

THE SOCIAL MEANINGS OF THE KEBAYA IN CLASSIC MALAY CINEMA (1950–1965)

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ABSTRACT

The kebaya, a traditional Malay garment, functions as more than attire; it operates as a cultural text that encodes social meanings, gender norms, and class distinctions. This study examines the representation of the kebaya in classic Malay cinema from 1950 to 1965, focusing on its role in shaping social identity and behaviour within narrative contexts. Using a qualitative object-based approach, five FINAS-listed films were analysed through frame-by-frame costume observation, supported by archival and secondary sources. The findings reveal three key functions of the kebaya. First, it acts as a marker of social stratification, distinguishing class, morality, and gender roles through variations in design and styling. Second, it serves as an emotional register, where colour and tailoring communicate character psychology and reinforce cinematic narratives of femininity. Third, the kebaya mediates the relationship between tradition and modernity, reflecting broader socio-cultural transformations in post-independence Malaysia. By situating costumes within film narratives, this study contributes to sociological understandings of fashion as a system of meaning, demonstrating how visual culture shapes and reflects social values, identity formation, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Fashion Sociology; Heritage Studies; Malay Cinema; Social Behaviour.

MAKNA SOSIAL KEBAYA DALAM SINEMA MELAYU KLASIK (1950–1965)

ABSTRAK

Kebaya, sebagai busana tradisional Melayu, berfungsi bukan sekadar sebagai pakaian, malah berperanan sebagai teks budaya yang mengandungi makna sosial, norma gender, dan perbezaan kelas. Kajian ini meneliti representasi kebaya dalam sinema Melayu klasik dari tahun 1950 hingga 1965 dengan memberi tumpuan kepada peranannya dalam membentuk identiti dan tingkah laku sosial dalam konteks naratif filem. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berasaskan objek, lima filem yang disenaraikan oleh FINAS telah dianalisis melalui pemerhatian kostum secara bingkai demi bingkai, disokong oleh sumber arkib dan rujukan sekunder. Dapatan kajian memperlihatkan tiga fungsi utama kebaya. Pertama, kebaya bertindak sebagai penanda stratifikasi sosial, yang membezakan kelas, moraliti, dan peranan gender melalui variasi reka bentuk serta gaya pemakaian. Kedua, kebaya berfungsi sebagai penanda emosi, di mana warna dan potongan busana mencerminkan psikologi watak serta mengukuhkan naratif sinematik berkaitan kewanitaan. Ketiga, kebaya menjadi medium yang menghubungkan tradisi dengan kemodenan, sekali gus mencerminkan transformasi sosio-budaya yang lebih luas dalam konteks Malaysia pascakemerdekaan. Dengan meletakkan kostum dalam kerangka naratif filem, kajian ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman sosiologi fesyen sebagai suatu sistem makna, serta memperlihatkan bagaimana budaya visual membentuk dan mencerminkan nilai sosial, pembinaan identiti, dan kesinambungan budaya.

Kata kunci: Identiti Budaya; Sosiologi Fesyen; Kajian Warisan; Sinema Melayu; Tingkah Laku Sosial.

INTRODUCTION

Garments have historically been recognised as more than a mere practical requirement; they serve as a cultural narrative that conveys values, beliefs, and social practices. In Malaysia, the kebaya has traditionally represented femininity, elegance, and cultural history, while also evolving to reflect contemporary influences. Its existence in Malay cinema throughout the golden age of the 1950s to 1960s offers a significant archive for comprehending how dress influences identity, mediates tradition, and mirrors societal transition (Rahman, 2021; Yusof, 2022). The performances of renowned personalities like Saloma, Latifah Omar, and Sarimah transformed the kebaya into a fashion statement and a visual symbol of morality, class, and gender in film narratives.

The selection of the period between 1950 and 1965 is significant as it represents the golden era of Malay cinema, marked by the rise of influential studios such as Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris, as well as the emergence of iconic cultural figures. This period also coincides with post-independence nation-building, where cinema functioned as a medium for constructing social values, gender norms, and cultural identity. The frequent appearance of the kebaya in films during this era provides a valuable visual archive for examining how traditional dress participated in shaping social meaning and modern Malay identity.

