

Systematic Visual Documentation of the Mah Meri Tribe's Cultural Practices

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Abstract: The purpose of photography is identical to that of language and writing. Photography's operation must be evaluated in light of various explanatory, interpretative, and theoretical linguistic assertions due to visual art's multifaceted and multifunctional nature. In documentary photography, people, situations, objects, and events are depicted straightforwardly and narratively; This paper first gives a brief overview of the history and facts related to the beliefs and culture of the Mah Meri tribe in Peninsular Malaysia in photo documentary reporting. The primary purpose of this research is to conduct a thorough analysis of cultural traditions and environmentalist ideals. Accordingly, Mah Meri requires systematic and organized visual data, and the collection of qualitative data is essential. In a phased study, ethnomethodological techniques were used to collect periodic primary data. Throughout this systematic documentation procedure, more time was needed to collect in-depth information about personal lifestyles and religious practices. In conclusion, this research contributes to the modern accessibility of digital data sources by achieving an understanding of the Mah Meri tribe through the discovery and deconstruction of traditional beliefs unknown to the public.

Keywords: *Mah Meri Tribe, Cultural Portrayal, Ethnomethodology, Systematic Documentary, Photojournalism*

1. Introduction and Background

Malaysia's indigenous population, known collectively as the "Orang Asal," comprises diverse ethnic groups categorized into three main groups: the Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malaysian. Within these broader categories, there are 95 subgroups, each with distinct languages and cultural practices. The "Orang Asli" is a significant subgroup of the Orang Asal, accounting for approximately 13.8% of Malaysia's national population as of 2017 (Indigenous World Malaysia, 2020).

Among these indigenous groups, the Mah Meri tribe stands out. The Mah Meri belongs to the Aslian Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family and is categorized as a Southern Indigenous language group along with Semelai, Semoq Beri, and Temoq (Benjamin, 1976). Predominantly residing on Carey Island in Selangor, the Mah Meri are known for their deep-seated cultural traditions and ancestral beliefs, which are celebrated through various festivals and ceremonies (Masron, Masami & Ismail, 2013).

The Malaysian Indigenous Development Agency highlights that the term "Mah Meri" translates to "orang hutan" (forest people) or "orang bersisik" (scaly people), and they are also referred to as "orang laut" (sea people). Over the years, the Mah Meri have evolved from obscurity to embracing technology and literacy, yet they continue to uphold their traditional rituals and ancestral customs, which form the core of their identity.

Photography has transcended its traditional role of preserving family legacies to become a powerful tool for identity and communication (Van Dijck, 2008). The field of photography is diverse, with various forms serving significant purposes across different sectors such as business, science, the arts, sports, and medicine. Digital photography, in particular, has revolutionized the industry by merging art with technology, thereby enhancing its impact and reach. The visual arts, through reference materials like films and books, continue to narrate the stories of ancestors, as seen in the works documenting the Mah Meri tribe (Razak, 2013). To effectively interpret photographs, it is essential to analyze three types of contextual information: internal, native, and external (Barrett, 1986). Photographs can be analogous to linguistic assertions on explanatory, interpretative, and theoretical levels. Photography, comparable to language or written words, is a primary method of communication (Mustaff, 2013). Comprehensive use of instructional documentation opens more avenues that may lead to unexpected insights (Alnervik, 2018).

In the context of systematically documenting the cultural portrayal of the Mah Meri tribe, emphasis must be

placed on interpretation and visual analysis. Visual scenes described by Zitnick, Parikh, and Vanderwende (2013) include various information regarding objects' presence, attributes, and spatial relationships. Such detailed linguistic assertions regarding explanations, interpretations, and theories are crucial for preserving sustainable development within a systematic documentary framework (Barrett, 1986).

Figure 1: The Portrait of Mah Meri Tribe



Picture by: Mohd Shariful Hafizal

2. Literature Review

Historical Context and Evolution of Documentary Photography: Documentary photography has evolved significantly since its inception in the 19th century, where it served primarily as a tool for historical documentation and social reform. Pioneers like Mathew Brady and Lewis Hine used their cameras to capture the realities of war and child labor, respectively, thereby influencing public perception and policy (Stott, 1973). The transition to digital photography and the proliferation of the internet have further transformed the field, making it easier to capture, edit, and share images on a global scale (Van Dijck, 2008). This technological evolution has expanded the scope and impact of documentary photography, enabling it to serve diverse purposes across various fields such as business, science, and the arts.

