

## Organizing Visual Information of Traditional Ornaments Adorned by Embhan's Ring Ladies

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### Abstract

This article aims to discuss an alternative system to organize information in the context of visual ethnography study particularly on the documentation of diminishing traditional ornaments worn by the remaining Ring Ladies of Embhan Community, the only community in Sarawak who still practice this culture. The system was developed based on problems faced by the researcher when visual and data collected during the investigation has difficulty with storage due to the lack of a systematic compilation method. Thus, it is challenging for the researcher to identify or retrieve the information, especially relating to visual data on the cultural objects. Through visual ethnography method, visual information related to cultural objects of Bidayuh Embhan particularly with the Ring Ladies was collected and analyzed. Hence, an alternative system in organizing visual information relating to the cultural object called, Digital Ethnographic Organizer (e-Divo) was created using Adobe InDesign and published in a Flash format. It is hoped that this system can be developed further as an

information seeking tool that can be used in the context of cultural objects and ethnography exhibition, especially in the galleries or museums.

**Keywords:** Traditional Ornaments, The Ring Ladies, Semban, Bidayuh, Sarawak

### Introduction

In the context of Social Science research, especially involving visual ethnography methods, the usage of visual data such as photos, videos and sketches is argued to be more effective compared to text-based data (Rafee, et. al, 2015). Riviera (2010) also explained as cited from Pink (2001), the relevance of using photography, video, and hypermedia as convenient tools for visual ethnography. It is also reported by Schembri and Boyle (2013), which argued that the visual text collected through the process of cultural immersion can serve as an effective and credible research tool in the quest to collect and analyze empirical evidence as well as disseminate research findings.

Thus, this method has been applied during the documentation process of Embhan community, a sub-tribe Bidayuh from Kampung Semban, one of the remote villages in Bengoh Range, Padawan, Sarawak. This community has been made known through the popular featuring of their last remaining 'Ring Ladies', a special group of ladies adorned with brass coiled rings on their forearms and calves. Although the culture of the Bidayuh Embhan is unique, almost no literature related to the Ring Ladies can be found except by Rafee et al. (2012) and several articles in the newspaper and magazine such as Chan (2016), Sobri (2011) and Ritchie (2010).

These special ladies wore brass-rings around their calves called '*rasunk'ng*' (pronounced *lasung* – figure 1), and the forearms known as '*ruyank'ng*' (pronounced *luyang* – figure 2). These coiled brass rings are worn as early as six years-old and in the past, only women who wear these rings could take part in the 'eagle' dance during festive rites at the village. Hence, women without rings will have difficulties to find a husband, as it was a social standard of beauty in the old Bidayuh Embhan community of Kampung Semban.

However, the tradition stopped abruptly towards the end of 1960s whereby younger generations were required to attend school, and young girls were obliged by the rules of not wearing any type of accessories at school. In 2013, the villagers of old Kampung Semban were moved to Bengoh Resettlement Scheme at Padawan District (Chan, 2016). Previously, there were seven Ring Ladies available in Kampung Semban, but today there are left with only five because two ageing members had stopped wearing the rings due to their health issues. Among the five remainders, it was found that there are two new members from the new generation. Despite of wearing the rings at the late age of 40, their inclusion was nevertheless seen as a positive effort toward preserving and continuing their diminishing tradition.

Fig. 1: *rasunk'ng*Fig. 2: *ruyank'ng*

While the rest of the world has given in to modern idea of beauty, the Ring Ladies of Semban remain devoted to their brass rings. Bearing this classic symbol of beauty all their lives, these rings are not merely materialistic accessories to them, but somehow, they have become a part of their body. Other than *ruyank'ng* and *rasunk'ng*, there are also other diminishing cultural ornaments worn by the Ring ladies as their costume accessories that is also unknown to the outside world. Preserving what remains of our traditional culture is a social responsibility. For that reason, the researchers decided to immortalize the memories of the Ring Ladies in their glorious days through the creation of an organized system of visual documentation.


Copious quantities of visual data collected using various tools of latest documentation will be seen as a waste if this information is difficult to be retrieved effectively by researchers. In addition, disorganized information on cultural objects worn by the Ring Ladies will be made impossible to share with the outside world without the application of an effective system. In response to answer to this problem, especially in reconfiguring the collected visual data on cultural objects, a system with an artistic approach was created for a more reliable storage, accessible record and to ease the retrieval of information related to cultural objects in the future.