Notwithstanding its cultural significance, academic inquiry on the kebaya in relation to film and social sciences is scant. Although research has explored the garment's heritage significance (Zawawi, Rahman, & Yusof, 2021) and its interplay between tradition and modernity (Rahman, 2021), limited attention has been given to its cinematic function as a narrative device that influences notions of identity and behaviour. The disparity is considerable, as cinema serves not merely as entertainment but also as a

repository of intangible history that records the role of dress in cultural discussions during nation-building (Putra & Hasanah, 2024).

This study examines the representation of kebaya in FINAS-listed Malay films from 1950 to 1965, emphasising its function as an identity identifier, an emotional register, and a bridge between tradition and modernity. This research enhances scholarship on cultural identity, social behaviour, and heritage preservation by contextualising the kebaya within cinematic narratives. It underscores the significance of costume studies within social science, providing fresh perspectives on how clothing serves as a conduit for negotiating continuity and transformation in Malaysian culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Costume studies in cinema have been progressively analysed as a method for comprehending cultural identity, social conduct, and heritage preservation. Recent study has emphasised that traditional dress functions as a cultural text that navigates gender, class, and modernity, while also acting as a conduit for the continuity of heritage representation (Rahman, 2021; Yusof, 2022; Putra & Hasanah, 2024). This analysis delineates five principal topics that contextualise the kebaya's significance in Malay cinema: costume as social identity, history and preservation, gender representation, tradition against modernity, and digital revolution in cultural studies

Costume as Social Identity in Film

Film costumes are becoming seen as vessels of social significance, influencing identity and cultural interpretation. Yusof (2022) contends that Malay cinema costumes, such as the kebaya, serve as cultural icons that signify status, morality, and gender roles. This corresponds with extensive study that regards apparel as a "social text" that shapes identity within visual narratives.

Conservation and Preservation of Traditional Garments

Heritage studies emphasise the kebaya as a cultural artefact necessitating preservation, rather than merely a fashion item. Zawawi, Rahman, and Yusuf (2021) emphasise the necessity of preserving Malay dress via manuscripts and historical records that encapsulate both material culture and symbolic significance. This viewpoint regards film as an additional archive in which garments such as the kebaya facilitate cultural continuity.

Gender Representation and Femininity

Apparel significantly contributes to the representation of gender and femininity in Southeast Asian cultures. Rahman (2021) illustrates how the kebaya facilitates the interplay between norms of modesty and contemporary femininity, serving as a locus for the negotiation of tradition and social transformation. Film portrayals either reinforce or contest prevailing gender standards, placing costume within broader discussions of identity politics.

Tradition and Modernity in Cultural Expression

The kebaya frequently represents the cultural contrasts between tradition and modernity. Putra and Hasanah (2024) observe that although the kebaya maintains symbolic connections to heritage, its developing variations also embody ambitions for contemporary identity. In cinema, this negotiation is visually conveyed through tailoring, colour, and styling, allowing clothes to function as indicators of both continuity and shift.

Digital Transformation in Cultural Studies

Recent research highlights the influence of digital technology on preserving and reinterpreting cultural heritage. Tan (2022) emphasises that digital archives and object-based learning offer novel avenues for the examination of Southeast Asian fashion and media. The kebaya indicates that the digital preservation of films and costumes can improve accessibility and create new opportunities for cultural education and cross-cultural analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, object-based research design that integrates film analysis with cultural interpretation to examine how the kebaya functions as a social and cultural text within Malay cinema. The analysis was conducted using a thematic coding approach to interpret visual data derived from selected film scenes. Initially, open coding was applied to identify recurring visual patterns related to the kebaya, including silhouette, colour, fabric, and styling. These codes were subsequently refined through axial coding and organised into three key thematic categories: identity, emotion, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. To ensure analytical consistency and minimise interpretive bias, the analysis was conducted iteratively through repeated viewing of selected scenes. The findings were further supported by cross-referencing with archival materials, museum sources, and relevant scholarly literature. This process of triangulation enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in multiple sources of evidence.