Indexing Visual Information: Visual media activities are archived and represented visually in both still and moving images, providing valuable data for research. Jewitt (2012) emphasizes the importance of observable data in research, noting that visual recording can be utilized in various ways, including participatory videography, interviews, and field research. Harris (2015) argues that moving images offer multiple viewpoints, enhancing the ability to track, gather, assess, report, and share research results. Visual aids and instructional resources highlight the unique characteristics of visual analysis as a teaching and learning strategy (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). Lorang (2010) underscores the importance of visual adaptation in interpretive and theoretical documentation to effectively compress the research topic's narrative and information.

Systematic Documentation: Systematic documentation involves meticulous planning, organization, and research. Boon, Hirschhorn, Griener, and Cali (2009) describe this approach as essential for constructing cohesive and logically presented documentaries. The process begins with determining the subject and conducting extensive research, including reading relevant literature, conducting interviews, and analyzing historical or archival documentation (Hodson, 1999; Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). Once the research is complete, a clear and structured outline is created, followed by the recording phase, which employs high-quality equipment and diverse methods to capture the subject matter compellingly. The final phase involves editing the material into a cohesive and engaging documentary and disseminating it to the intended audience through various channels (Smith & Schryer, 2009; Nohl, 2010).

Technological Advances in Documentary Photography: The advent of modern technology has revolutionized documentary photography. Digital cameras, advanced editing software, and online platforms have greatly enhanced the ability to capture, process, and disseminate visual data. Innovative tools like drones, 360-degree cameras, and augmented reality (AR) have opened new possibilities for documenting and presenting cultural practices (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009). These technologies enable more immersive and comprehensive documentation, allowing researchers to present richer and more detailed visual narratives.

Ethical Considerations in Documentary Photography: Ethical considerations are paramount in documentary photography, particularly when dealing with indigenous communities. Researchers must ensure informed consent, respectful representation, and avoid exploitation (Barrett, 2020). Ethical frameworks, such as those outlined by the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 2012), provide guidelines to conduct research that respects the dignity and rights of participants. These frameworks emphasize the importance of transparency, community involvement, and sensitivity to cultural contexts.

Comparative Analysis with Other Indigenous Tribes: Comparing the cultural portrayal of the Mah Meri tribe with other indigenous tribes in Malaysia and Southeast Asia offers a broader context. Studies on tribes like the Batek, Jahai, and Temiar reveal unique cultural elements and common challenges, including the impacts of modernization and the loss of traditional lands (Carey, 1976; Endicott, 2012). These comparisons highlight the distinctiveness of the Mah Meri culture and the universal issues faced by indigenous communities, enriching the understanding of their cultural practices and resilience.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs an ethnomethodological approach to explore and document the cultural practices of the Mah Meri tribe. Conducted over a day on Carey Island, the research focuses on immersive interaction with the tribe. Data collection is structured into five distinct stages, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the Mah Meri's cultural and social dynamics.

According to Friend and Caruthers (2016), conducting effective research in documentary photography involves several critical steps: selecting a location, choosing respondents, obtaining their permission, conducting research, determining the significance of the results, and reporting them. These steps are integral to ethnomethodology-based qualitative methods used in photo documentaries.

In the initial stage, researchers and photographers will collect secondary data to build a thorough

understanding of the Mah Meri tribal community's behavior and characteristics. This involves an extensive review of relevant literature, including books, journals, and articles, to gather insights into the tribe's cultural practices, social structures, and historical background.

The second stage involves direct observation of the Mah Meri tribe's daily interactions and behaviors. Researchers will immerse themselves in the tribe's environment, meticulously documenting social dynamics and cultural practices through detailed field notes and visual recordings. This observational study aims to capture the essence of the tribe's way of life. The photo documentary method will be utilized to interpret these observations, analyzing the data through explanatory, interpretive, and theoretical lenses. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the internal, original, and external contexts of the Mah Meri community, facilitating effective communication through visual storytelling.

