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DOCUMENTING THE CULTURAL CEREMONIES OF ORANG ASLI PAHANG

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Abstract

The Orang Asli Pahang celebrate their heritage with vibrant ceremonies embodying the spirit of community, culture, and nature. This study aims to develop a digital documentation strategy to archive the cultural ceremonies of the Orang Asli Pahang in a cultural repository. This will preserve and enhance access to this cultural information, filling gaps in collective memory and improving documentation of lesser-known communal ceremonies to help revive the cultural heritage. Purpose: The primary objectives of this paper are (i) to document the cultural ceremonies of Orang Asli Pahang, and (ii) to assign themes to the cultural ceremonies widely applicable to all tribes of the Orang Asli in Pahang. Method: Qualitative research method is employed to explore, document and thematize the cultural ceremonies of Orang Asli Pahang. Such methods include content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis. Findings: There exists a rich tapestry of cultural ceremonies that interrelate with other domains of cultural heritage. These cultural ceremonies are commonly motivated by marital celebrations, ancestral honorations, supernatural phenomena, and occasional communal feasts. Concerning all tribes of Orang Asli Pahang, the cultural ceremonies are thematized under rite of passage-related, ancestor-related, supernatural-related, and communal feast-related. The findings also highlighted the urgency to digitally document the Orang Asli Pahang's cultural ceremonies. Respondents remember individual rites of passage but struggle to recall communal ceremonies involving feasts, ancestors, and the supernatural.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Ceremonies, Orang Asli Pahang

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to develop a digital documentation strategy to archive the cultural ceremonies of the Orang Asli Pahang. This effort seeks to fill gaps in the collective memory by identifying existing traditions and improving the documentation of lesser-known communal ceremonies, ensuring the preservation and revival of the heritage. The study significantly contributes to the ongoing investigation into the field of Intangible Cultural Heritage [ICH], with a specific focus on the cultural ceremonies the Orang Asli in Pahang.

In pursuit of documenting and assigning the metadata for the repository of cultural ceremonies, the primary objectives of this paper are outlined below:

- i. To document the cultural ceremonies of Orang Asli Pahang,
- ii. To assign themes to the cultural ceremonies widely applicable to all tribes of the Orang Asli in Pahang

CULTURAL CEREMONY METADATA AND THEMES

Cultural ceremonies are categorized under the third of domain of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH. The third domain refers to the Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events. However, the manifestation of any particular ICH is not confined to a single domain. Often times the completion of a single cultural manifestation involves multiple ICH domains (Abu Bakar, et al., 2014; Lazaro Ortiz, S., & Jimenez de Madariaga, 2022)

Museums and heritage institutions often use many forms of repositories to document and oversee cultural heritages materials and items. Metadata is crucial for the operation of a cultural repository since it facilitates the organisation and discovery of cultural materials, ensures consistent standardisation, offers contextual information, and enables preservation and management. This process expedites accessibility and interoperability across various cultural manifestation archives. Metadata refers to the information that explains and provides context to a certain data (Monova-Zheleva, et al., 2020). For instance, the metadata pertaining to a certain cultural manifestation may include the title of the manifestation, its location, the participants, and the materials involved.

The crucial metadata for cultural ceremonies includes (i) the incorporation of ICH domains and (ii) the identification of themes, which refers to the underlying motives behind the ceremony's manifestation. The incorporation of ICH domains refers to the categorizing the cultural ceremony according to the domain outlined by UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH, guaranteeing that they are classified within the established framework. The identification of themes focusses on the fundamental causes that define each cultural ceremony. This can include marital celebration and seasonal changes.

Thematizing the intricacies of the cultural ceremonies help recognize the underlying motives, interrelationships with other domains of ICH and other specifics involved the ceremonies.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CEREMONY

According to UNESCO (2003), cultural ceremonies are categorized under the third domain out of the five domains of ICH. Cultural ceremonies are a prominent cultural manifestation, encompassing customs, social practices, and collective festivities transmitted over successive generations. These activities frequently function as forums for cultural interchange, promoting a feeling of identity and unity among the participants. Tume (2021) highlights that ceremonies provide a platform for the expression of many ethnicities and cultural solidarity, particularly by presenting and immersing oneself in a unique culture.