Research Objectives

This study has four objectives. This study aims to evaluate the depiction of the kebaya in selected Malay films from 1950 to 1965, as documented in the FINAS library. Secondly, it seeks to analyse the role of the kebaya as an indicator of social identity, class, and gender in cinematic narratives. The paper examines the kebaya's function as a cultural emblem that navigates the conflict between tradition and modernity in post-independence Malaysia. Ultimately, it aims to enhance social scientific study by contextualising costume studies within wider discourses on cultural identity, heritage preservation, and media portrayal.

Research Questions

The study was directed by the subsequent research enquiries:

1. RQ1: In what manner is the kebaya depicted in Malay films created from 1950 to 1965, as documented in the FINAS archive?
2. RQ2: How does the kebaya serve as a symbol of identity, class, and gender in cinematic narratives?

3. RQ3: In what manner does the kebaya function as a cultural emblem that reconciles the conflict between tradition and modernity in post-independence Malaysia?
4. RQ4: In what ways may the examination of the kebaya in film enhance broader social science discussions regarding cultural identity, heritage conservation, and media representation?

Search Strategy

This study's search technique integrated archival research with a scholarly literature evaluation to guarantee thorough coverage of both primary and secondary sources. The National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) archive functioned as the primary repository for cataloguing Malay films created from 1950 to 1965. Keywords including kebaya, Malay film, costume, identity, tradition, and modernism were employed to refine pertinent titles. From an original selection of films, five were deliberately chosen: *Hang Tuah* (1956), *Semerah Padi* (1956), *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), and *Masam Masam Manis* (1965) due to its cultural importance and the prominent depiction of the kebaya.

Academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were queried for secondary sources utilising analogous keywords. Research produced from 2019 to 2024 was prioritised to guarantee contemporary viewpoints, concentrating on costume studies, cultural identity, gender representation, and heritage preservation. Grey literature, including museum catalogues, exhibition notes, and cultural policy documents, was also evaluated to augment scholarly sources. The technique achieved historical authenticity and modern scholarly relevance by integrating film archives with academic and institutional resources.

Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion requirements mandated that films be Malay-language works released between 1950 and 1965, catalogued in the FINAS archive, and prominently include the kebaya in costume design and cultural representation. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, museum catalogues, and archival materials, were incorporated if they specifically pertained to Malay apparel, cinema costuming, or cultural identity. Exclusion criteria included films made outside Malaysia, works where the kebaya was either absent or of minimal narrative significance, and secondary sources without scholarly legitimacy, such as popular media or non-peer-reviewed web publications. This process guaranteed that the study concentrated on reputable films and literature that offered significant insights into the kebaya's function in cinematic and cultural contexts.

SELECTION AND SCREENING PROCESS

A preliminary compilation of 24 Malay films, created from 1950 to 1965, was obtained from the FINAS collection utilising keywords associated with costume and cultural identity. Each film was evaluated to determine the prominence and narrative function of the kebaya. Based on the established inclusion and exclusion criteria, five films were deliberately chosen: *Hang Tuah* (1956), *Semerah Padi* (1956), *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), and *Masam Masam Manis* (1965). These films were selected due to their archival recognition, cultural importance, and explicit representation of the kebaya in characterisation and narrative. Secondary materials, such as academic publications, museum catalogues, and heritage show notes, were evaluated for relevance and scholarly credibility. The dual procedure of

screening film and literature guaranteed the incorporation of only reputable and contextually rich sources into the analysis.

Extraction of Data and Synthesis

Data extraction was conducted through meticulous examination of the chosen films, focussing on scenes prominently displaying the kebaya. Costumes were meticulously examined, frame by frame, to document aspects of silhouette, colour, fabric, needlework, and accessories. The visual observations were thematically coded to represent three analytical categories:

- 1) Kebaya as an emblem of character identity
- 2) Kebaya as an emotional register.
- 3) Kebaya serves as a conduit between tradition and modernity.

