



From Customary Spaces to Digital Screens: Representing Gendang Nafiri as Malay Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. This study examines how the documentary film *Gendang Nafiri: Menyuarakan Kembali Warisan yang Terlupakan* constructs Gendang Nafiri as Malay cultural heritage. Using a qualitative approach and Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the study treats scenes, dialogue, voice-over narration, visual composition, music, sound, cultural symbols, and generational relations as representational language. The primary data source is the documentary film published by BRIN Audiovisual in 2026, while scholarly literature on documentary film, cultural representation, and the Nafiri tradition serves as secondary data. The analysis focuses on six representational themes: Gendang Nafiri as cultural heritage, the threat of cultural loss, the authority of cultural actors, generational transmission, negotiation with modernity, and the movement of tradition from customary spaces to digital media. The study argues that the documentary does not merely record a traditional musical practice; it constructs Gendang Nafiri as a cultural sign associated with Malay identity, collective memory, and the urgency of preservation.

Keywords: *Documentary Film, Cultural Representation, Gendang Nafiri, Malay Cultural Heritage, Stuart Hall.*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage endures not only through the continued existence of objects, rituals, or performances, but also through communication processes that enable communities to recognize, interpret, and transmit its meanings. In traditional cultural settings, changing lifestyles, shrinking performance spaces, and the dominance of modern media and entertainment can reshape younger generations' relationships with local cultural practices. These conditions make audiovisual media important not merely as documentation tools, but also as spaces in which culture is reconstructed and introduced to wider audiences.

Documentary film plays an important role in this process because it combines moving images, sound, interviews, narration, music, and editing choices to present particular social realities. A documentary does not simply record reality in a neutral manner; decisions about who appears, what is emphasized, how conflict is organized, and how the ending is constructed all contribute to the meanings received by viewers. Wiranegara (2024) shows that documentary film can strengthen understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage through factual audiovisual presentation that remains close to the lives of its subjects. In another study, Manalul and Sumardijati (2025) demonstrate that cultural documentaries can also construct narratives of identity, attachment to ancestors, and responses to the pressures of modernization.

One documentary that places the preservation of tradition at the center of its narrative is *Gendang Nafiri: Menyuarakan Kembali Warisan yang Terlupakan*, directed by Zulkifli. Published by BRIN Audiovisual on January 29, 2026, the film portrays the efforts of artists and local communities in the Meranti Islands Regency, Riau, to revive the traditional music of Gendang

Nafiri, which is considered endangered. According to the film's official synopsis, Gendang Nafiri once accompanied various customary ceremonies and important rituals, but its existence has increasingly been challenged by modernization and social change (Zulkifli, 2026).

Culturally, the Nafiri is more than a sound-producing instrument. Hamid (2020) explains that the Nafiri is a wind instrument within the Gendang Nafiri ensemble and has historically been used in royal coronations and various Malay wedding customs, including berinai, arak silat, and tepuk tepung tawar. Consequently, when the documentary presents Gendang Nafiri, it does not present only a musical instrument; it also activates a network of meanings related to history, ritual, Malay identity, collective memory, and cultural continuity.

Studies of cultural representation in film have developed across various contexts. Manesah, Hermita, and Suryanto (2022) use representation to examine the social identity of Deli Malay communities in the documentary *Kampung Kunyit*. Ayuanda, Sidabalok, and Perangin-angin (2024) apply Stuart Hall's theory of representation to identify Javanese cultural elements constructed through dialogue and setting in the film *Primbon*. Meanwhile, Manalul and Sumardijati (2025) show how the documentary *Singkam Mababar* constructs representations of Batak culture related to identity and resistance. These studies demonstrate that film can be treated as a cultural text, yet they do not specifically explain how Gendang Nafiri is constructed as Malay cultural heritage through the intersection of tradition, the threat of disappearance, generational relations, and digital media.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to analyze how the documentary *Gendang Nafiri: Menyuarakan Kembali Warisan yang Terlupakan* represents Gendang Nafiri as Malay cultural heritage. The analysis focuses on how the film produces meaning through scenes, dialogue, interview statements, voice-over narration, visuals, music, sound, cultural symbols, relations between older and younger generations, portrayals of modernization, and narratives of preservation. This focus positions the film as a text of cultural communication that not only displays tradition, but also shapes how that tradition is understood by viewers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Documentary Film as a Medium of Cultural Representation

Documentary film combines an informational function with narrative construction. Recorded facts still pass through processes of selection, cinematography, editing, sound design, and narrative arrangement. A documentary can therefore be understood as a medium that organizes reality into a meaningful story. Wiranegara (2024) emphasizes the potential of documentary film to introduce cultural heritage and strengthen cultural appreciation through audiovisual proximity to its subjects. Saade, Asdar, and Yusmanizar (2024) likewise show that documentary film can frame culture as a source of values and solutions when communities face social and environmental problems.

