

Interface-Based Visualization of Procreation Cultural Symbolism in Malay Pantun Using Photographic Imagery

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ABSTRACT

The Malay Pantun, an essential part of traditional Malay literature, uses metaphorical language to convey symbolic meanings and deep cultural values. Despite its literary richness and historical importance, Pantun is increasingly seen as obsolete by the younger generation. The main cause of this disconnect is the complexity of Pantun's language and symbols, which are frequently based in cultural contexts that are foreign to today's young. This research aims to recommend a visual photographic image based on Cultural Symbolism in Malay Pantun. The study uses a qualitative methodology that consists of three stages: a textual analysis of five selected Pantun with strong symbolic elements, a comparative analysis of ten existing artworks inspired by Pantun, the creation of five original photographic images based on the chosen Pantun, and a survey-based audience interpretation. The results show that the best ways to present Pantun's basic ideas to modern audiences are through symbolic iconography and textual materials. Visual photographic images were proving to be a compelling medium for communicating cultural values that enhances engagement among youth and supports the preservation of intangible heritage.

Keywords: Cultural Symbolism, Intangible Heritage, Malay Pantun, Visual Photography, Youth Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Symbolism plays a vital role in literature, art, and other forms of creative expression, as it allows readers to understand and interpret meanings beyond the literal level. The meaning of a symbol is often embedded within phrases or sentences, carrying deeper implications that go beyond surface interpretation (Mat Hussain et al., 2015). According to Brodskaja (2012), symbolism can be described as one of the most significant creative trends in art, serving as a medium for representing abstract ideas and facilitating the transfer of meaning across different minds (Çengel, 2023).

Additionally, symbolism can be roughly split into contextual and universal forms, where each of it has a distinct function in cultural expression and narrative (Esparza, 2024). Besides, contextual symbolism is influenced by particular cultural or narrative contexts, whereas universal symbolism depends on well-known representations drawn from nature, mythology, and common human experiences. Positively, symbolism serves as a effective communication tool in all civilizations and traditions by incorporating cultural norms and beliefs into expressive forms (Kamal & Ajjulus, 2022).

In the context of Malay literature, symbolism has deep roots and is most prominently expressed through traditional poetry. According to Ismail et al. (2017), symbolic language has long been an essential aspect of Malay cultural expression. Traditional Malay poetry was categorized into several forms, including *Syair*, *Pantun*, *Gurindam*, *Seloka*, and *Ikatan Puisi Bebas* (Osman, 1978). Among these, pantun stands out as one of the most widely known and celebrated poetic forms, composed of quatrains rich in symbolic and metaphorical language (Yahaya, 2015).

Previous studies on poems have largely focused on the use of nature symbolism, particularly flora and fauna, as well as its linguistic structure, aesthetic value, and cultural significance. However, pantun is more than just a literary form but also serves as a reflection of Malay philosophy, identity, and traditions. Pantun on the other hand, is commonly classified into 11 thematic categories (Bakar, 2018), which included as an advice and education significant. Despite its rich cultural and historical value, the appreciation of Pantun has been steadily declining, especially among younger generations.

The challenges derived from linguistic complexity, archaic expressions, and references to customs and values that are increasingly unfamiliar to contemporary audiences (Mohamad, 2024). Moreover, rapid globalization and the dominance of digital media have shifted youth preferences towards fast-paced, visually driven content, leaving reflective literary forms like Pantun marginalized (Judi et al., 2023; Nur et al., 2024).

To address this gap, this research explores how the symbolic elements of Malay Pantun can be revitalized and made more accessible to younger audiences. By transforming cultural symbolism into visual photography representations, the study seeks to bridge the divide between traditional literary heritage and contemporary visual culture. Through this approach, it aims to enhance understanding, engagement, and appreciation of Malay Pantun in modern society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolism plays a central role in literature and the arts, allowing abstract concepts to be communicated through tangible forms such as objects, colors, and imagery (Jung, 1964). In cultural contexts, symbols are not arbitrary; they carry collective meanings shaped by historical, religious, and environmental influences (Yahya, 1995). According to de Saussure (1974), symbols act as signifiers that evoke layered interpretations rather than directly representing meaning, making them vital tools for storytelling and cultural expression.

Cultural symbolism refers to the shared meanings embedded within a community's symbols, which can appear as objects, gestures, natural elements, or visual motifs (Philips & Gonzalez, 2023). These symbols preserved traditions and reflect collective identity, although their interpretations can vary across cultures, requiring cultural literacy for accurate understanding (Dongxiang, 2018).

Within Malay literature, symbolism is deeply rooted in Pantun, one of the oldest forms of traditional poetry. Originating from the oral tradition, Pantun is composed of verses where the first two lines known as *pembayang* or set imagery, and the last two lines established as *maksud* or deliver meaning (Ungku, 2011). Its symbolism often draws from nature, flora, fauna, and everyday life, encoding moral, philosophical, and cultural values (Ayob & Nor, 2012 ; Zainal Abidin Bakar, 2018).

