Abstract: This study aims to give an account of the Malaysian Homestay Tourism industry through a case study of the Relau Homestay Program. By using a qualitative approach based on participant observation and interviews, this paper will examine the Relau Homestay Program in regard to three themes. These are a) the issue of ‘authenticity’ in the host culture and in the tourist experience, b) women’s participation in the homestay program, and c) the filial dynamic of the host-guest relationship, which is discussed with reference to the concept of ‘fictive kinship’. The Relau program was found to be a cogent model of homestay operation, in many respects due to the participation and major role of female operators. Therefore, we recommend more efforts are taken by the local government to recognize the contribution of women, and enhance opportunities for their training and further education.

Keywords: Authenticity, Fictive Kinship, Homestay Program, Malaysia, Women in Tourism

Introduction

This article seeks to evaluate the tourist Homestay programs in the rural Malaysian village of Relau in regard to three themes; authenticity, tourist-host bonding and the role of female hosts. Homestay tourism is generally understood as a form of tourism that addresses the common desire to experience a different and exotic way of life that is somehow ‘authentic’, as opposed to contrived for the tourist’s leisure and entertainment. Staying with a family in their home, instead of in a hotel, is viewed as a direct way to access the authentic - to both observe and participate in a different culture and society (Theobald 1994). Tourism has however seen a value shift from the notion of
experiencing the ‘authentic’, to having an ‘authentic experience’. This means, broadly speaking, that tourists are less concerned with encountering authentic cultural difference, and more so with the emotional quality of their experience regardless of its origin and context.

Homestay can not only increase the income of the operator (foster family), but it can also encourage the preservation of certain cultural practices through the incentive to maintain as traditional a household as possible for their guests’ benefit (Wang 1999; Cole 2005). The objective value and degree of ‘authenticity’ aside, homestay as a form of sustainable tourism does appear to have a number of advantages and benefits for the hosts and their community. With this in mind, the present study will make a qualitative survey of guest and host experiences in Relau.

The concept of ‘fictive kinship’ has been adapted here to describe the virtual adoption of the tourist by the host, in a generally short but intense period of intimacy that, nevertheless, can occasion a deep and lasting bond between the two. In connection with this, female hosts, playing the role of nurturing mothers, are found to play an abundant and significant role in homestay, which needs to be acknowledged and further researched. The role and participation of women in the tourism industry is discussed in Elias (2005).

In homestay programs, the role of women is even more important as it is primarily women who undertake domestic responsibilities, including housekeeping, cooking and hospitality. Hence, women’s participation in Relau’s homestay program, and the responsibility they subsequently feel to provide an ‘authentic experience’, is of particular concern to us. The host-guest relationship is constructed through a process in which the host takes the role of a foster family for the tourists staying with them. We are interested in the way ‘fictive kinship’ unfolds throughout the relationship and adds to a sense of authenticity for the guests. Fictive kin relations can engender sincere and lasting bonds between host and guest (Braithwaite et al. 2010), and we evaluate the degree to which this was the case in Relau.

The paper begins by contextualizing homestay in its broader context of Malaysian tourism, following this with a brief discussion of authenticity as concept in tourism, fictive kinship and the roles of women in homestay. We then outline our methodology before giving an account of the Relau Homestay
Program that focuses particularly on space and ceremony. Finally, we offer some discussion of the data and draw our theoretical conclusions.

**Homestay Program in Malaysia**

The tourism sector has been recognized by the government as a major revenue source and a catalyst for the revival of the economy. Various forms of tourism have been introduced in Malaysia, including educational tourism, eco-tourism, agro-tourism, sports tourism and health tourism.

**Table 1.** The number of tourist to Malaysia and total number of receipt received from tourists in 1998 to 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Tourists (million)</th>
<th>Total Tourist’s Receipt (Billion MYR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>25.70</td>
<td>69.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>27.44</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>25.72</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>25.03</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>24.71</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>24.58</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>23.65</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>22.05</td>
<td>49.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>20.97</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>17.55</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>16.43</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>15.70</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>10.58</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>13.29</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>12.78</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>10.22</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia
Based on Table 1, it can be seen that in 2012, tourist arrivals had an increase of 320,000 tourists, which is 25.03 million compared to 24.71 million tourist visitors in 2011. Apart from that, the number of receipts received from tourists had an increase of RM1.8 billion, which is RM60.6 billion compared to RM58.3 billion in the previous year. Among the top five tourist markets in 2012 were Singapore (13,014,268), Indonesia (2,382,606), China (1,558,785), Thailand (1,263,024) and Brunei (1,258,070). The increase in number of tourists visiting Malaysia every year has brought more resources into play to support the industry, especially in terms of human resources in the service sector.

