

Mepasah: An Exploration of the Death Ceremony in Terunyan Village, Bali Through the Medium of Documentary Film

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the *Mepasah* tradition in Terunyan Village, Bali, a unique mortuary practice in which the deceased are placed in the open air beneath the sacred *Taru Menyan* tree. As an intangible cultural heritage of the Bali Aga community, this tradition remains under-documented and faces the risk of erosion due to globalization. Data collection methods included literature review, interviews with local priests, direct observation, and the application of the *Glass Box* method for visual design. The findings demonstrate that documentary film serves as both a medium for cultural preservation and an effective educational tool, particularly for younger generations, who are more engaged with visual media. Beyond safeguarding local identity, the film also contributes to sustainable tourism promotion by introducing Balinese indigenous wisdom to a global audience. The documentary has been donated to the Batur Geopark Museum (UNESCO Global Geopark) as an educational and cultural preservation resource. This study highlights how the integration of cinematographic techniques and anthropological approaches can produce works that are simultaneously scientific and artistic, ensuring the relevance of cultural conservation in the modern era.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Bali has grown rapidly over the past few decades, making it a global destination with cultural richness as its main attraction. However, the dynamics of globalization and modernization present serious challenges to the sustainability of local traditions. The shift in values resulting from the development of tourism, the declining interest of the younger generation in local wisdom, and the penetration of global culture pose a risk of eroding the traditions that have become the identity of Bali (Ratmanto, 2018). One of the traditions that is now receiving attention is *Mepasah* in Terunyan Village, a unique funeral procession where the body is not cremated or buried, but instead placed open under the *Taru Menyan tree* (Dwijendra, 2015; Danandjaja, 1985).

The urgency of this research lies in the fact that *the Mepasah* tradition, despite being an icon of Balinese Aga culture, is still not documented in depth in scientific and popular media. In fact, systematic documentation is essential to prevent the loss of this cultural practice in the midst of globalization. As conveyed by Aan Ratmanto (2018), cultural historiography that is limited to texts is often less effective in reaching a broad audience. In this context, documentaries with an observational ethno-documentary style are considered a medium that can present cultural narratives in an authentic, informative, and engaging way for the digital generation.

The main research problem raised is how to explore and represent *the Mepasah tradition* through the medium of documentary films as a means of cultural preservation. This research aims to answer the core question: How can visual documentation strategies preserve local cultural values while conveying the philosophical meaning of traditions to a global audience?

The objectives of this research are:

1. Preserving *the Mepasah* tradition as the cultural heritage of Bali Aga through authentic visual documentation.
2. Providing a new understanding to the broader community, especially the younger generation, about the values of local wisdom in Terunyan Village.
3. Produce academic contributions in the form of ethnographic documentaries that can be used by researchers, educators, and policy makers.

The benefits of the research are divided into several aspects. Academically, this research expands the study of cinematography-based cultural documentation. Socially, documentaries function as a medium of education and increase public awareness about the importance of preserving local traditions. In practical terms, this work also supports the promotion of sustainable tourism by emphasizing the importance of culture as an authentic tourist attraction. Thus, this research is not only oriented to cultural preservation, but also to its relevance in sustainable development in Bali.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Documentaries as a Media for Cultural Preservation

Documentaries have long been used as a means of recording, documenting, and disseminating cultural knowledge. Documentaries not only showcase reality but also serve as visual representations that allow the audience to understand the social, philosophical, and spiritual context of a society (Nichols, 2017). In the cultural context, documentaries act as a medium for the preservation of intangible heritage that is at risk of being lost due to globalization. With an ethno-documentary approach, visual media can present a direct experience to the audience while maintaining the authenticity of cultural practices (Siddiq & Salama, 2019).

Similar Documentary Film Review

Some relevant documentary works inspire this research:

1. Film *Semesta* (2018) by Chairun Nissa highlights spiritual traditions in Indonesia, including Nyepi in Bali. This film emphasizes the harmony between humans and nature, employing an observational approach that showcases the daily lives of indigenous peoples (Pratista, 2008). This documentary demonstrates that cultural representation through film can serve as a powerful message of ecology and environmental conservation.
2. TVOne's documentary "Terunyan Cemetery Tradition" (2020) depicts the practice of *Mepasah* burial in Terunyan Village. The approach is more informative in the style of television reportage. While effective as an introduction to information, this approach leaves little room for philosophical reflection and immersive visual experiences.
3. The film *Maramba* (2022), which documents the funeral procession of the King of Sumba, uses observational techniques to show the spiritual relationship of the Sumbanese people with their ancestors. This film emphasizes symbolic value and spirituality, aligning with the research goal to explore the philosophical significance of funeral traditions (Pamungkas & Dzulfikar, 2022).
4. The *Rambu Solo* ritual in Toraja, which was raised into documentary media, featured a funeral procession with significant cost and potent symbolism. This documentation shows the social, spiritual, and economic dimensions that are integrated into the funeral tradition (Hall & University, 1997).