In modern contexts, however, younger generations face challenges understanding the Pantun due to its symbolic depth, archaic language, and cultural references (Mohamad, 2024). As Rose (2016) emphasizes that visual literacy allows viewers to decode cultural symbols effectively, and Barreto (2006) highlights photography's role as an educational tool that enhances engagement and understanding, this study addresses that gap by exploring how photography can reinterpret Pantun, making its cultural symbolism more accessible and engaging for modern society.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to understand the cultural symbolism in Malay Pantun and further re-explain the cultural symbolism in Malay pantun through visual photographic images. The qualitative approach is suitable as it allows for in-depth analysis of symbolic meanings and provides flexibility in translating literary expressions into visual representations (Ghauri et al., 2005). The research process is divided into three main phases as shown in Fig. 1 below

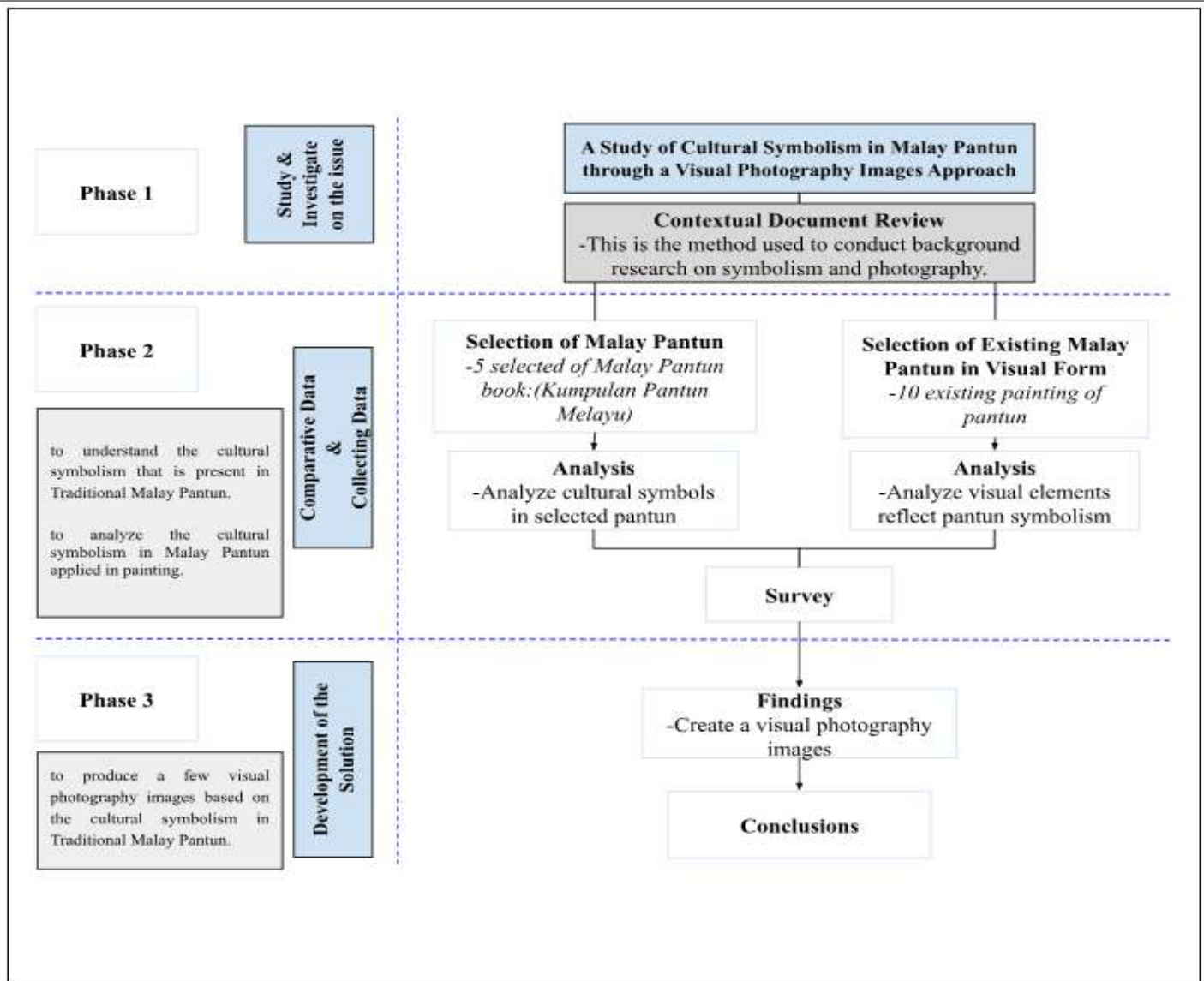


Fig. 1 The flowchart of Research Design

Data Collection

Analysis of Pantun and Visual Artworks

The five selected Pantun exemplify the use of metaphor, natural imagery, and cultural wisdom. The analysis identified the presence of three symbolic elements: Icon, Text, And Color. The ten visual artworks are from two different artist which five artworks from each artist. All artwork offered rich interpretations of Pantun themes through mixed media. Overall, visual representation amplified symbolic meaning, offering multi-layered interpretations. The presence of visual icons made abstract ideas such as humility, hardship, and gratitude to be more accessible to contemporary viewers.