Archival photographs, museum catalogues, and cultural exhibitions were also referenced to authenticate costume interpretations and guarantee cultural precision. The synthesis approach entailed juxtaposing findings from the five films with contemporary academic viewpoints on costuming, cultural identity, and social conduct. Through the triangulation of film analysis and secondary literature, the study situates the kebaya within broader discussions of gender, class, and cultural identity. The amalgamation of visual and textual data offered an in-depth comprehension of the kebaya's role as both a cinematic costume and a cultural text that influenced and mirrored Malaysian social identity.

TABLE 1. Thematic Synthesis of Kebaya Representations in Selected Malay Films (1956–1965)

Film Title	Year	Representation of Kebaya	Thematic Category
Hang Tuah	1956	Traditional kebaya labuh symbolising modesty and continuity of tradition	Character Identity / Cultural Symbolism
Semerah Padi	1956	Kebaya used to reflect morality and social order in village settings	Social Identity / Morality
Pendekar Bujang Lapok	1959	Plain cotton kebayas signified rural humility; ornate kebayas signified urban sophistication	Character Identity / Class Distinction
Ibu Mertuaku	1962	Pastel-toned kebayas symbolised innocence; darker hues expressed conflict and defiance	Emotional Expression
Masam Masam Manis	1965	Modern tailored kebaya pendek embodied urban femininity; traditional kebaya labuh reinforced heritage values	Mediator of Tradition & Modernity

Quality Assessment

The quality of both primary and secondary sources was meticulously assessed to guarantee the study's reliability and validity. Primary materials were exclusively sourced from the FINAS archive, which conserves and acknowledges significant productions in the history of Malay cinema. This guaranteed that the selected films were genuine cultural relics embodying the golden era of Malaysian cinema. The continuing popularity, preservation status, and cultural awareness of each film augment its appropriateness as reputable resource for analysis.

variants symbolising urban elegance. These disparities maintained social hierarchies and conveyed identity visually to observers.

Kebaya as a Manifestation of Emotion

The kebaya functioned as an emotional register within film storytelling. In *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), pastel-hued kebayas represented innocence and purity, whereas darker tones were linked to conflict, internal turmoil, and sorrow. Styling decisions, including more fitted and incorporation of opulent textiles effectively expressed the character's psychology, illustrating the kebaya's function as a subtle yet potent medium of emotional expression.

Kebaya as a Conduit of Tradition and Modernity

The interplay between tradition and modernity was prominently displayed in *Masam Masam Manis* (1965), where the modern kebaya pendek epitomised urban femininity and cosmopolitan aspirations, whereas the traditional kebaya labuh underscored cultural continuity and familial values. Likewise, *Semerah Padi* (1956) employed kebayas to emphasise moral order, associating traditional garments with virtue and communal purity. These representations demonstrated how cinema mirrored extensive cultural negotiations in post-independence Malaysia.

Compilation of Results

The findings collectively indicate that the kebaya transcended mere clothing; it served as a cultural text that facilitated identification, emotion, and heritage in Malay cinema. Table 1 summarises the changes to the kebaya in each film, conveying complex meanings, whereas Figure 1 depicts the prevalence of themes across the five films. The persistent manifestation of these themes validates the kebaya's function as a visual lexicon of Malaysian social identity during the cinematic golden age.