### Methodology

Most of the time, study on the indigenous ethnics used a semi-structured interview as an inductive approach to gain new and unexpected responses from the respondents as applied by Kunasekaran, Gill, Talib and Redzuan, (2013). However, this research employing Visual Ethnography with the fundamental structure of data collection will be using audio-visual information such as digital video and photography, sketches and drawing (Rafee, 2015). Blended Observational Method which combined data collection approach in qualitative research such as observation, which involved the systematic collection and examination of behaviors in a social setting also being applied together in this research (Marshall & Rossman,

1995).). In advance, researchers concentrating on at least two various aspects: the aesthetic-sensual, as well as the multisensory- experiential (Nakamura, 2013).

Hence, it will also implement the latest technology in visual documentation tool such as a DSLR camera, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (drone), Action Cam and 360-degree Camera. Different forms of visual documentation have been obtained in parallel with the increase of the use of equipment in the documentation process as shown in table 1 below.

Documentation Tool	Image Sample
DSLR Camera	
Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (Drone)	
Action Cam	
360-degree Camera	



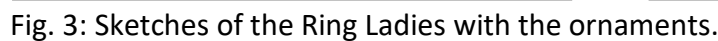
Sketch and drawing		
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Table 1: Types of documentation equipment and sample of images

This process was recorded via notes, photography, videography, sketches, and drawings as images sample shown in table 1. In this study, the researcher took visual ethnography to another venture ahead, and tries to modify and collaborate it in Visual Arts approach digitally. In view of the statements by Michell, C. (2011) and the latest technologies of visual recording, the research was structured and the data is collected based on schematic phase as below:

- i) Data Collection – sketches, notes, observation and interview
- ii) Video and Photography - digital documentation
- iii) Editorial – digital audio and visual
- iv) Publication – Academic papers and articles
- v) Exhibition – Digital and Interactive Multimedia Presentation

While engaging this technique, the researcher had experienced the critical understandings of visual and cultural art practices based on the comparative study within visual documentation from the observation and interview as well. All data collected was analyzed to consider the connection and the similarities. The innovation was started based on the initial sketches, after information especially on the names and types of cultural objects worn by the Ring Ladies was recorded as shown in fig. 3.



Next, from the basic idea initiated by the initial sketches and visual information, a digital organization system named as e-DiVo (Ethnographic Digital Visual Organizer) was created using Adobe InDesign and published in a Flash format. Basically, it is an interactive infographic system with the intention to share, collect and compile information related to the visuals and cultural objects in ethnographic study. e-DiVo is meant to organize the collection of multi-assorted data (drawings, sketches, textual record and visual images) in a systematic manner.

## Findings



Fig. 4: e-DiVO interface with interactive infographic system.

This system is an artistic and a graphical approach in documenting visual information pertaining to Social Science research. e-DiVO was designed with the objective in enabling users to obtain information easily relating to cultural objects worn by the Ring Ladies. In this system, cultural ornaments worn by the Ring Ladies have been organized or listed in order from head to toe with interactive graphical design features (Fig. 4).



Fig. 5: Interactive Information Chain

Based on the design concept of interactive information chain, information concerning any cultural objects of the Ring Ladies will be expanded and easily obtained with just a click on related keyword. An important feature of this system is the use of clear and high-definition images so that information involving the cultural ornament can be understood more clearly. Any information relating to the cultural ornaments will be elaborated based on the desired information only with colorful and high definition quality images. This system acts as a network that grown based on a chosen keyword and indirectly minimize the use of text on each page (Fig. 5).

### **Discussion**

The system is an original creation by improvising the static nature of current infographic poster. Through this user-friendly and interactive digital infographic system, the process of archiving and retrieving details on visual information especially to the researcher will be more organized and efficient. Among its outstanding features are the provision of easy access and retrieval of the required information. The information and visual data is also easy to keep and can be updated easily. Furthermore, it is also easy to be produced using other software available in the market such as Microsoft PowerPoint or any web -based design. In this context, this system is designed specifically to specify ornament of cultural object adorned accordingly to specific part of the body of the Ring Lady.

The researcher considers this approach as an alternative for those in the social sciences who seeks to diversify ethnographic techniques, which offers an innovative approach that utilizes interactive components to simulate cultural narratives. Something similar with what Cardullo (2014) claimed as Digital Ethnography, which can be understood as a method for representing real-life cultures through the digital media presentation. This method allows viewers to go beyond absorbing facts, digital-based narrative that engaged the knowledge of another culture.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings and discussions above, e-Divo could be viewed as an alternative system in organizing visual information relating to the cultural object in social science research. It is developed using Adobe InDesign and published in a Flash format as an improvised and systematic way of organizing visuals relating to ethnographic and cultural object study digitally. The system and its specially structured design shall adequately provide the users to have a better understanding about the culture and ethnography study. It also has the potential to be developed further in facilitating the sharing of information to users, or as an information seeking tool particularly to describe information related to cultural objects in an exhibition in a gallery or museum.

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