Table 1 Analysis of Textual Analysis and Visual Artworks

No.	Pantun & Visual Artwork (Painting)	Symbolism			Cultural Interpretation
		Color	Icon	Text	
	<i>Dalam Semak Ada Duri, Ayam Kuning Buat Sarang; Orang Tamak Selalu Rugi, Macam Anjing Dengan Bayang.</i>	✓	✓	✓	Greed leads to loss

1.	 SI TAMAK Artist: Amy Nazira (2017) Medium: Oil & charcoal on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Moral caution on selfishness
	 TEXTBOOK NARCISSISM Artist: Safar Zin (2017) Medium: Charcoal & acrylic on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Danger of self-absorption
2.	Berakit-Rakit Ke Hulu, Berenang-Renang Ke Tepian; Bersakit-Sakit Dahulu, Bersenang-Senang Kemudian.	✗	✓	✓	Encourages perseverance and patience
	 SUSAH SENANG Artist: Amy Nazira (2017) Medium: Oil & charcoal on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Endurance and reward
	 ISTIKOMAH Artist: Safar Zin (2017) Medium: Charcoal & acrylic on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Value of consistency & patience

3.	<i>Sorong Papan Tarik Papan, Buah Keranji Dalam Perahu; Suruh Makan Awak Makan, Suruh Mengaji Awak Tak Mahu.</i>	✗	✓	✓	Laziness and preference for pleasure duty
	 TEPUK DADA, TANYA SELERA Artist: Amy Nazira (2017) Medium: Oil & charcoal on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Self-discipline vs. indulgence
	 PROCRASTINATING Artist: Safar Zin (2017) Medium: Charcoal & acrylic on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Modern critique of discipline
	<i>Buah Cempedak Di Luar Pagar, Ambil Galah Jolokkan; Saya Budak Baru Belajar, Kalau Salah Tolong Tunjukkan.</i>	✗	✓	✓	Humility and openness in the learning process
4.		✓	✓	✓	Humility in learning

	 “Semangat Bertenteng:(Kronologi Fauzulyusri)” by Amy Nazira 2017, Oil & charcoal on canvas				
	 “Adab Belajar” by Safar Zin 2017, Charcoal & acrylic on canvas 152 x 122 cm	✓	✓	✓	Intellectual and moral growth
5.	<i>Pisang Emas Dibawa Belayar, Masak Sebiji Di Atas Peti; Hutang Emas Boleh Dibayar, Hutang Budi Dibawa Mati.</i>	✗	✓	✓	Upholding moral and emotional gratitude in life
	 SILATURAHIM Artist: Amy Nazira (2017) Medium: Oil & charcoal on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Value of familial gratitude

	 DIRI, ILMU & PENCIPTA Artist: Safar Zin (2017) Medium: Charcoal & acrylic on canvas	✓	✓	✓	Navigating life with values
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Visual Interpretation through Visual Photography Images

The final stage of this study involved translating the symbolic meanings of the five selected Malay pantun into original photographic images. Each photograph was carefully designed by incorporating three key visual elements identified during the textual and artwork analyses: Iconography, Color, and Textual cues. These elements were deliberately composed to preserve the cultural symbolism embedded in the pantun while presenting it in a visual language that is more familiar to contemporary audiences.

The selection of icons was guided by the symbolic meanings extracted from each pantun. For example, tangible objects, human gestures, and environmental settings were used to represent abstract values such as perseverance, humility, gratitude, discipline, and the consequences of greed. Color was employed to reinforce emotional tone and symbolic associations, while photographic composition, including framing, lighting, and perspective, directed viewers' attention towards the intended cultural message. Where appropriate, short textual elements were incorporated into the visual composition to strengthen interpretation without diminishing the metaphorical nature of the pantun. Fig. 2 is the 5 photographic images based on the symbolic composition and visual metaphor.