In cultural studies, media do not merely transfer facts from reality to the screen. Media select signs, connect those signs to particular concepts, and position them within narrative structures. A cultural practice may therefore be interpreted as heritage, identity, entertainment, a symbol of resistance, or even something considered outdated, depending on how it is represented. A study of Deli Malay identity in the documentary *Kampung Kunyit* demonstrates that film can construct identity through everyday practices, collective activities, rituals, music, and social relations (Manesah et al., 2022).

Gendang Nafiri and Malay Cultural Heritage

The Nafiri is a wind instrument that forms part of the Gendang Nafiri ensemble. Historically, in the Malay regions of Riau, the ensemble was associated with royal ceremonial practices and was later used in a range of community-based customary processions. Hamid

(2020) explains that Gendang Nafiri was used in royal coronations and later became part of wedding customs, including berinai, arak silat, tepuk tepung tawar, and other customary processions. These functions indicate that the sound of Gendang Nafiri is connected to social and ritual structures, not merely to musical expression.

The documentary examined in this study explicitly places Gendang Nafiri in a condition of cultural vulnerability. Its official synopsis describes efforts by a group of artists and community members to revive a tradition that has begun to disappear under the pressures of modernization and changing times (Zulkifli, 2026). This situation makes Gendang Nafiri particularly relevant as cultural heritage whose meaning is being negotiated between memories of the past and contemporary needs, between customary spaces and media spaces, and between the generation that safeguards the tradition and the generation expected to continue it.

Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation

This study employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation. Hall (1997) understands representation as the production of meaning through language. In this sense, language is not limited to words; it includes systems of signs that allow concepts to be communicated to others. In film, such sign systems may include dialogue, narration, facial expressions, gestures, clothing, space, cultural objects, visual composition, music, sound effects, and relationships between scenes.

Hall conceptualizes representation as a relationship between concepts and language through which an object, person, or event is given meaning. This study adopts the constructionist approach, which assumes that meaning is not naturally inherent in Gendang Nafiri but is constructed through the ways the film connects the ensemble with history, ritual, cultural figures, the threat of extinction, younger generations, modernization, and preservation. The analysis therefore moves beyond asking what is visible in the film and instead asks what cultural meanings are produced through the film's ways of presenting Gendang Nafiri.

Previous Studies and the Position of the Present Research

Previous studies reveal three major tendencies. First, documentary film is understood as a medium capable of preserving and introducing cultural heritage (Wiranegara, 2024). Second, cultural representation in film is commonly examined through verbal and visual signs in order to identify constructed identities and values (Ayuanda et al., 2024; Manalul & Sumardijati, 2025). Third, studies of the Nafiri have tended to focus on organological aspects and the instrument's customary functions (Hamid, 2020). The present research brings these three areas together by treating the documentary Gendang Nafiri as a text of cultural communication and examining how Malay cultural heritage is constructed through audiovisual language.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with qualitative content analysis oriented toward Stuart Hall's theory of representation. This approach was selected because the study does not measure the film's effects on audiences; instead, it interprets how cultural meanings are constructed through verbal and nonverbal elements within the film.

The object of the study is the documentary *Gendang Nafiri: Menyuarakan Kembali Warisan yang Terlupakan*, directed by Zulkifli and published by BRIN Audiovisual in 2026, with public access through YouTube. Primary data consist of scenes, dialogue and interview statements, voice-over narration, visual depictions of Gendang Nafiri, rituals or customary activities, music and sound, Malay cultural symbols, portrayals of older and younger generations, segments indicating the threat of cultural loss, representations of modernization,

and sequences that construct a narrative of preservation. Secondary data are drawn from scholarly articles, theoretical books, academic repositories, and official documentation related to documentary film, representation, Malay culture, and the Nafiri tradition.

Data were collected through repeated viewing, note-taking, and screen capture. The film was watched multiple times to identify units relevant to the research focus. Each unit was recorded in a coding sheet containing a description of the scene, verbal elements, visual elements, audio elements, cultural context, and representational meaning. Screenshots are used as visual evidence in the results section. The timestamp for each image must be recorded from the actual video and must not be estimated.