For Selkani (2018), a ceremony can occur regularly or less frequently than once a year, while Dadman and Madani (2021) describe a ceremony as a customary yearly celebration. Drawing upon previous studies, Hjalager & Kwiatkowski (2018) define ceremonies under five distinct characteristics:

- i. Ceremonies have a finite duration, with a clearly defined beginning and end;
- ii. Ceremonies are restricted to a particular place;
- iii. Ceremonies are organized events with predetermined goals, themes, and schedules that follow recognisable structures, although they may include some spontaneous elements;
- iv. Ceremonies bring together multiple activities in mutually beneficial relationships; and, lastly,
- v. Ceremonies are inclusive and welcoming, allowing anyone to participate.

Cultural ceremonies showcase diverse ICH manifestation and expressions. Religious rituals, rites of passage, and family events like births, marriages, and funerals are among them. They also include socio-political practises including loyalty oaths, customary law, and community amusement. Cultural ceremonies can also include family, settlement, and seasonal rituals. Other cultural manifestations found within these ceremonies such as cultural expressions, including gestures, recitations, music, and attire, enrich enhance the cultural ceremonies. Parades and symbolic gestures, like animal sacrifice, rituals feature, and culturally important cuisines augment their significance (Lazaro Ortiz, S., & Jimenez de Madariaga, 2022).

The cultural ceremony among Orang Asli is a timeless tradition deeply interwoven with their cultural, spiritual, and social fabric. Their distinctive languages, knowledge systems, beliefs, and vital expertise in strategies for sustainable management of natural resources distinguish them from other parts

of national communities. Orang Asli expresses cultural identity, tradition, and solidarity through their lively cultural ceremonies. Originating in ancestral traditions and sacred cosmologies, these celebrations resonate with the rhythms of nature. They signal seasonal changes, abundant harvests, and deep spiritual ties (Goh & Teh, 2022; Zuhairi, Rosnon, & Shaari, 2020; Ghani et al., 2020).

THEMES OF CULTURAL CEREMONY

Four themes of cultural ceremonies emerged from prior research, centred around rites of passage, communal feasts, ancestors, and the supernatural. The development of the interview's questions and the thematic analysis of the interview data both incorporated these themes.

Rite of Passage-Related Ceremonies

The rite of passage-related ceremonies are fundamental to Orang Asli cultural traditions and social structure. *Adat* is the term for Orang Asli's customs and tradition. For Orang Asli Jahut's marital ceremony, only the relatives of the engaged parties are invited to weddings, though at times, neighbours are allowed to attend as well. Crucially, at marriage celebration, Orang Asli upholds their beliefs and adhere to their *adat*. The wedding ceremony is guided by the *adat* leaders, who diligently follow the customs and traditions governing the union between a man and a woman (Adam & Yusop, 2020).

Communal Feast-Related Ceremonies

Communal feast-related ceremonies tend to occur during seasonal months, usually just after the harvest of crops, such as rice or other forest produced. The ceremony of *Menjulung Tahun* (New Years) is one of the joyous celebrations that function as a ceremonial gratitude for a bountiful harvest and a time for communal feast for Orang Asli Semelai. Additionally, a noteworthy tradition of Orang Asli Semai is offering sacrifice chickens, flowers, and unhusked rice to the rice spirit to placate the land spirits for a successful crop (Shaari et al., 2024).

Ancestor-Related Ceremonies

The ancestral-related ceremonies comprise of ceremonies or rituals specifically designed to pay homage and remember forebears and their customs. Orang Asli Temuan celebrate *Hari Moyang* (Ancestors' Day) to request protection, forgiveness, and blessings from their ancestral spirits to ensure a more promising future. This celebration functions as a prominent cultural indicator, strengthening connections to one's ancestors and safeguarding customary rituals throughout the community (Linggang, Wirunsakunphiban & Nusen, 2024; Mahfuz, 2023)

Supernatural-Related Ceremonies

Orang Asli Pahang believe in supernatural entities, with *Sewang* being one of the most notable. A ceremonial rite called *Sewang*, functions as a singing séance with the goal of forging a strong connection between their spirituality and paranormal beings. Deeply ingrained in their cultural legacy, this ceremonial practice allows spiritual communication and asks the supernatural realm for blessings, protection, and guidance. *Sewang* maintains spiritual continuity and cultural identity by preserving their ancestors' traditions (Chan & Saidon, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study conducted qualitative research, in particular a thematic literature review driven by the objective formulated, followed by content and thematic analyses to establish existing findings. Multiple resources were utilized, such as books, journals, reports, academic publications, community documentation and scholarly articles on Orang Asli Pahang. The initial findings helped to shape the creation of interview questions and an organization that enabled smooth discourse during the interview sessions with different Orang Asli tribes.