**Table 2. Homestay program (villages) and operators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Homestay</th>
<th>Number of Villages</th>
<th>Number of Operators</th>
<th>Number of Rooms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Kedah</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Pulau Pinang</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Perak</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Selangor</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Melaka</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Negeri Sembilan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Johor</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Kelantan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Terengganu</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Sarawak</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Sabah</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Labuan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>140</strong></td>
<td><strong>227</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,264</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,463</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia, 2009

The Homestay Tourism Program was introduced by the Ministry of Tourism, as an effort to diversify tourism products by offering alternative accommodation and activities to tourists. The program was organized by the Malaysian Homestay Association in collaboration with the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board in 1995 (Sjamsir 2005). It was seen as a potential alternative
tourism product that would be benignly sustainable and lucrative for local communities. The program has proved popular among budget tourists visiting Malaysia whose motivations include the desire to experience ‘the authentic’ (Sham Sani and Samad 1990), and are ‘experience-hungry’ (Richards and Wilson 2004b). Table 2 shows the homestay program’s statistics in Malaysia up till the year 2009.

It was also hoped that the homestay program would increase the participation of rural people in the tourism sector, and at the same time showcase the people and culture of Malaysia to international tourists in a unique and interesting way. The program is believed to have been a success in terms of the household income it has created (Yusnita et al. 2013). The numbers of tourists using homestays is also increasing steadily (Pusiran and Xiao 2013).

The dynamic of the homestay experience is based on the encounter between the guest (or researcher) and the society and its culture, the community, and the domicile in which they will stay and their host family (Mura et al. 2015). This is where the role of women becomes significant, because the household itself is usually their domain. The host community and organizers will also showcase local crafts and cultural traditions to the guests, and encourage and facilitate their participating in simple tasks with a cultural theme.

**Authenticity and Fictive Kinship**

Many authors describe the role played by the notion of authenticity in the tourist’s expectations and overall experience (see for example Bryon and Derre 2010; Cahyadi 2015; Nelson 2014). As MacCannell describes (1972), the tourism industry has traditionally operated by marketing designed and manipulated products as ‘authentic’ experiences. The majority of tourists are satisfied with these products because they are unable to distinguish between the authentic and the contrived. If the product meets their expectations of the exotic, as it is designed to do, then they experience satisfaction (Wang 1999). Williams (1998) calls experiences and spectacles contrived for tourist consumption ‘pseudo-events’. A pseudo-event is often designed to appear as spontaneous, and unconnected to the tourist’s presence. Pseudo-events often mimic or reproduce diluted and adapted native ritual or behavior for tourist consumption, often with the consequence that this behavior is ultimately re-formed, giving rise to a hybridity that renders any notion of authenticity
problematic. Gamper (1981) gives interesting examples from southern Austria, in regard to the use of national costume. Cohen (1995) argues however that tourists in the post-modern era no longer regard authenticity as an important criterion for satisfaction, instead placing more value on how much enjoyment they derive. Herein lies the shift from ‘experiencing the authentic’ to having an ‘authentic experience’.

The concept of ‘fictive kinship’ can be defined as the formation of a strong personal bond between individuals, that resembles or imitates that which conventionally exists or develops by virtue of blood ties or marriage (see Shaw 2008; Sussman 1976; Fortes 1970). This concept is central to the homestay experience. The special status of the tourist guest, within the unit of the host family and their household, facilitates their ‘adoption’ as junior members of the family, who can look up to the head(s) of the household as temporary ‘parents’. The plunge into a foreign and exotic society, which is sometimes experienced as intense and disorientating, further enhances the pseudo-filial bond between guest and host in terms of the guest’s dependence and the host’s affection. In this way, despite the presentation of possible ‘pseudo-events’ in the form of cultural presentations and other spectacles, a slightly different form of authenticity is encountered in terms of the sincerity and intimacy of the fictive-kinship bonds, and the subsequently enhanced quality of the tourist experience.

Women and Homestay program

Female homestay operators have contributed significantly to the development of the homestay program in Malaysia. According to a study conducted by Intan et al. (2009), the majority of Malay homestay operators are women (65.3%) between the age of 41 to 60 (see also similar findings in Mapjabil et al. 2011). Many of these women entered into and remain in the homestay program for reasons such as personal satisfaction and the encouragement of peers. Participation in the homestay program has also increased women’s access to training and education services, in addition to the business skills they learn and develop.