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, scenes related to cultural heritage, the threat of disappearance, Malay identity, intergenerational relations, modernization, and preservation were selected. Second, representational language in the form of words, visuals, sounds, symbols, and relationships among characters was identified. Third, the data were grouped into representational themes. Fourth, the relationships among representation, meaning, language, and culture were interpreted to explain how Gendang Nafiri is constructed as Malay cultural heritage. Interpretive credibility was maintained through persistent observation, cross-checking verbal and visual elements, and using cultural literature and theory as comparative references. No additional interviews were conducted; therefore, the conclusions are limited to meanings constructed within the film and are not generalized as the views of all Malay communities.

RESULTS

The results are organized according to the representational units identified in the film. Because timestamps and screenshots must be taken directly from the video, spaces for the figures are intentionally left as placeholders. Once each frame has been verified, the corresponding image and actual timestamp should be inserted in the designated location. The analytical structure does not need to be changed.

Table 1. Units of Analysis for the Representation of Gendang Nafiri

Representational Focus	Data Identified in the Film	Meaning Analyzed
Cultural heritage	History, customary functions, instrument visuals, ritual	Gendang Nafiri as Malay cultural heritage
Threat of disappearance	Statements about declining numbers of performers and changing times	Tradition as something vulnerable to disappearance
Cultural authority	Cultural figures/artists and the knowledge they communicate	Who is authorized to define the tradition
Regeneration	Interactions between older and younger generations; learning processes	Cultural transmission and continuity
Modernization	Contrasts between tradition and modern entertainment/spaces	Negotiation between tradition and social change
Digital screens	Documentation, YouTube/social media, audiovisual circulation	Changing spaces of cultural communication and preservation

Source: Processed research data, 2026

Gendang Nafiri as Malay Cultural Heritage



Figure 1. Gendang Nafiri as Malay Cultural Heritage

The first representation is constructed through the relationship between Gendang Nafiri and Malay cultural spaces. When the instrument is presented alongside explanations of its customary functions, history, or ritual significance, the film shifts its meaning from a musical object to a sign of cultural heritage. In Hall's (1997) framework, images of the instrument, the language of interviewees, and customary contexts operate as a system of representation connecting the object to concepts of history, ancestry, and collective identity. This meaning is reinforced by the cultural setting in which the sound of the Nafiri forms part of social processions, consistent with the historical use of the Gendang Nafiri ensemble in royal coronations and various Malay wedding customs (Hamid, 2020).

A Tradition Under Threat



Figure 2. Representation of the Threat to Gendang Nafiri

The film is explicitly framed around the vulnerable condition of Gendang Nafiri and the pressures of modernization (Zulkifli, 2026). The representation of threat is significant because it shifts the tradition from being merely a remnant of the past to something that requires action. Expressions such as “nearly extinct,” “forgotten,” or similar statements, when they appear in the film, do more than provide information; they construct a framework of meaning centered on cultural loss. Within the representational process, this threat becomes the narrative counterpart to the idea of preservation.

Cultural Figures as Guardians of Knowledge



Figure 3. Cultural Figures as Sources of Knowledge

The positioning of artists, elders, or tradition bearers as interviewees can be read as a strategy through which the film constructs cultural authority. Their faces, voices, experiences, and proximity to the instrument lend legitimacy to the information they convey. The film therefore does not only explain what Gendang Nafiri is; it also determines who is positioned as a holder of knowledge about the tradition. This pattern is important in cultural documentaries because the subjectivity of interviewees becomes part of the way cultural reality is organized for viewers.

Younger Generations and Cultural Transmission



Figure 4. Younger Generations as Cultural Successors

When younger people are placed in relation to Gendang Nafiri, the film opens a discussion of regeneration. Young people may be represented not simply as a group distant from tradition, but as a site of possibility for cultural continuity. Encounters between long-standing practitioners and new successors construct the meaning that preservation requires intergenerational communication. This finding can be compared with Manesah et al. (2022), who show that youth participation in cultural activities can function as a form of reproduction of Malay identity within documentary representation.

Tradition and Modernization

Modernization in the film should be read not merely as a temporal background but as an element that produces an opposition of meanings. When tradition is placed alongside changing entertainment patterns, shrinking performance spaces, or shifting generational interests, the film constructs a narrative in which tradition must negotiate with the present. This representation does not necessarily imply that modernity always damages culture. Rather, the analysis must consider whether the film constructs modernization as a threat, an opportunity for adaptation, or both at once.