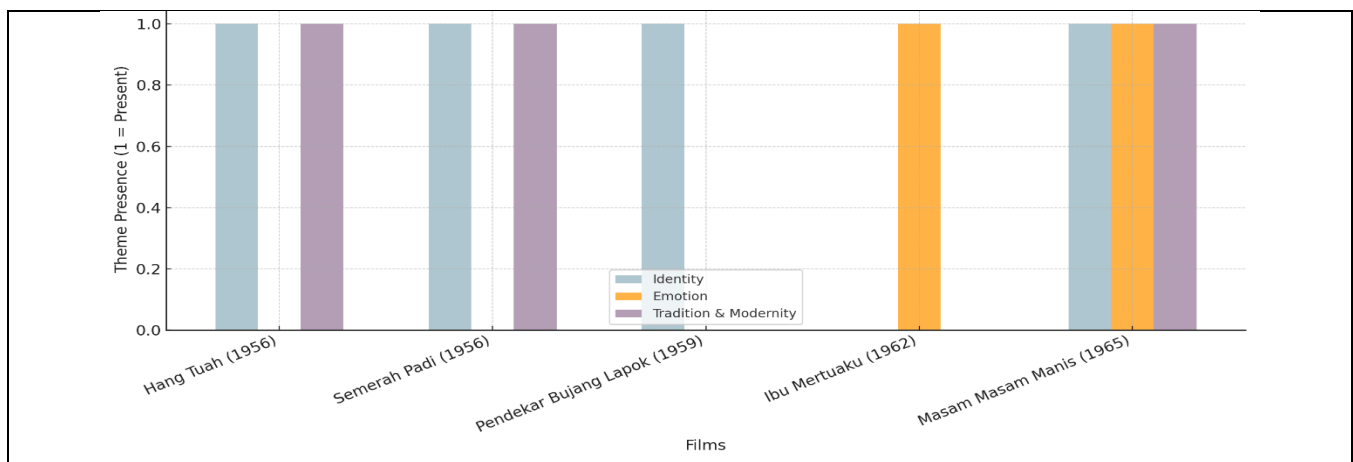


FIGURE 2. Representation of Kebaya Themes in Selected Malay Films (1956–1965).
 Source: Researcher's Own Analysis Based on Malay Film (2025)

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of key kebaya themes across the selected Malay films, namely identity, emotion, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. The chart demonstrates that identity is consistently represented across all films, indicating the kebaya's central role as a marker of social status and cultural values. Emotional expression is more prominently associated with *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), where colour and styling reflect character psychology and narrative tension. Meanwhile, the theme of tradition and modernity is most evident in *Masam Masam Manis* (1965), highlighting the transition towards urban femininity and evolving cultural identity. Overall, the figure reinforces the kebaya's function as a visual language that encodes social meaning within Malay cinema.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings position the kebaya as a dynamic cultural artefact within Malay cinema that not only reflects but actively constructs social identity, emotional meaning, and cultural negotiation. Rather than functioning as a passive costume, the kebaya operates as a visual system through which class, gender, and moral values are encoded and communicated, shaping audience perceptions of social behaviour.

As an emblem of social identity, the kebaya reinforces and naturalises class and gender hierarchies within cinematic narratives. In *Hang Tuah* (1956) and *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), the contrast between plain cotton kebayas and intricately embroidered variants does more than indicate aesthetic difference; it visually constructs the rural–urban divide as a marker of social stratification. This supports Yusof's (2022) argument that costume functions as a cultural signifier, while extending Barnard's (2014) notion that fashion communicates ideology by demonstrating how clothing in film actively participates in the reproduction of social order rather than merely representing it.

In terms of emotional expression, the kebaya functions as a narrative device that shapes character psychology and audience interpretation. In *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), the use of pastel tones does not simply signify innocence but constructs an idealised femininity associated with softness, restraint, and moral virtue. Conversely, darker tones signal emotional tension and resistance, reflecting internal conflict. This aligns with Monks' (2010) assertion that costume contributes to character depth, while also reinforcing Rahman's (2021) view of the kebaya as a site where femininity is negotiated within shifting social expectations.

The negotiation between tradition and modernity is most evident in *Masam Masam Manis* (1965), where the kebaya pendek represents emerging urban femininity and cosmopolitan aspirations, while the kebaya labuh signifies continuity with traditional values. This duality illustrates that the kebaya operates not as a fixed cultural symbol but as a fluid form of cultural capital, as suggested by Putra and Hasanah (2024). Similarly, in *Semerah Padi* (1956), the association of traditional kebaya styles with moral order reflects how cinema uses costume to reinforce societal norms, positioning dress as a visual regulator of acceptable behaviour in post-independence Malay society.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the kebaya can be understood as a semiotic system in which visual elements such as silhouette, colour, and styling function as signifiers that produce layered cultural meanings. Drawing from Roland Barthes, clothing operates as a form of visual language that constructs meaning rather than merely reflecting reality. In this context, the kebaya in Malay cinema actively participates in shaping narratives of identity, gender, and modernity.

