

Symbolic Interpretations of Mah Meri Visual Art: A Conceptual Approach Using Peirce's Semiotic Theory

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Abstract: This study examines the visual art heritage of the Mah Meri tribe through a semiotic analysis. The research uses Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory as the foundational framework to decode the symbolism embedded in Mah Meri's artistic expressions. The aim is to understand and document the deep meanings behind these symbols and their impact on the cultural identity and historical narratives of the Mah Meri tribe. An ethnographic approach is employed for data collection, including field observations, photographic and videographic documentation, and qualitative interviews with community members. The findings reveal that Mah Meri's art is rich in symbolic meanings that reflect the tribe's cultural identity and history. The study also highlights the adverse effects of modernization on traditional art forms, necessitating urgent preservation efforts. This research makes significant contributions to visual anthropology by emphasizing the importance of semiotic analysis in understanding and preserving indigenous art. It calls for increased efforts in documenting and protecting the visual heritage of the Mah Meri tribe to ensure its transmission to future generations.

Keywords: *Semiotic Analysis, Mah Meri Tribe, Visual Art Heritage, Cultural Identity, Charles Sanders Peirce, Symbolism, Ethnography, Indigenous Art, Visual Anthropology*

1. Introduction and Background

The Mah Meri tribe, one of the indigenous communities of Peninsular Malaysia, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and distinctive artistic expressions. As one of the many Orang Asli (aboriginal) tribes, the Mah Meri possess a unique cultural identity intricately linked to their traditional art forms. These art forms, encompassing wood carvings, masks, and other visual arts, are aesthetic expressions and carry profound symbolic meanings that reflect the tribe's historical narratives, spiritual beliefs, and social values (Santano & Thwaites, 2022).

In recent years, the Mah Meri's cultural heritage has faced significant threats from the forces of modernization. Rapid economic development, urbanization, and the influx of global cultural influences have gradually eroded traditional practices and knowledge (Coluzzi, 2016). This has raised concerns about the sustainability and preservation of Mah Meri's artistic heritage, which is integral to their cultural identity and continuity (Mustaffa Halabi, 2013; Abdul Razak, 2014).

This study addresses these concerns by conducting a comprehensive semiotic analysis of the Mah Meri tribe's visual art heritage. By applying Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory, the research aims to decode the symbols and meanings embedded in Mah Meri's artistic expressions. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, offers a powerful tool for understanding how the Mah Meri communicate their cultural identity and values through visual art (Lester, 2005).

The primary objectives of this research are threefold: first, to analyze the characteristics and significance of the symbols used in Mah Meri art; second, to document and interpret these artistic expressions in the context of the tribe's cultural heritage; and third, to explore the impacts of modernization on the preservation and transmission of Mah Meri art. Through an ethnographic approach, this study will employ qualitative methods, including field observations, photographic and videographic documentation, and interviews with community members and cultural experts (Pink, 2022; Schwartz, 1989). The findings of this research are expected to

contribute to visual anthropology by providing deeper insights into the symbolic richness of Mah Meri art and its role in cultural preservation. Furthermore, the study aims to highlight the urgent need for effective strategies to safeguard Mah Meri's visual heritage against the pressures of modernization. By doing so, it seeks to ensure that the artistic legacy of the Mah Meri tribe can be preserved and appreciated by future generations (Abdul Razak, 2012).

2. Literature Review

Semiotic Theory and the Work of Charles Sander Peirce: Semiotic theory, particularly the work of Charles Sander Peirce, provides a framework for analyzing the symbols and meanings in Mah Meri's art. Previous studies on indigenous art forms emphasize the importance of preserving cultural heritage in the face of globalization (Hoopes, 2014). This theoretical approach helps decode the complex layers of symbolism embedded in traditional crafts, rituals, and performances of the Mah Meri tribe, ensuring their cultural narratives are preserved and understood.

Photography as Sustainable Design in Visual Communication: As Mustaffa Halabi (2013) emphasized, photography is similar to language or written words and is considered a fundamental communication medium. Photography exists in various genres of different functions. The field of photography, especially digital photography, which dominates the world today, is a combination of art and technical skills that contributes significantly to other fields such as business, science, arts, sports, and medicine (Mustaffa Halabi, 2013). With reference materials like video and print media, it is possible to ensure the continuity of their ancestor's stories (storytellers) and maintain the originality of their visual arts (Abdul Razak, 2014).

Understanding Symbolism in Anyaman Kelerai of Indigenous People: In their book, "*Kearifan Tempatan: Dari lisan ke Aksara dan Media*" (2015), discussed the indigenous people's values via the theme anyaman kelerai, which holds explicit and implicit meanings related to their religion and daily lives for blessings. The research discovered that any man kelerai motifs such as Bunga Cina, Bunga Melor, Tampok Manggis, Tapak Harimau, and Tapak Anjing are inspired by nature (A. Hamid, 2015). These motifs manifest the indigenous community's thoughts, transforming signs from their surroundings into plaited designs (Isnin & Abd Aziz, 2022).

According to Jo Komar (2014), the materials used for plaiting also reflect the indigenous people's beliefs and rituals. Mengkuang Pandanus, for example, is believed to protect people from meddling with delicate species. Furthermore, there are specific periods, such as during a full moon, when it is appropriate to gather Sengkang leaves to prevent the leaves from becoming fragile and ensure their longevity (Komar, 2014).

3. Research Methodology

This research adopted an ethnographic approach to understand the Mah Meri community and their cultural expressions. This included long-term participant observation, visual documentation through photography and videography, and qualitative interviews with community members and cultural experts. Ethnographic research methods are well-established in anthropology for gaining deep insights into cultural practices and community dynamics (Atkinson, 2007). Visual ethnography, in particular, is practical for documenting and analyzing visual aspects of culture (Pink, 2022).