Many of the registered homestays in Malaysia’s rural villages offer services such as local food tasting and demonstration of traditional games, availing the community and its culture to visitors with a level of intimacy that would
be harsher to achieve through conventional tourism. Most of these activities are organized and run by women, or the wives of male homestay operators. Gender issues and family relations are very much interconnected in a home-based industry such as homestay. Loscocco and Smith-Hunter (2004) show that women who own home-based businesses face less family conflict than those who run their businesses outside the home. Since family and domestic responsibilities are often the first priority for women, they may have an advantage over male counterparts. Jamilah and Amran (2007) study the importance of the role played by the Women’s Association in supporting female entrepreneurs in the homestay program in Malaysia. The Association provides a platform for the women involved in the homestay industry to earn extra income and be part of the homestay community in the area. The organization also empowers women by equipping them with skills needed in the homestay industry through special training programs.

**Research Methodology**

The data collected in this study are based on in-depth interviews with two groups of people: Relau homestay program operators, and domestic and international tourists who have participated in one of Relau’s homestay tourism packages (3 day and 2 night package). There are 7 villages in the Relau homestay program, with a total of 30 households involved. However, only 25 families representing 6 villages own the Certificate of Qualification and Participation from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. Table 3 shows the number and distribution of homestay households.

In-depth interviews were carried out with 11 families who run the homestay program, representing 6 villages in Homestay Relau. A total of 9 tourists were interviewed, whom were all participating in the same homestay package. The program was also subjected to rigorous general observation that included visiting sites such as rubber plantations, vegetable gardens, rubber-tapping activities and participating in traditional games.
Table 3. Relau Homestay Operators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Number of families joining the homestay program</th>
<th>Representative from every village (Number of families)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Kampung 300 Kaki Relau</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Kampung Tengah</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Kampung Paya Semambu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Kampung Padang</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Kampung Ulu</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Kampung Kilang Batu</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Kampung Sungai Rambai (*)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Only operates the homestay program for domestic tourists and has not received full approval and certification from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

Research Location: Homestay Relau

Relau Malay village is located in the southern state of Kedah Darul Aman, which is at the northern border with the state of Perak and Seberang Perai Selatan. Relau village has an area of approximately 2,385 hectares and has a total of 3,000 residents of Malay descent.

Homestay Relau consists of seven small villages, namely Kampung 300 Kaki Relau, Kampung Tengah, Kampung Paya Semambu, Kampung Padang, Kampung Ulu, Kampung Kilang Batu and Kampung Sungai Rambai. These villages all have a relatively developed infrastructure, and facilities such as mosques, government clinics, schools, community halls and playgrounds. According to Abd Razak Hamid, Chairman of the Relau village, the majority of villagers are farmers working on the rubber and oil palm plantations, or in fruit and vegetable orchards. Many of them also work at the nearby factories located in the vicinity of Sungai Bakap, Prai and in Kulim, Kedah. The majority of the women in the villages are housewives, and some of them are involved
in small-scale businesses such as food stalls and confectionary production. The idea to establish Relau village as a homestay location took off in 1985 when Abd Razak Hamid attended a seminar on entrepreneurship in Australia. He read an article about the farm tour (farmstay) which was introduced in Australia, and subsequently decided to develop a homestay program in his own village.

The Homestay program began in earnest in October 1999, when the village received a group of local students who wanted to participate in the ‘Foster Families program’ with the local villagers. In this program, students are usually ‘adopted’ by a foster family with whom they stay for a certain period of time. The main objective of this program was to expose students to rural life and the traditional culture of their foster families. The success of this program was a significant motivation for villagers to take part in the Relau Homestay program, which involved attendance of several training courses organized by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. As of 2006, there were 24 families active in the program.

**Space and Preparation**

This section focuses on the spaces within the village and households that are utilized for tourist accommodation and activities, and the extensive preparations undertaken by the Homestay Program’s operators. Analytically, we can speak of the operator’s ‘creation of space’ for the tourist gaze. As discussed above, female operators or the wives of male operators are the most responsible and active in ‘creating spaces’ for the tourist to experience. Certain spaces within the household will be selected and made presentable to visitors through a rigorous regimen of cleaning. This emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness both reflects the host’s desire to maintain dignity under the scrutiny of the outsider’s gaze, and to make the rooms within their household that the guest will see and stay in as pleasant and welcoming as possible (Little 2000; Edensor 2001).

