninsular).

TRANSPARENCY DECLARATION

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the manuscript's contents and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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