Data Collection

Phase 1: Participant Interviews

The initial phase involves conducting in-depth interviews with members of the Mah Meri tribe. These interviews aim to gather detailed information about their culture, traditions, beliefs, and daily practices. Open-ended questions will be used to encourage participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words.

Phase 2: Observation

In this phase, researchers will observe the Mah Meri tribe's daily activities and interactions. This observational approach helps capture the nuances of their lifestyle, social structures, and community interactions. Detailed field notes and visual recordings will be taken to document these observations accurately.

Phase 3: Visual Documentary Documentation

Visual documentation is a critical component of this study. Researchers will capture photographs and video footage of the Mah Meri tribe's cultural practices, including rituals, ceremonies, and daily activities. This visual data will provide rich, contextual insights into the tribe's way of life and help preserve their cultural heritage.

Phase 4: Cultural and Ritual Documentation

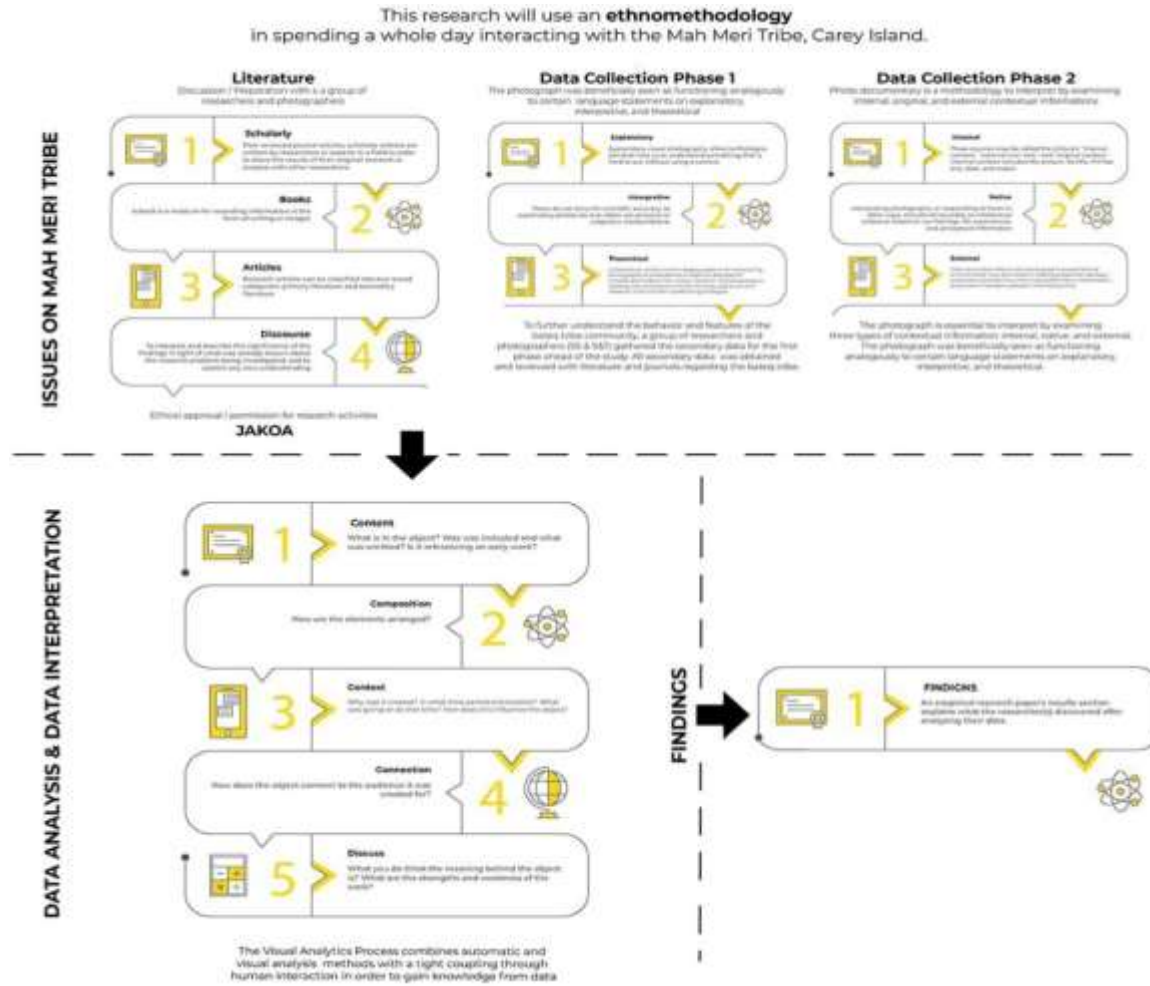
The fourth phase focuses specifically on documenting the Mah Meri tribe's spiritual ceremonies and memorial days. These events are integral to understanding the tribe's cultural identity and religious beliefs. Researchers will record these ceremonies, paying close attention to symbolic actions, artifacts, and the roles of participants.