The space of the homestay location will usually be divided into two categories – ‘front space’ and ‘back space’, (see Erving Goffman 1959). Goffman uses the term ‘front space’ to refer to the spaces in which the hosts and guests meet and interact. ‘Back space’ refers to areas that afford privacy, where participants can take a break from host-guest relations. Usually, when the homestay program
involves the whole village, only certain areas will be selected for front-space, for example multi-purpose halls, and the village mosque. For activities conducted within households, there are several important spaces accessible to the tourist – the living room, guest bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. Tourists are also usually free to make use of space outside the house.

Therefore, before guest arrival, the host will make sure that these spaces are thoroughly cleaned and pleasingly decorated. Usually a week before arrival, Abdul Razak, as the Homestay Chair, will hold meetings to discuss the program with the homestay operators who have agreed to host guests. The arrival date, country of origin and number of tourist arriving will be notified during the meeting. The number of operators will depend on the number of tourists expected. If they are receiving 50 tourists, each homestay operator will receive between 2 to 3 guests per house. Operators will inform the Chair whether or not they agree to accept the assigned tourists and to participate in all the activities organized throughout the three-day program. In some cases, operators had to withdraw from participating when their wives were ill or had other miscellaneous business to deal with. Usually, the operators will be contacted in advance by the Homestay Chair to obtain their agreement. Both parties will be consulted on the activities in which the tourists want to participate, and the associated fees. After both parties agree to a set of activities and payments, the mediator will provide a list of sites one week before the meeting. Operators will only find out the identity of their guests in a ceremony called the ‘Adoption Ceremony’, which is held to welcome tourists.

**Multi-purpose Hall**

The multi-purpose hall is usually the first space that the tourist encounters. The hall is used for the adoption ceremony, in where the homestay operators receive tourists as their ‘foster children’. Respondents among the organizers felt strongly that the places visited by tourists should be clean and decorated with a view to leaving as positive an impression of the community as possible. Therefore, a day before the arrival of tourists, the area in and around the hall is always cleaned and decorated. It is usually the women who cooperate in carrying out this task. Preparations in the hall are twofold, firstly for the initial adoption ceremony, and secondly for a later ‘Cultural Night’ event.
Household Frontage and Yard

The operators believed that their frontage was important as it gave guests their first impressions of the host’s home. Respondents explained that the front yards of rural homes are wider and larger than in urban areas, and it was important to make them look well maintained. The example in the photograph below is decorated with a swing-set, flowering trees and rambutan trees forming a shelter.

Host Zainal and his wife began the process of cleaning, tidying and decorating their home’s exterior a day before the arrival of tourists. Plants were watered and flower vases were carefully arranged. Shoes were tidied into rows. Drains were brushed and cleaned. A set of traditional games such as congkak were displayed at the corner of the house’s porch. Items that should not be seen were placed out of sight in a storage room in the backyard. In short, the household’s frontage was ‘presented’ as beautifully as possible to create a favorable impression.

Figure 1. The yard of Relau Homestay Operator. Source: the authors.
Living room

The living room is the space in which most time is spent together. According to Atikah, another operator, “...this room should be beautiful and spotless, ideally the same atmosphere as when one celebrates Hari Raya (Eid Festival)”. Atikah cleaned and decorated the living room with the help of her daughter-in-law, hanging new curtains and preparing several sets of traditional foods to eat there.

![Figure 2. Living Room. Source: the authors.](image)

Atikah said that she had three sets of special curtains made for this program. She also put together a new floral arrangement for the room. The carpet was cleaned, sofas were lined with lace and a new box of tissues was placed on the table. Pictures of her family together with their former ‘foster children’ were put on display on the shelf in her living room. Atikah spoke fondly of her former guests, with whom she said she still maintained contact. She opined that since operating the homestay program she observed higher than usual standards of cleanliness. Another housewife operator said,

“...cleanliness should be number one. If tourists come and see that all the beautiful decorations are covered in dust, or with lizard droppings, we will be ashamed. They will forever remember our house as dirty”.

Bedroom

According to many of the respondents, the bedroom is the most important room in a homestay. One informant held that the guest’s impression of their host would rest first and foremostly on how well the bedroom was presented. All of the operators tended to speak as though the bedroom furniture should ideally be new, although this was rarely the case. Another operator went into substantial detail describing the minutiae of preparing the bedroom, starting with how she cleaned and made the bed, and including the complimentary items she provided, such as talcum powder, combs, hair oils, massage oils, mosquito coils, mineral water and tissues. In the instance of the guest being Muslim, a prayer mat would also be provided.