Guided by key themes and sub-themes identified in the initial findings, the semi-structured interview aimed to explore and document the cultural ceremonies of Orang Asli Pahang. The semi-structured interviews were conducted primarily with community leaders, known as *Tok Batin*, or, if they were unavailable, with key representatives of the targeted communities (refer to Table 1). The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for further analysis. The analysis was principally focused on identifying the names of the ceremonies, the involvement of ICH domains, and assigning suitable themes to the cultural ceremonies (refer to Figure 1).

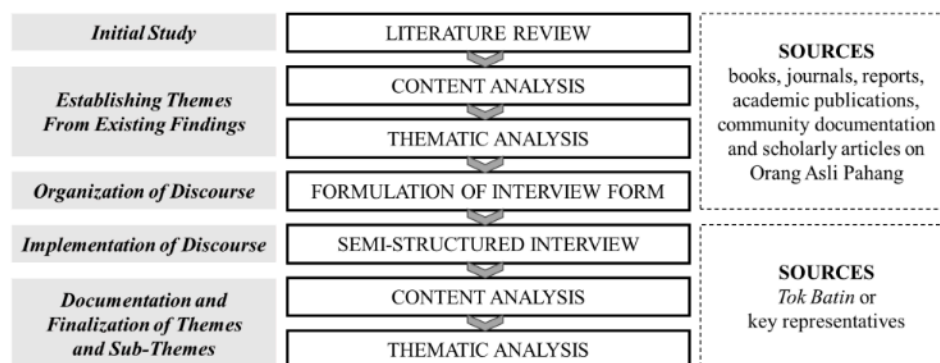


Figure 1: Flowchart of Fieldwork Approach

Table 1: Targeted Community for Semi-Structured Interviews

Targeted Community	Daerah	Tribes
Kampung Kuala Atok	Jerantut	Bateq
Kampung Sungai Pian	Temerloh	Jah Hut
Kampung Kuala Enggang	Temerloh	Che Wong
Kampung Sungai Rening	Cameron Highlands	Semai
Kampung Kuala Boh	Cameron Highlands	Semai
Kampung Sungai Tiang	Jerantut	Semoq Beri
Kampung Pelawan	Bera	Semelai
Kampung Sungai Bot	Bentong	Temuan
Kampung Gumum	Pekan	Jakun

FINDINGS

The first part of this section indicates the summary of findings from the semi-structured interviews. The following part shows an example of how the findings are organized in the designated metadata.

The cultural ceremonies of Orang Asli Pahang are essentially communal events, typically involving families and neighbours. *Adat*, their cultural customs, underpin these ceremonies. Following *Adat*, led by the *Tok Batin* and backed by other community leaders, is vital and violators are punished. Table 2, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5 shows the summary of findings of the third ICH domains, Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events gathered from the interview conducted. The supporting domain of Oral Traditions and Expressions (1), Performing Arts (2), Knowledge & Practices (4) and Traditional Craftsmanship (5) are also indicated.

Table 2: Rite of Passage-Related Ceremonies

Tribes	Description	ICH	
Orang Asli Bateq	Marriages in the communities occur without any exchange of money. If both parties agree, they proceed with a small celebration. Before the wedding, the village head seeks approval from both families. After the marriage, the house that was built by the formerly single bride is completed with walls. Most parts of the house are constructed by the wife.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5
Orang Asli Che Wong	<i>Merisik</i> is a preliminary step where a man proposes to a woman, allowing both families to acquaint themselves. If the woman's family agrees, they move to engagement, pledging marriage. The wedding follows with customs and rituals to invoke blessings, with community support and advice being integral to maintaining family harmony.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5
Orang Asli Semoq Beri	Engagement takes place once an agreement has been reached between both parties. Typically, engagements involve the exchange of gifts such as toys, animals, or other valuable items.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4