		
Pantun 1	Pantun 2	Pantun 3



Pantun 4



Pantun 5

Fig. 2 Visual Photography Images

Based on Pantun 1, the photographic image visualizes the destructive nature of greed through symbolic composition and visual metaphor. The main subject is positioned in a way that suggests fixation on an unattainable object, representing excessive desire and self-deception. The use of shadows or reflections reinforces the pantun's analogy of "anjing dengan bayang," illustrating how uncontrolled greed causes individuals to pursue illusions rather than reality. A darker color palette and high-contrast lighting create a sense of tension and emotional conflict, emphasizing the negative consequences of selfishness. The composition encourages viewers to reflect on the moral lesson that excessive desire ultimately results in loss rather than fulfilment.

Further is Pantun 2, where this photograph symbolizes perseverance and delayed gratification by portraying a subject engaged in a challenging journey before reaching a place of comfort or achievement. Directional composition guides the viewer's eye from a difficult foreground towards a brighter background, representing progress from hardship to success. Natural lighting gradually increases across the image to reinforce the transition from struggle to hope. The visual narrative reflects the Malay philosophy that enduring temporary hardship is necessary to attain future happiness and achievement. By presenting perseverance in a contemporary photographic context, the image makes the pantun's moral values more relatable to younger audiences.

For Pantun 3, the photograph illustrates the conflict between personal comfort and responsibility through carefully selected symbolic objects and human behavior. Educational materials are contrasted with leisure-related elements to represent the tension between discipline and distraction. The placement of these objects within the frame visually communicates the consequences of prioritizing immediate pleasure over long-term self-development. Cooler tones and subdued lighting reinforce the atmosphere of neglect and missed opportunity. Rather than portraying laziness literally, the image uses symbolic juxtaposition to encourage viewers to consider the importance of education, self-discipline, and responsible decision-making.

The photographic composition represents humility and openness to learning through the subject's posture, facial expression, and interaction with the surrounding environment shown in Pantun 4 photographic images. The upward perspective and balanced composition symbolize personal growth and the willingness to seek knowledge from others. Soft natural lighting creates a welcoming atmosphere that reflects sincerity and respect, while the uncluttered background allows viewers to focus on the emotional expression of the subject. The visual interpretation reinforces the Malay cultural value of acknowledging one's limitations and accepting constructive guidance as part of lifelong learning.

Finally, for Pantun 5, the photograph conveys the enduring value of gratitude and moral indebtedness through symbolic interaction between individuals rather than material possessions. Gestures of giving, receiving, or mutual respect become the central visual icons, emphasizing that kindness and compassion transcend monetary value. Warm color tones and balanced composition create a feeling of harmony and emotional connection, reinforcing the significance of social relationships within Malay culture. The photograph encourages viewers to recognize that while financial debts may eventually be repaid, acts of kindness leave a lasting moral obligation that shapes personal character and strengthens community bonds.

The completed photographic images were subsequently evaluated through a survey involving 100 respondents. Participants were asked to interpret the visual meaning of each photograph and assess its effectiveness in communicating the cultural symbolism of the corresponding pantun. Overall, the findings indicated that respondents were able to identify the intended symbolic meanings with a high level of consistency. The combination of recognizable visual icons with contextual color and composition enabled participants to understand the underlying moral values more easily than through textual pantun alone.

Furthermore, respondents also described the photographic representations as contemporary, engaging, and easier to relate to than traditional literary presentations. Many respondents indicated that the images encouraged them to reflect on the meaning of the pantun and increased their appreciation of its cultural relevance. These findings suggest that photography functions not merely as an illustrative medium but as an interpretive bridge between traditional Malay literary symbolism and modern visual communication. By transforming abstract cultural concepts into accessible visual narratives, photographic imagery has the potential to enhance cultural literacy and encourage younger generations to engage with Malay pantun as a living form of intangible cultural heritage.

Collectively, the five photographic images demonstrate how traditional Malay pantun can be translated into contemporary visual narratives without diminishing their cultural meanings. Rather than functioning as literal illustrations of the poems, the photographs reinterpret symbolic messages through iconography, color, composition, lighting, and human expression. This visual approach enables viewers to engage with abstract cultural values such as humility, perseverance, gratitude, discipline, and moral responsibility more intuitively. Consequently, the photographic representations serve as an effective medium for bridging traditional literary heritage with contemporary visual communication, making the symbolic meanings of Malay pantun more accessible and meaningful to younger generations.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that visual photography is an effective medium for revitalizing the symbolic richness of Malay Pantun. By combining traditional literature with contemporary visual expression, it not only enhances cultural appreciation among youth but also supports the preservation of Malaysia's intangible heritage in an increasingly digital era. To strengthen the legitimacy and reach of the initiative, collaboration with institutions such as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). This approach not only encourages cultural appreciation among youth but also offers innovative methods for integrating intangible heritage into education and creative practice. Future research is encouraged to explore cross-disciplinary strategies involving animation, multimedia, and interactive platforms to further extend the reach and relevance of Malay Pantun in the digital age.

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