Phase 5: Data Synthesis and Analysis

In the final phase, the collected data will be synthesized and analyzed to construct a comprehensive visual and narrative account of the Mah Meri tribe's culture. This analysis will involve reviewing the visual recordings, field notes, and interview transcripts to identify key themes and patterns. The goal is to provide a detailed and accurate representation of how the Mah Meri establish social order and maintain their cultural practices through everyday behaviors.

By employing these methods, the study aims to create a thorough and respectful documentation of the Mah Meri tribe. This research contributes to the broader understanding of indigenous cultures and their preservation by providing valuable insights into the Mah Meri tribe's cultural heritage and social organization.

Figure 2: Research Framework on Systematic Visual Documentation of the Mah Meri Tribe's Cultural Practices





Methodological Considerations for Documentary Photography: Due to their comprehensive environment, documentaries have proven more effective at convincing audiences and accurately portraying reality (Nichols, 2010). Academic institutions have recently utilized documentary films more frequently to disseminate knowledge. According to Friend & Caruthers (2016), films can assist researchers in exploring social considerations and current inequities in access to education and communicating their discoveries.

Ethical considerations in documentary photography are paramount. Researchers must protect the integrity of the photographs and the people they depict. Terry Barrett (2020) emphasizes that interpretive photography should portray subjects in a way that is favorable, artistic, shocking, or compelling. This ensures that the images convey a meaningful message to the viewer. Mustaff (2013) notes that photographs should allow viewers to form their interpretations and experience a range of emotions. This means that the images might be abstract or literal, depending on the intended message.


Data collection in documentary photography requires meticulous planning. This includes careful consideration of scene composition, lighting, and interviewing techniques. Nichols (2010) highlights the importance of photographing the surrounding area to provide context. Properly designed photographs are crucial, as they significantly impact the message conveyed to the audience. By integrating these methodological and ethical considerations, researchers can produce documentaries that are not only visually compelling but also respectful and insightful representations of their subjects.


Table 1: Data phased as a scaled function analogous to certain language statements on explanatory interpretation, interpretation and theory by examining internal, original and external contextual information

<p>Data Phase 1: A (1)</p>	<p>Explanatory: Visual photography refers to the use of photographs to reveal and elucidate details that are not easily perceptible to the naked eye. These images serve as powerful tools for understanding complex or subtle phenomena, providing clarity and insight that might otherwise be inaccessible without the aid of a camera.</p>	
<p>Data Phase 1: A (2)</p>	<p>Through careful composition and focus, explanatory photographs can highlight specific aspects of a subject, offering viewers a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the underlying details and nuances that are otherwise hidden from plain view.</p>	

<p>Data Phase 1: B</p>	<p>Interpretive: Visual photography does not aim for scientific accuracy as explanatory photos do. Instead, it focuses on personal or subjective interpretations. These photographs convey the photographer's individual perspective, emotions, and artistic vision, offering a unique and often evocative representation of the subject. Interpretive photography encourages viewers to engage with the images on a personal level, inviting them to explore their interpretations and emotional responses, thus enriching their understanding of the subject through a more intimate and nuanced lens.</p>	
<p>Data Phase 2: A</p>	<p>Theoretical: Visual photography involves creating a category system to interpret photographs, integrating specific considerations of the medium into existing art criticism formats. This method contributes to art criticism research by offering structured questioning strategies. Theoretical frameworks allow researchers and critics to systematically analyze and critique photographs, enhancing the understanding of photographic works within the broader context of visual arts and cultural studies</p>	