	Marital ceremony involves the extended family and the local community.	☒	5
Orang Asli Semelai	Ceremonies are held at the <i>Rumah Adat</i> led by the Village Headman with support from elders and community leaders. Only the <i>Tok Batin</i> officiates marriages, with customs requiring everyone to sit on traditional mats. Festivities begin with the groom's exit from the house to traditional music. While dowries are not customary, the groom presents a <i>mas kahwin</i> valued at RM 22.50, with additional RM 0.50 for the Village Headman, and RM 8.00 for widows. Gifts include betel leaves, makeup, clothes, and jewellery, accompanied by a betel nut set. Guests cannot take or reduce items from it. Following vows, celebrants enjoy music and palm wine, banana, or sugarcane-based drinks.	☒	1
		☒	2
		☒	4
		☒	5

Table 2: Rite of Passage-Related Ceremonies (continued)

Tribe	Description	ICH	
Orang Asli Jah Hut	During proposal, the man's side sends a needle and thread in a woven container made of <i>mengkuang</i> to the woman's side. If the woman does not accept the man, she will pierce the needle into the thread and return it to the man as a sign of agreement. The engagement involves sending items such two identical rings, handkerchiefs, and RM100. Since gold rings are ostentatious and taboo, they are rarely used. The man sends these items to the woman, who reciprocates with a woven container. Traditions has been modernized where money or rice are now exchanged. Tribal leader descendants expect more than RM50, unlike ordinary member. Usually, the paternal uncle officiates the wedding. Absent paternal uncles are represented by heirs. Without paternal uncles, heirs, or younger siblings, elder brothers can act as guardians as a last resort. The village's <i>Devan Adat</i> will host the wedding. The welcoming ceremony for the bride and groom is also held among the tribe.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5
Orang Asli Semai	Marriage among the tribe usually occurs at a young age, around 17 or 18 years old. The importance of respecting traditions is emphasized, such as the prohibition for the bride and groom to leave their villages before the wedding. Weddings in village are celebrated on a large scale, with over a thousand attendees at each ceremony. The celebrations can last from morning until the next morning and include traditional dances and other forms of entertainment. Marriages in village also involves discussions with family and village leaders, followed by religious procedures overseen by a religious officer. Equal distribution of dowry is emphasised, considering the groom's financial capacity. There are financial compensations involved if divorce, with the amount depending on the fault of each party. Remarriage also entails financial obligations, including a fee for entering the spouse's house.	☒	1
		☒	2
		☒	4
		☒	5

Orang Asli Jakun	The tribe have two types of engagements: ordinary and <i>Timun Setudung</i> . Regular engagements are long due to financial constraints, while <i>Timun Setudung</i> engagements are shorter due to financial flexibility. Engagement items include betel leaves, betel nuts, and clothing. Weddings are held at <i>Dewan Adat</i> and officiated by the Tok Batin. Most tribe members marry inter-tribally. Wedding ceremonies follow traditional Orang Asli or Malay-style solemnizations. Divorce penalties range from RM 30 to RM 40, with higher penalties imposed today to discourage divorce. <i>Adat</i> institution members work together to ensure successful wedding ceremonies.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5

Table 3: Communal Feast-Related Ceremonies

Tribe	Description	ICH	
Orang Asli Semai	The tribe celebrate the rice harvesting ceremony. They hold a feast on the first day of rice harvesting. The harvesting day is a busy day as most of them engage in activities such as fishing, hunting, gathering vegetables, harvesting, and pounding rice.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5
Orang Asli Semelai	The <i>Menjulung Tahun</i> celebration is held in conjunction with rice harvesting activities, where relatives, siblings, and neighbours are invited to process harvested rice together by winnowing and pounding the rice. The processed rice is then cooked and enjoyed together with the attending relatives, siblings, and neighbours who helped in the process.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4
		☐	5