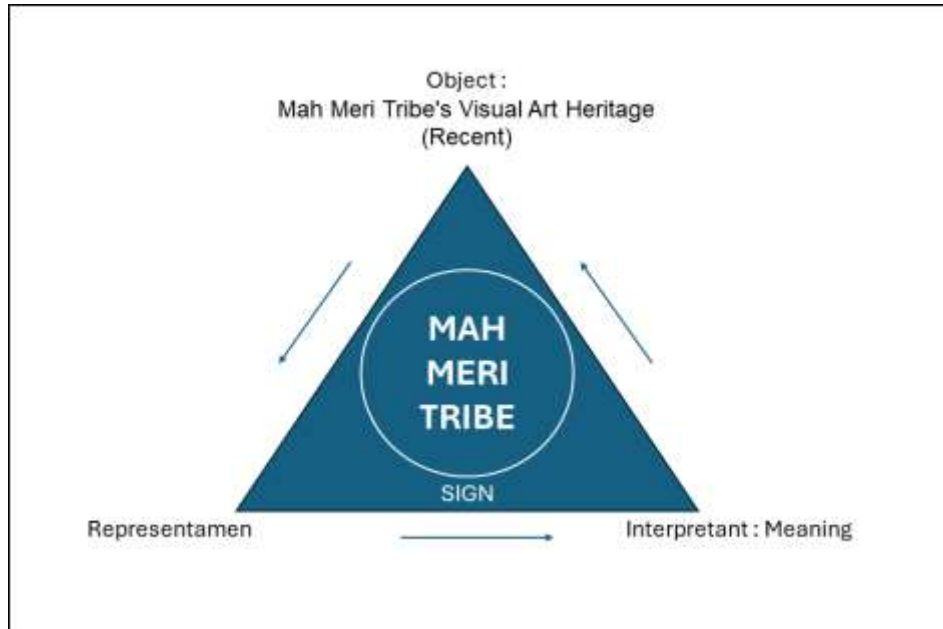
Ethnographic Approach: An ethnographic research approach is adopted to understand the Mah Meri community's cultural expressions comprehensively. This involves long-term, non-active field participant observation, allowing for an immersive exploration of the community's daily life and artistic practices.

Data Collection: Data will be collected through photographic and videographic methods, providing visual documentation of Mah Meri's art forms, rituals, and cultural practices. Qualitative data will be gathered from field visits to key sites, such as Pulau Carey, and interactions with the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). The Talanoa method, known for its in-depth and inclusive discussions, will be employed to gather rich, qualitative insights.

Quantitative Analysis: Quantitative data will also be collected to assess the impact of modernization on the Mah Meri tribe's art and cultural heritage. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Semiotic Framework: Charles Sander Peirce's Semiotic theory will be employed as a theoretical framework for this research. This semiotic approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the symbolism embedded in the Mah Meri tribe's artistic expressions. By decoding the meanings and significance of their art, we can gain valuable insights into their cultural identity and historical narratives.

Figure 1: In-depth analysis of the symbolism embedded in the Mah Meri tribe's artistic using Charles Sander



4. Results and Discussion

This research enhances the field of visual anthropology by highlighting the role of image representation in preserving and understanding cultural heritage. By applying Peirce's Semiotic Theory, the study offers new perspectives in semiotics, potentially inspiring further theoretical developments. The ethnographic approach provides valuable case studies for academic courses, enriching the discourse on cultural preservation. The findings can inform strategies to protect and sustain the Mah Meri tribe's traditional art forms. Insights from this research can guide the development of culturally sensitive tourism initiatives. The study can serve as a basis for designing programs that economically and socially empower the Mah Meri tribe. The analysis revealed that Mah Meri's art is rich in symbolic meanings, reflecting the tribe's cultural identity and historical narratives. The impact of modernization on traditional art forms was also documented, showing a shift towards contemporary themes while maintaining traditional elements.

The findings underscore the significance of visual representation in preserving cultural heritage. By applying semiotic theory, this study provides a deeper understanding of the Mah Meri tribe's artistic expressions and their role in maintaining cultural continuity. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of documenting visual heritage to sustain cultural identity, as digital media can play a crucial role in preserving the originality of indigenous arts (Abdul Razak et al., 2023). This research builds upon these insights, demonstrating how semiotic analysis can decode the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional crafts, thereby contributing to preserving and promoting the Mah Meri tribe's cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

This research highlights the need for effective strategies to preserve the Mah Meri tribe's art and cultural heritage. Future studies should focus on the impact of cultural preservation initiatives and explore the use of digital media in documenting indigenous art forms. Previous research has demonstrated that digital media can play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage by maintaining the originality and continuity of visual arts. Such approaches can ensure that traditional art forms are documented and accessible for future generations, promoting cultural sustainability and continuity.

Preserving the Mah Meri tribe's art and cultural heritage requires comprehensive documentation and understanding of their symbolic expressions. By applying a semiotic analysis, this research provides valuable insights into the cultural identity of the Mah Meri tribe, contributing to visual anthropology and offering practical benefits for cultural preservation and sustainable tourism.

Acknowledgment: We would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Research Management Centre (RMC) UiTM, Grant DUCS KK UiTM Selangor Branch (UiTM Puncak Alam) for funding this paper. SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF MAH MERI TRIBE'S VISUAL ART HERITAGE THROUGH IMAGE REPRESENTATION. 600-UiTMSEL (PI. 5/4) (018/2023). Our heartfelt thanks go to the individuals who have supported me throughout this research. We also extend appreciation to the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Puncak Alam, Malaysia, and to SOCI - Socio-Cultural Innovation, UiTM, for their unwavering support.

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