<p>Data Phase 2 - B</p>	<p>Internal: The internal context of visual photography refers to the elements contained within the photograph itself. These sources can be identified as the picture's "internal context," which includes the image, its title (if it has one), the date it was taken, and the identity of the maker. This context provides essential information that helps to understand the photograph's creation and initial intention, allowing viewers to gain insights into the circumstances and perspectives that shaped the image.</p>	
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<p>Data Phase 2: C</p>	<p>Native: The native context of visual photography highlights that interpreting or responding to photographs should go beyond intellectual analysis. It should include our feelings, life experiences, and perceptual information, as well as a deeper understanding of the cultural and contextual background of the image. Integrating these elements provides a holistic and enriched perspective, allowing viewers to fully appreciate the photograph's significance and nuances</p>	
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<p>Data Phase 2: D</p>	<p>External: The external context of visual photography pertains to the photograph's presentational environments. This context includes how and where the photograph is being presented, how it has been delivered and received, and how other interpreters have understood it. Additionally, it encompasses the photograph's placement in the history of art. By considering these external factors, viewers can understand the broader impact and significance of the photograph, as well as its reception and interpretation over time. This holistic approach provides insights into the photograph's influence and legacy within the artistic and cultural landscape.</p>	
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4. Results and Analysis

Indigenous Peoples and Their Connection to the Land: Indigenous peoples have a profound and intrinsic connection to the land and the natural environment. This bond is reflected in the rich diversity of their cultures, languages, and traditional knowledge systems. The Mah Meri tribe, like many other indigenous communities, exemplifies this deep relationship with their surroundings through their cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and everyday interactions with nature.

Challenges of Globalization and Industrialization: In the contemporary world, globalization and industrialization exert significant pressure on indigenous civilizations. These forces threaten the survival of traditional ways of life, making the extinction of unique cultures increasingly probable. The encroachment of modernity often disrupts the harmony that Indigenous peoples maintain with their environment, leading to the erosion of their cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. The use of an ethnomethodology-based systematic documentary to study the Mah Meri tribe provides a robust approach to documenting and preserving their culture. Ethnomethodology focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their daily lives and social interactions. This method is particularly effective in investigating the communication and social structures within the Mah Meri community, offering insights into how they organize their lives and sustain their cultural practices.

Documenting and Protecting Mah Meri Culture: Through this systematic approach, the research documents the Mah Meri tribe's cultural rituals, social interactions, and spiritual beliefs. By capturing these elements visually and contextually, the documentary serves as a vital tool for cultural preservation. It not only records the tribe's way of life for future generations but also raises awareness about the importance of protecting indigenous cultures from the impacts of globalization and industrialization. The visual documentary method enhances the understanding of the Mah Meri tribe's culture by providing a vivid and immersive portrayal of their daily lives. This approach allows viewers to engage with the tribe's experiences on a deeper level, fostering empathy and appreciation for their unique cultural identity.

Figure 3: Published on a local online news portal regarding the ritual festival of the Mah Meri tribe using the concept of data phase one (1) methodology/source and pix by Mohd Shariful Hafizal B Aminuddin



The Mah Meri tribe's cultural preservation involves capturing their authentic spiritual beliefs and interpersonal interactions. Ethnomethodological research facilitates the documentation and preservation of indigenous culture through the meticulous analysis of visual data. This approach includes examining body language, art, and other forms of visual communication to understand how the Mah Meri perceive and interact with their environment. By interpreting these visual cues, researchers can uncover the deeper significance behind the tribe's practices and behaviors, providing valuable insights into their cultural heritage and social dynamics

Figure 4: Published on a local online news portal regarding the ritual festival of the Mah Meri tribe using the concept of data phase two (2) methodology/source and pix by Mohd Shariful Hafizal B Aminuddin



Ethnomethodology and Visual Data Analysis: E. Laurier (2020) concludes that examining social life through the lens of ethnomethodology provides a unique perspective on how humans construct social order through traditional behaviors in specific contexts. This approach is particularly valuable in understanding the Mah Meri tribe, as it sheds light on the intricate ways in which their cultural practices and social interactions are organized. Visual data analysis emerges as a powerful tool for preserving Indigenous cultures, allowing

researchers to delve into the rich history and significance of human behavior. By analyzing visual cues, researchers can gain profound insights into the cultural and social dynamics of the Mah Meri tribe, contributing to the preservation and appreciation of their heritage.