Table 4: Ancestor-Related Ceremonies

Tribe	Description	ICH	
Orang Asli Temuan	<i>Hari Moyang</i> or known as <i>Aik Muyang</i> is a ritual and prayer held at the graveyard site to honor the spirits believed to have safeguarded the safety and provided blessings to the current generation. <i>Hari Moyang</i> is celebrated from December to January on different dates depending on the settlement groups. Activities include cleaning the graves of ancestors and serving various food and drinks to the spirits of the ancestors.	☒	1
		☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5
Orang Asli Semai	<i>Hari Genggulang</i> is a traditional ritual celebrated between December and February for community safety and well-being. The ritual has evolved throughout time and place. A shaman or <i>Bomoh</i> casts a <i>Cenagoh</i> spell to their ancestors to start the event. In a specially constructed <i>Balai</i> , the <i>Bomoh</i> will execute the rite. Woven <i>serdang</i> leaves, <i>mengkuang</i> forest, flowers, and others beautify the <i>Balai</i> . The left and right bowls in front of the <i>Balai</i> contain an ancestral feast of glutinous rice, <i>Wajik Periong</i> , and chilled and bleeding chicken eggs. After the <i>Balai</i> ritual, the <i>Tok Pawang</i> binds the taboo. The ritual culminates	☒	1
		☒	2
		☒	4
		☒	5

	with each resident hosting a feast for the public. Indigenous or <i>Modek</i> dancers and music in half the sites make the celebration more exciting.		
Orang Asli	They believe in ancestral spirits as everyday companions. The spirituality of their culture shapes their outlook and behaviours.	☒	1
Semoq Beri	They believe their ancestors' spirits guard, advise, and assist them. This religious system influences their customs, ceremonies, and social interactions by fostering deep regard for their ancestry.	☐	2
		☒	4
		☐	5

Table 5: Supernatural-Related Ceremonies

Tribe	Description	ICH	
Orang Asli	During the Chinese New Year holidays, they participate in a <i>Berlacang</i> activity. Offering beef and poultry among other meals to the river as a form of devotion is the ritual's practice.	☒	1
Jakun	After releasing adorned sculptures or tiny boats into the river, the meal is devoured while taking a bath. Worship and disaster protection for the village's residents are the two main goals. The <i>Tok Batin</i> is in charge of organizing and carrying out the planning process. It is forbidden to visit at this time because of the possibility that <i>hantu</i> or ghosts may accompany the guests.	☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5
Orang Asli	A ritual called <i>Berjarom</i> is performed to appease spirits and is conducted at spiritually significant locations such as large rocks, caves, banyan trees, fig trees, and so on. During the ritual day, they impart protective knowledge to selected individuals, while on the following night, the knowledge is passed down to the new shaman.	☒	1
Jakun		☐	2
		☒	4
		☐	5
Orang Asli	The <i>Tum Yap</i> ceremony or blood sacrifice ceremony appeases the anger of <i>Gobar</i> (a supernatural being). <i>Tum</i> (water) and <i>Yap</i> (blood) ceremony involves disposing of blood taken from the tibia bone, mixed with rainwater or river water. During the ritual, phrases such as "Go! Go!" or "stop" must be uttered. Anyone who violates the <i>lawad</i> must perform the <i>Tum Yap</i> ceremony. Typically, participants come in groups rather than individually. If the perpetrator is absent during the ceremony, a replacement must be chosen from witnesses.	☒	1
Bateq		☐	2
		☒	4
		☒	5
Orang Asli	The tribe believes deeply in <i>Jujuh Semengot</i> , which refers to the seven spirits that hold significant spiritual and cultural importance. This folklore is passed down orally from one generation to the next, serving to educate about the tribe's spiritual beliefs, values, and traditions.	☒	1
Semelai		☐	2
		☒	4
		☐	5
Orang Asli	The tribe performs a singing séance called <i>Nopoh Bukau</i> to cure or communicate with supernatural spirits specifically the <i>Bi Asal</i> and <i>Bi Hali</i> , who greatly affect fertility and abundance. The spirits thought to have come from deep inside the Earth,	☒	1
Che Wong		☐	2
		☒	4

live in nature and help plants thrive. The ritual is conducted in complete darkness, typically after sunset, without any other light sources to allow the supernatural to enter the location. The two nights ceremony includes entertainment, relaxation, songs about fruit and animals. Although it is usually performed indoors, it can also be conducted outdoors, with close family and friends invited to participate.	☐	5
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The gathered data is expected to be entered based on the metadata into the cultural repository database as follows.