From this comparison, it can be seen that cultural documentaries can focus on spiritual (*Universe*), informative (TV One), and philosophical (*Maramba*) dimensions. This research adds a new perspective by combining cinematic observational approaches and ethnographic narratives to present *Mepasah* as a tradition full of meaning.

History and Tradition of Funerals in Terunyan Village

Terunyan Village is one of the villages of Bali Aga, known for its unique funeral tradition. The Terunyan people do not perform cremation like the Balinese Hindu community in general, but carry out two practices: *Mepasah*, which is placing the body on open ground under the *Taru Menyan* tree; and burial for the bodies of those who died unnaturally or children (Danandjaja, 1985; Dwijendra, 2015).

The *Taru Menyan* tree is believed to neutralize the smell of corpses, thus allowing the funeral procession to proceed without causing disturbances. Customary rules limit this tradition; for example, only the body of a married and reasonably deceased person can be buried by *Mepasah*. The beliefs of the Terunyan people distinguish them from other Balinese communities even though they both adhere to Hinduism (Danandjaja, 1985).

Theoretical Foundations

This research rests on three theoretical foundations:

1. Cinematography: the art of shooting that functions to present reality visually. According to Kamarulzaman (2015), cinematography is a technique of painting with light, which includes aspects of camera, framing, and image duration.
2. Ethnography: an anthropological research method that describes culture as a whole, emphasizing direct experience and the meaning that lives in society (Siddiq & Salama, 2019). In documentaries, visual ethnography enables the audience to gain a deeper understanding of culture through authentic narratives.
3. Tri Hita Karana: a philosophy of life of the Balinese people that emphasizes the balance between human relationships with God (*parahyangan*), others (*pawongan*), and nature (*palemahan*). This concept is an important framework for understanding the *Mepasah* tradition as a religious as well as an ecological practice (Efferin, 2015).

Conclusion of the Literature Review

The literature shows that cultural documentation through film not only serves as a visual record but also as a medium for cultural education, preservation, and promotion. This research differs from previous documentaries in that it explores explicitly the *Mepasah* tradition through an observational cinematographic approach combined with an ethnographic framework. Thus, this research contributes novelty in the realm of Balinese cultural documentation and the development of visual-based educational media.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative method with an observational ethno-documentary approach. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring cultural practices that are full of symbolic, spiritual, and social meaning. The observational documentary method emphasizes the recording of events naturally, without direct intervention from researchers, in order to display the authenticity of the *Mepasah* tradition in Terunyan Village (Nichols, 2017).

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain valid and comprehensive data, this study uses three main techniques:

1. Literature Studies. Literature studies were conducted to gain a theoretical and historical understanding of the funeral tradition in Terunyan Village. The primary sources used are the academic works *Uniqueness of Terunyan Village* (Dwijendra, 2015) and *the Circle of Life Ceremony in Terunyan Bali* (Danandjaja, 1985). Additional literature in the form of scientific articles,

journals, and similar documents was also analyzed as comparative material.

2. Interview. Interviews were conducted in depth with traditional leaders of Terunyan Village, including Jero Mangku Bagaskara and Jero Mangku Sampurna, who have spiritual authority and cultural knowledge about *the Mepasah* procession. The interviews are semi-structured, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the traditional narratives, philosophies, and ritual meanings contained in the tradition.
3. Direct Observation. Observation was carried out by attending and recording the *Mepasah procession* in July 2024. This participatory observation includes observing the situation at the funeral home, the process of preparing ceremonial facilities, and the funeral procession under the *Taru Menyan tree*. Observation techniques are used to capture visual details, emotional atmosphere, and social interaction of the community in carrying out the tradition.

Analysis Method: Glass Box Method

The documentary design process uses **the Glass Box Method** (Soedarwanto, 2017). This method emphasizes openness in the process of thinking and data analysis with four main stages:

1. Preparation Stage. Researchers collected preliminary data, including literature, interviews, and field observations. At this stage, the determination of resource persons, filming locations, and the preparation of documentary story frameworks was also carried out.
2. Incubation stage. The collected data was processed through deep reflection, where the researcher analyzed the meaning of *the Mepasah tradition* and assessed its relevance to the research objectives.
3. Illumination stage. At this stage, creative ideas in the form of visual and narrative concepts emerge that will be outlined in the documentary. The story idea was then developed into the form of storyline, storyboard, and cinematography style determination.
4. Verification Stage. The results of the analysis and design are tested through the film production process. Visual documentation is verified with ethnographic data to ensure cultural accuracy. Verification also involves traditional leaders as validators so that the film remains authentic and in accordance with the values of the local community.