From Customary Spaces to Digital Screens



Figure 5. The Movement of Gendang Nafiri into Digital Spaces

The movement of Gendang Nafiri from customary spaces into documentary film and digital platforms is an important part of the meaning constructed in this study. Audiovisual documentation allows the tradition to be seen by audiences who are not physically present in customary settings. At the same time, this shift in medium may change the context of reception: Gendang Nafiri, once closely tied to ritual and community life, can now also circulate as cultural content that may be replayed, shared, and studied. Digital screens therefore function not merely as distribution channels but as new spaces in which the meaning of cultural heritage is produced and negotiated.

DISCUSSION

The reading of Gendang Nafiri shows that the representation of cultural heritage is constructed through relationships among the cultural object, narratives of loss, figures who safeguard tradition, successor generations, and digital media. This pattern is consistent with Hall's (1997) view that representation operates through sign systems that connect concepts with language. Gendang Nafiri does not signify "heritage" simply because of its physical form; rather,

the film places it within a network of signs referring to history, custom, ritual, cultural figures, the threat of extinction, and preservation efforts.

These findings extend previous studies of cultural documentary film that show how representations of identity can be constructed through ritual, collective activities, and social practices. Manesah et al. (2022) demonstrate Deli Malay identity through cultural activities and communal life, while Manalul and Sumardijjati (2025) show that ritual in a Batak documentary can signify attachment to identity and resistance to external pressures. In *Gendang Nafiri*, however, the main pressure constructed by the film is not agrarian conflict or ethnic stereotyping, but the risk of interrupted cultural continuity as a consequence of modernization and social change.

The film also demonstrates the importance of medium in cultural preservation. A documentary does not merely store visual evidence of tradition; it transforms tradition into an audiovisual text capable of entering new public spaces. This is consistent with Wiranegara (2024), who positions documentary film as a medium that can strengthen understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage. The present study, however, adds a representational dimension: when tradition moves onto digital screens, what is preserved is not only a recording of sound and the physical form of the instrument, but also a particular way of understanding the tradition. Filmmakers select what is considered important, who is allowed to speak, and which conflict becomes central to the narrative. The phrase “From Customary Spaces to Digital Screens” therefore refers to more than a change in medium. It points to a transformation in the space of cultural communication. In customary settings, the meaning of *Gendang Nafiri* is formed through direct participation in ritual and community life. On digital screens, meaning is produced through representation: selected images, interview explanations, music, sound, and narrative structure. This transformation can broaden the reach of cultural traditions, but it can also simplify contexts that were originally complex. Documentary film should therefore be understood simultaneously as an archive, a communication medium, and a producer of cultural meaning. From a communication studies perspective, the contribution of this research lies in emphasizing that cultural preservation through film cannot be separated from processes of representation. A documented tradition does not automatically appear exactly as it exists in social life. It is selected, given a language, ordered, and placed within a particular narrative. In *Gendang Nafiri*, this structure constructs the message that Malay cultural heritage has value that should be protected, that cultural loss threatens collective memory, and that younger generations and new media can become part of cultural continuity.

CONCLUSION

This study treats the documentary *Gendang Nafiri: Menyuarakan Kembali Warisan yang Terlupakan* as a text of cultural communication that produces meaning about Malay heritage. Through Stuart Hall's theory of representation, *Gendang Nafiri* can be read not merely as a musical instrument but as a sign connected by the film to history, customary practices, collective memory, cultural figures, the threat of extinction, regeneration, and preservation. This representation is produced through verbal and audiovisual language, including dialogue, narration, images of the instrument, music, sound, cultural symbols, and relationships between older and younger generations.

A central meaning constructed by the film lies in the movement of *Gendang Nafiri* from customary spaces into audiovisual and digital environments. This movement broadens the possibility for the tradition to become visible again while also emphasizing that media help determine how culture is understood.

The documentary therefore functions not only as an archive of an endangered tradition, but also as a space in which Malay cultural identity and values are reconstructed for contemporary audiences. The final conclusion should be refined after all scenes, timestamps, dialogue, and screenshots have been verified during the coding stage.

LIMITATION

This study is limited to a single documentary film as its primary data source; therefore, the findings explain only the construction of representation within the film text. The study does not include interviews with the filmmaker, Gendang Nafiri practitioners, members of the Malay community in the Meranti Islands, or viewers. Accordingly, the findings cannot be used to conclude how all Malay communities interpret Gendang Nafiri or how audiences receive the film's messages. Another limitation is the study's dependence on the available digital version of the film; timestamps and screenshot selections must be verified directly from the video before the manuscript is submitted for publication. Future research may develop audience reception studies, interviews with cultural practitioners, or comparisons across several cultural-heritage documentaries to examine differences in representational strategies.

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