Figure 5: Published in Utusan Malaysia on November 17, 2022: At the ICCS2022, a photojournalistic documentary and the "Indigenous Research-Base" concept were showcased.



Importance of Indigenous Expertise and Policy Implications: Recognizing the uniqueness of each Indigenous culture is crucial in visual data analysis. Engaging an Indigenous specialist ensures that the study respects the community's perspectives and needs. This collaboration enhances research validity and fosters respectful documentation.

This study provides a framework for analyzing visual data in Indigenous contexts, guiding other researchers and supporting policy development. It aligns with SDG No. 4: Quality Education, promoting inclusive and equitable education for Indigenous communities. Additionally, it supports SDG No. 1: No Poverty, by informing strategies to alleviate poverty among the 'Orang Asli' community.

The findings are valuable to the *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, Malaysia (JAKOA)*, and other stakeholders, offering insights into preserving Indigenous cultural and artistic heritage. This study aids in creating initiatives to protect and celebrate the unique traditions of the Mah Meri tribe and other Indigenous groups in Malaysia.

In conclusion, the ethnomethodology-based systematic documentary on the Mah Meri tribe is a powerful means of documenting and protecting indigenous culture. It highlights the tribe's deep connection to their land and environment, showcases their cultural diversity, and underscores the urgent need to address the challenges posed by globalization and industrialization. Through this research, the Mah Meri tribe's cultural heritage is preserved and celebrated, contributing to the broader effort to safeguard the world's indigenous civilizations.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

How a Systematic Documentary Can Help Scholars Understand Indigenous Societies: The Case of the Mah Meri Tribe

In an increasingly digitized world, the importance of visual information is paramount. This study enhances

modern accessibility to digital data by exploring and deconstructing the traditional beliefs of the Mah Meri tribe. Through the systematic collection and efficient storage of this information, researchers can better investigate and understand their surroundings.

Using ethnomethodology in the systematic documentary, researchers gained profound insights into the Mah Meri tribe's social, religious, and cultural portrayals. This approach provided a comprehensive view of the tribe's customs, language, and social interactions. The study highlighted the tribe's use of various visual cues, such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions, which are integral to their communication. These visual indicators, combined with spoken language, facilitate effective communication and comprehension within the tribe.

Significance of the Outcome: The outcome of this research is significant for several reasons:

Cultural Preservation: By documenting the Mah Meri tribe's cultural practices, this research preserves invaluable aspects of their heritage that might otherwise be lost. The systematic documentary method captures detailed visual and contextual data, creating a rich repository of the tribe's customs, rituals, and social interactions.

Enhanced Scholarly Understanding: This research provides scholars with a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Mah Meri tribe. The use of ethnomethodology allows for an in-depth analysis of the tribe's social order and communication methods. This detailed documentation helps scholars appreciate the complexity of the tribe's cultural practices, which might not be fully conveyed through textual data alone.

Framework for Future Research: The methodological approach used in this study can serve as a model for future research on other indigenous societies. By demonstrating the effectiveness of combining visual documentation with ethnomethodological analysis, this research sets a precedent for how to systematically study and document cultural practices. This framework can be adapted and applied to various indigenous communities, facilitating a broader understanding and preservation of diverse cultures.

Policy Development: The findings of this study can inform policymakers working to promote inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG No. 4) and develop strategies to alleviate poverty in Indigenous communities (SDG No. 1). By providing a deeper understanding of the Mah Meri tribe's cultural and social dynamics, this research helps policymakers design initiatives that are culturally sensitive and effective in addressing the specific needs of Indigenous populations.

Resource for Cultural Institutions: Organizations like the Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, Malaysia (JAKOA), and other cultural institutions can use the data from this study to develop programs and initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting indigenous heritage. The detailed visual documentation serves as an educational resource, fostering greater awareness and appreciation of the Mah Meri tribe's unique cultural contributions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the systematic documentary on the Mah Meri tribe not only enhances our understanding of their cultural practices but also provides a valuable framework for future research and policy development. This approach ensures that the cultural nuances and social intricacies of the Mah Meri tribe are recorded and appreciated in their full complexity, contributing to the broader effort to safeguard the world's indigenous civilizations.

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