Data Integration with Documentary Production

Data obtained from literature, interviews, and observations were combined with a cinematographic approach. The resulting documentary serves as a visual representation of the *Mepasah tradition*, with an observational style that presents the authentic voice of the Terunyan people. This integration confirms that documentary films can play a dual role: as a work of visual art and as a valid medium for cultural research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Documentary Production

This research resulted in a documentary film of approximately 45 minutes, which recorded a series of *Mepasah processions* in Terunyan Village. The documentary shows the complete stages, starting from the preparation of ceremonial facilities, the funeral procession of the body under *the Taru Menyan* tree, to prayers led by traditional leaders. The observational techniques used allow the audience to witness the tradition authentically, without a patronizing narrative. This approach emphasizes the visual experience and cultural atmosphere that arises from the interaction of a society with its traditions.

Cultural Preservation

The main results of the study show that this documentary serves as a medium for cultural preservation. The *unique Mepasah tradition, which is only carried out in Terunyan Village, is systematically documented so that it can be passed on to future generations*. This visual documentation is important considering that globalization has the potential to erode traditional cultural practices that are local and sacred (Ratmanto, 2018). With documentaries, the philosophical and spiritual values of the tradition are not only stored, but can also be reproduced for academic and educational purposes.

Community Education

This documentary also serves as a means of education for the wider community. The audience is introduced to the philosophy of *Mepasah* as a Balinese Aga cultural heritage that teaches a balance between humans, nature, and spirituality. This education is not only aimed at the local community, but also at national and international audiences. With a visual approach, the transmitted understanding becomes easier to accept, especially among the younger generation, who are accustomed to audiovisual media rather than written texts (Nichols, 2017).

Scientific Contributions

As a form of academic contribution, this documentary was donated to the Batur Geopark Museum (UNESCO Global Geopark). This step strengthens the function of documentaries as a formal and non-formal educational medium. Thus, film not only serves as a work of art but also as a source of scientific reference that researchers, educators, and policymakers can use in the study of culture and the preservation of intangible heritage.

Sustainable Tourism Promotion

In addition to the academic aspect, this documentary also contributes to the promotion of sustainable tourism. The visual narrative of *Mepasah* enriches the treasures of Balinese cultural tourism by presenting a different perspective from *the more widely known Ngaben* practice. This documentation supports a tourism model that emphasizes the authenticity of local culture as a key attraction. Thus, tourism is not only oriented to entertainment, but also to understanding the values of local wisdom (Efferin, 2015).

Discussion: The Effectiveness of Visual Documentation

Research discussions show that visual-based documentation is more effective than written historiography in reaching global audiences and younger generations. Documentaries not only convey information but also build an

emotional and empathetic experience for the audience. Through observational cinematography, the audience can feel the sacred nuances and silence of *the Mepasah* procession. This indicates that documentaries serve a dual function: as a medium of preservation and as an instrument of cultural communication across generations and nations (Pratista, 2008; Siddiq & Salama, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The *Mepasah tradition* in Terunyan Village is one of the unique funeral practices that reflects the local wisdom of the Balinese Aga people. This tradition has distinct religious, philosophical, and ecological dimensions that differ from those of Balinese Hindu funeral processions in general. Through this research, it can be concluded that *the Mepasah tradition* is not only a ritual of death, but also a manifestation of a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and spirituality that is in line with the philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana*. Documentation through observational documentaries has proven to be effective in recording the socio-cultural realities of the community, as it allows the audience to watch the procession authentically without the intervention of external narratives. The results of this study demonstrate that visual documentation serves not only as a medium of preservation but also as a means of education and promotion of relevant culture in the era of globalization. This documentary, with an ethno-documentary style, offers both an emotional experience and academic knowledge to the audience, thereby bridging the gap between local traditions and global audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, local governments in Bali, especially Bangli Regency, are advised to provide greater support for the production of similar cultural documentaries. This support can take the form of financing, distribution facilitation, and the integration of documentaries into regional cultural preservation initiatives. In this way, documentaries can serve as an official cultural archive that supports efforts to protect intangible heritage.

Second, researchers, particularly in the fields of art, design, and anthropology, are recommended to develop ethno-documentary methods as an alternative approach to exploring the archipelago's culture. This method has been proven to effectively combine scientific perspectives with visual power, resulting in works that possess both academic and artistic value. The implementation of this method in various regions of Indonesia can enrich the cultural documentation treasures.

Third, *Mepasah* documentaries need to be disseminated more widely through international film festivals, digital platforms, and global distribution networks. This spread not only introduces *Mepasah* traditions to international audiences but also supports the promotion of sustainable cultural tourism in Bali. By prioritizing the uniqueness of Bali Aga, this film can be an authentic representation of local identity that contributes to Indonesia's cultural diplomacy.

FURTHER STUDY

Further research can expand the scope by comparing *Mepasah* with funeral rituals in other indigenous communities in Indonesia. Studies can also integrate virtual reality (VR) technology to bring immersive experiences in cultural education.

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