Table 6: Example of Data Input

Metadata	Input
Name	Marital Custom: Engagement
Tribe	Orang Asli Semoq Beri
Location	Kampung Sungai Tiang, Jerantut
ICH Manifestation	Cultural Ceremony
ICH Theme	Rite of Passage-Related Ceremonies
ICH Domain	Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events
Supporting ICH Domains	☒ Oral Traditions and Expressions (as vehicle) ☐ Performing Arts ☒ Knowledge & Practices (Nature & Universe) ☒ Traditional Craftsmanship
Description	Engagement takes place once an agreement has been reached between both parties. Typically, engagements involve the exchange of gifts such as toys, animals, or other valuable items. Marital ceremony involves the extended family and the local community.
Source	Tok Batin
Keywords	Gifts Exchange

	RITE OF PASSAGE	COMMUNAL FEAST	ANCESTOR	SUPERNATURAL
BATEQ	<i>House Construction</i>	-	-	<i>Tum Yap</i>
JAH HUT	<i>Needle & Thread in Woven Container</i>	-	-	-
CHE WONG	<i>Merisik</i>	-	-	<i>Nopoh Bukau</i>
SEMAI	<i>All-Day Celebration</i>	<i>Harvest Ceremony</i>	<i>Hari Genggulang</i>	-
SEMOQ BERI	<i>Gifts Exchange</i>	-	<i>Spiritual Companionship</i>	-
SEMELAI	<i>Mas Kahwin</i>	<i>Menjulung Tahun</i>	-	<i>Jujuh Semengot</i>
TEMUAN	<i>Within-Tribe Union</i>	-	<i>Hari Moyang</i>	-
JAKUN	<i>Timun Setudung</i>	-	-	<i>Berlacang, Berjarom</i>

Figure 2: Tabulated Keywords of Cultural Ceremony based on Tribe and ICH Themes

The interview findings show how much the respondents were able to recall with respect to their cultural ceremonies. Following the transcription process, thematic analysis was conducted to assign codes and themes to the interview data. The themes of cultural ceremonies are found to be centred on rites of passage, communal feasts, ancestors, and the supernatural. The thematic findings also indicated a strong interweaving of the cultural ceremonies with other domains of ICH, implying that the comprehensiveness of a cultural ceremony is heavily dependent on the protection of other ICH domains.

The findings underscore the urgent need to safeguard the cultural ceremonies of the Orang Asli Pahang via digital documentation in an established cultural repository. The respondents can identify rites of passage ceremonies, which are highly individualized. However, they struggle to recall ceremonies centred around communal feasts, ancestors, and the supernatural, which are deeply collective and involve the broader community.

Cultural ceremonies serve as symbols of the tribe's common expressions, encapsulating its beliefs, customs, and overall identity. The ceremonies provide a medium to transmit social conventions, spiritual beliefs, and ancestors' knowledge from one generation to the next, acting as essential ties to their past. They are essential to maintaining a strong connection with their ancestral lands and the environment, promoting community cohesiveness, and protecting indigenous languages. Safeguarding these ceremonies is crucial for the Orang Asli Pahang's continued cultural existence as well as for raising public knowledge and appreciation of their rich cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

The two objectives of this study are to document the cultural ceremonies of the Orang Asli in Pahang and to assign themes to these ceremonies that are broadly applicable to all tribes of the Orang Asli Pahang. The process of documenting the cultural ceremonies commenced with the establishment of existing findings, which facilitated the formulation of interview questions and the creation of an organisation that could effectively execute the ceremonies at the various locations of the targeted respondents.

The findings show that the respondents can recall rites of passage ceremonies but struggle with communal feasts, ancestor, and supernatural events. Thematic analysis revealed these themes and their interconnection with other ICH domains, stressing the need for comprehensive protection. The findings highlight the urgency of digitally documenting Orang Asli Pahang's cultural ceremonies. These ceremonies are essential for transmitting social practices, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral knowledge, preserving community cohesion, and protecting indigenous languages. Safeguarding the cultural ceremony is crucial for the tribe's cultural continuity and public awareness of their heritage.

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