![Figure 3. Tourist’s Bedroom. Source: the authors.](image)

Kitchen

The same concerns informed the preparation of the kitchen area. Most of the informants kept special chinaware and glassware in storage for use exclusively with guests. It became evident that this reserve kitchenware was routinely brought out not only for homestay tourists, but also for guests of any nature, such as visiting family members or friends. Another natural concern was making sure the kitchen was stocked with food and other supplies.
**Bathroom and toilet**

In addition to the usual high standard of cleanliness, there is strong pressure on the operators to provide an indoor toilet. Prior to joining the homestay program, one informant’s bathroom was located outside her home in a separate structure, but once she decided to join the program she spent a total of RM1500 to build an indoor facility.

**Staging Culture**

The Cultural Show is the main and most elaborate event offered by the Relau Homestay tour package, consisting of a number of cultural performance items and a mock wedding. The night we attended, all of the tourists were present with their host families. Throughout the evening women could be seen preparing food like *nasi lemak*, curry puffs, cakes, donuts and drinks to be served to tourists.

![Figure 4. The mock ‘Wedding Ceremony’. Source: the authors.](image)
The mock wedding ceremony required the participation of the guests. An acting bride and groom, recruited from among the guests and dressed in full costume, sat on a *pelamin* or dias. During the *menepung tawar* (blessing) ceremony, several members of the village committee, the homestay operators and also the tourists are invited to throw saffron rice and *bertih* (roasted corn) over the bride and groom. Whilst the tourists were aware that the wedding ceremony was just a performance, the palpable enthusiasm of the Malay hosts and the resultant sense of celebration and friendship appeared to make everyone become less inhibited and enjoy themselves. The authors also speculate that the mock ceremony had the dual effect of invoking the sense of bonding and coming together for the host families that marks the genuine Malay wedding ceremony.

*Layanan: Hospitality and the Bond between host and guest*

This section describes how the host families employ the Malay concept of *layanan*, or hospitality, through the preparation and serving of meals, gift exchange and the farewell ceremony. *Layanan* is key to the bonding process as it draws the guest into the family unit, thus bringing about sincere and lasting relationships that are the basis of ‘fictive kinship’.

**Eating Rice Together**

Eating together is one of the most important social bonding activities that take place between the host and guest. Its frequency gives structure to the days and provides a clear and familiar framework within which both parties can relax and socialize. Sharing meals in the host’s household also strengthens the notion that the guest is a member of the family unit. Host respondents generally reported that mealtimes tended to be the foundation on which to build increased bonds of intimacy.

Food is also an important element of the tourist expectation and experience. In the context of homestay, the guests very much expect to ‘experience the authentic’ in regards to cuisine, as they imagine they will be fed precisely what members of the host community would ordinarily be eating anyway (for discussion of authenticity and cuisine see Best 1989; Chambers 2000).
According to the Homestay Chair Haji Abdul Razak, the authenticity of the cuisine that is offered to tourists is an important aspect of the homestay program: “We should prepare the food that we ordinarily eat on a daily basis. We do not need to change the menu for visitors. We should eat the same menu, and especially highlight our curry dishes”.

He added the caveat that, although the food selected for tourist meals is authentic, the presentation of the food may be somewhat enhanced.

Among the dishes commonly served to tourists are fish curry, fried or grilled fish, squid or shrimp sauce, chicken fried in soy, fried spinach and other vegetables, and various types of salad using fresh vegetables. An effort is also made to make as wide a variety of food as possible available during the visitor’s stay. Haji Abdul Razak was very enthusiastic in his emphasis on Malay curry, which he insisted had to be included on the menu.

Azizah, the wife of one operator, described her efforts in preparing food for her guests. She held that cooking and presenting a traditional menu was an important aspect of layanan. She also explained that although the menu is generally agreed before the guest’s arrival, she makes allowances for tourists of certain nationalities based on her experience. For example, Pakistani visitors are less inclined to eat chicken, or fried shrimp and vegetables. So to accommodate them, she would gear the menu towards their preference for other dishes such as soup, fried mixed vegetables, dates, dried fish and fried omelet with beans. Another informant spoke of how easy it was determining the menu for tourists from Japan and Korea. Apparently tourists from these
countries are very open-minded and adventurous when it comes to cuisine. Based on our observations, women played the primary role in the preparation and serving of food, and had developed a storehouse of knowledge about the likely eating trends of different nationalities.