By triangulating visual analysis with archival and scholarly sources (Zawawi, Rahman, & Yusuf, 2021; Tan, 2022), this study extends previous research that often treats traditional dress as a static heritage artefact. Instead, it demonstrates that film functions as a repository of intangible cultural heritage in motion, where costume becomes a critical medium through which social meanings are produced,

negotiated, and transformed. The kebaya in cinema therefore serves not only as a fashion artefact but also as an analytical framework for understanding how Malaysian identity was visually constructed during post-independence nation-building.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

This study encountered multiple problems that affected the extent and interpretation of the findings. The primary issue was the limited accessibility of archival films, as numerous Malay classics are either unavailable in restored versions or exist solely in incomplete records, which constrains the depth of visual research. Secondly, the study faced cultural sensitivity challenges, necessitating meticulous contextualisation of the kebaya's meaning to prevent the overgeneralisation of heritage values. The scarcity of recent academic work on Malay film costumes in relation to broader Southeast Asian studies, restricted prospects for comparative research. Ultimately, dependence on qualitative interpretation presents the risk of researcher bias; however, this was alleviated through triangulation with FINAS archives, academic literature, and museum records. These challenges underscore the necessity for enhanced archival preservation, interdisciplinary study, and broadened cultural discourse to fortify future scholarship on clothing, film, and social identity.

OPPORTUNITIES AND ADVANCEMENT

Notwithstanding these challenges, this study underscores numerous prospects for enhancing scholarship and practice. The growing digitalisation of cinema archives by institutes like FINAS facilitates enhanced access to Malay classics, enabling more thorough costume and heritage studies. The kebaya's depiction in cinema facilitates cross-cultural comparisons with traditional garments in Indonesian, Thai, and Filipino films, hence broadening regional insights on identity, gender, and modernity. The incorporation of digital tools and multimedia platforms provides innovative methods for preserving and reinterpreting cultural clothing, especially via online exhibitions, instructional modules, and heritage-focused creative businesses. The kebaya's designation as cultural heritage enhances the potential for robust cultural policy and intellectual property protections, safeguarding its symbolic significance while encouraging inventive adaptations in modern design. These chances collectively validate the kebaya's persistent significance as both a cinematic garment and a vibrant symbol of Malaysian cultural identity in heritage and contemporary contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of the kebaya in five FINAS-listed Malay films from 1950 to 1965, demonstrating its role as a dynamic cultural text that constructs social identity, emotional meaning, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. The findings reveal that the kebaya functions not merely as costume but as a visual system that encodes class distinctions, gender norms, and moral values within cinematic narratives. By situating the kebaya within film, this study contributes to sociological and cultural scholarship by highlighting how dress operates as a medium through which social meanings are produced and communicated. It reconceptualises the kebaya as an active narrative device that shapes audience perception and reflects broader socio-cultural transformations in post-independence Malaysia. Furthermore, the study positions cinema as an important repository of intangible cultural heritage, where costume becomes a visual language that documents and negotiates identity. Despite limitations related to

archival access and interpretive scope, the findings open pathways for future research in digital heritage preservation, cross-cultural comparison, and interdisciplinary design studies. Ultimately, the kebaya in Malay cinema represents more than traditional attire; it embodies the ongoing interplay between culture, identity, and modernity, affirming its relevance as both a historical symbol and a contemporary cultural asset.

ENDNOTES

- 1) In Malay cinema, the term "kebaya labuh" describes a longer, loose-fitting kebaya that is typically portrayed in historical and rural settings and is traditionally associated with modesty and classical Malay identity.
- 2) A shorter, more fitted style of the kebaya that came into being with urban modernity, the kebaya pendek frequently represents social mobility and cosmopolitan femininity.
- 3) The chosen movies, which are from the FINAS archive and depict the heyday of Malay cinema that is often cited in cultural and film studies, are *Hang Tuah* (1956), *Semerah Padi* (1956), *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), and *Masam Masam Manis* (1965).
- 4) The main archival authority for Malaysian films is FINAS (National Film Development Corporation Malaysia), which is also frequently consulted in scholarly studies about Malay cinema and cultural preservation.
- 5) The close visual inspection of costume components (such as silhouette, fabric, color, and styling) as cultural artifacts within movie narratives is known as object-based analysis, and it was used in this study.

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