**Gift Giving – Strengthening the bond**

Offering gifts to the host family is encouraged as a gesture of appreciation, and is taken particularly seriously by Japanese guests. In Japanese culture, it is customary to offer a gift when visiting someone’s house for dinner or a special occasion. For other international tourists, gift exchange is generally observed on the last day of their homestay. This exchange naturally strengthens the lasting bond between host and guest as it is often accompanied by strong emotions.

**Departure Day**

In addition to the data gathered from interviews with both guests and hosts, our observations on the day of departure clearly demonstrated that a strong emotional bond had been formed between the homestay guests and their host families. This was evident through gift exchange, rigorous efforts to ensure contact would be maintained after departure, emotional entreaties to make return visits on the part of the hosts, and the emotionally charged atmosphere throughout the village in general. These elements are precisely what defines and distinguishes homestay from other forms of tourism.

The last organized event in the tour package is a farewell ceremony. During this ceremony, Chairman Abdul Razak gave a speech to close the 3-day homestay program. Following this, every homestay operator together with their guests were asked to come forward and give a short speech to express their feelings and reflect on their experiences while staying with their host families. Some of them were unable to hold back tears as they spoke.

Whilst the template and circumstances of these farewell rituals are somewhat coercive emotionally, the pseudo-filial bond that they contribute to engendering does appear to have surprising longevity. Many of the host families stayed in regular and varied contact with their previous guests, and the Relau Homestay program reports many instances of return visitors.
Conclusion

As regards the issue of cultural authenticity, we argue that despite some of the informants’ use of this term, especially in relation to cuisine, it remains as nebulous here as it does in other contexts. We noted that rather than encourage living arrangements and cultural events to remain traditional and static for the tourist gaze, the homestay program has directly resulted in various home improvements and modernizations, for example the mandatory construction of indoor toilets for operators. The community was also united in the great pains it took to show its best face to outsiders; ‘keeping up appearances’, so to speak. We do however argue that this concern with the quality of hospitality, called layanan in Malay, has contributed to the program’s tourists having an ‘authentic experience’, namely one that is not based on encountering the authentic ‘other’, but is instead defined by its emotional value and quality.

Zainal described layanan as the keystone of Relau’s homestay program, in that this quality directly engenders the special bond between guest and host. He also referred to himself as ‘ayah’ (dad) with his adopted guests. The program’s training courses emphasize and encourage the formation of such relationships under a rubric of ‘come as tourists, return as family’. Accordingly the guest should be ‘treated like your own child’. A combination of layanan and the imposition of a sometimes intense and intimate filial dynamic appear very
successful in forming lasting bonds between guest and host. Such post-
homestay relationships were evident in the form of displayed photographs,
email and letter-writing, and return visits. The explicit forging of a filial
connection and relationship was described by some informants as ‘expanding
the family network’. This approach and its success is why we conclude that
the Relau Homestay Program can be conceptualized as a form of tourism that
employs or is based on fictive kinship. Carsten (2004) describes this concept’s
many strands, including the importance of shared meals, which as we have
shown above, was central to the Relau homestay operator’s concerns.

This paper has highlighted the key role and various responsibilities carried
out by women in the homestay program. We conclude that women play an
indispensable role in the program in terms of the intensive housework and food
preparation they undertake, and the motherly role they play with the guests.
We suggest more effort should be taken by local government to recognize the
contribution of women in the hospitality industry, particularly in homestay
programs, given their key role in this industry and the associated opportunity
for further education and training programs, and the sense of wellbeing and
personal fulfillment that was in evidence throughout Relau.

There is room for a great deal more study in this direction. Comparative
studies of different homestay programs in Malaysia and throughout the region
may help to identify further strengths and weaknesses in the industry, and help
to better illuminate the social dynamics at work from a number of other useful
perspectives.

Notes
*Farah Syazwani Hayrol Aziz is a research assistant at Centre for Research
on Women and Gender (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia.
Email: farah.hayrolaziz@gmail.com

**Nor Hafizah Selamat, PhD, is an associate professor at the Anthropology
and Sociology Section, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Penang. She was the Deputy Director of the Centre for Research on Women
and Gender (KANITA) from 2013 - 2015. Email: hafiz@usm.my
References


