



Designing a Visualization of Malay Cultural Identity in the Illustration of the Children's Storybook "Let's Get to Know the Malay Tribe"

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Abstract. *This study explores the visual articulation of Malay cultural identity in children's educational media through digital-based picture storybooks. Although visual storytelling has great potential as a medium for cultural literacy, the transmission of traditional values into child-friendly aesthetics often faces challenges between cultural authenticity and visual simplification. Using a qualitative approach with a formal design framework, this study applies Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis and visual communication principles to dissect elements of composition, typography, visual hierarchy, and color psychology in storybooks for children aged 5–9 years. Data were collected through a triangulation methodology involving comparative visual analysis, audience studies of children, and expert judgment validation. The analysis results indicate that the transformation of Malay identity—such as the bamboo shoot motif and traditional color palette—can be effectively integrated without losing its philosophical meaning through the application of simple geometric shapes (child-friendly shapes). Furthermore, empirical validation confirms that a coherent visual storytelling structure significantly improves children's cognitive retention and emotional attachment to local cultural values. This research contributes to the methodology of visual communication design, particularly in formulating standard guidelines for creating measurable cultural literacy media for the younger generation.*

Keywords: Malay Culture, Visual Communication, Picture story books

INTRODUCTION

Children's picture books play an important role not only as reading materials but also as visual media through which children encounter cultural values, social norms, and collective identity. In the context of Indonesian cultural diversity, visual storytelling can function as an effective medium for introducing local traditions to young readers in an accessible and engaging form. Malay culture, particularly in North Sumatra, contains rich visual symbols represented through ornaments, traditional clothing, food, houses, weapons, colors, and ceremonial practices. However, these cultural elements are often complex in form and meaning, making them difficult to communicate directly to children without appropriate visual adaptation. Therefore, the design of culturally based children's picture books requires careful consideration of visual communication principles, children's cognitive development, and cultural accuracy.

Previous studies have emphasized that illustration is not merely decorative but functions as a visual language that clarifies, extends, and strengthens textual meaning. In visual communication design, illustration serves as a bridge between abstract ideas and audience understanding, particularly when cultural concepts must be translated into child-friendly forms (Zeegen & Wijlo, 2023). Similarly, picture books are recognized as an important medium for

developing children's visual literacy and cultural awareness because they combine narrative, image, typography, composition, and color into an integrated reading experience (Salisbury & Styles, 2020). In relation to design structure, Ambrose and Harris (2019) explain that layout, hierarchy, typography, and visual balance are essential elements in creating effective graphic communication. For child readers, these elements become even more critical because visual complexity, poor readability, and inconsistent composition may reduce comprehension and engagement.

Several studies have also discussed the relevance of local cultural representation in children's learning media. Wulandari (2021) found that picture books can improve children's understanding of cultural values when cultural content is presented through appropriate visual and narrative structures. Ningsih and Prasetyo (2022) further argue that the representation of local identity in children's book illustrations must consider cognitive aspects so that cultural symbols are not only displayed but also meaningfully understood by young readers. In the context of Malay visual culture, Hamzah and Ridwan (2023) highlight the importance of visual semiotics in interpreting traditional Malay houses and local identity in the digital era, while Aputra (2020) explains that Malay colors carry symbolic and psychological meanings that can shape cultural perception. These studies indicate that cultural identity in visual media should not be treated as surface ornamentation, but as a system of signs that requires thoughtful interpretation and transformation.

Nevertheless, existing studies have not sufficiently addressed how Malay cultural identity can be systematically transformed into children's illustration design without losing its symbolic meaning. Many cultural visualizations in children's media still tend to emphasize decorative elements, while the relationship between sign, cultural referent, and intended meaning is not clearly analyzed. In addition, limited attention has been given to how Malay ornaments, traditional attire, culinary objects, weapons, architectural elements, and ceremonial practices can be simplified into child-friendly visual forms while maintaining cultural authenticity. This gap is important because children aged 5–9 years require visual forms that are simple, readable, emotionally engaging, and cognitively appropriate. Therefore, a design approach that combines semiotic analysis, visual hierarchy, color psychology, and audience-oriented design is needed to produce a culturally meaningful and pedagogically effective picture book.

This study aims to design and analyze the visualization of Malay cultural identity in the children's storybook "Let's Get to Know the Malay Tribe." The study applies visual communication design principles and Peirce's semiotic framework to examine how Malay cultural signs are translated into illustration, composition, typography, color, and narrative

structure for child readers. The contribution of this research lies in its attempt to formulate a child-oriented cultural visualization framework that balances cultural authenticity and visual simplification. Practically, this study provides design references for illustrators, educators, and cultural literacy developers who seek to introduce local identity through children's media. Theoretically, it contributes to the discussion of visual semiotics and cultural representation in children's illustration design. This paper is organized into several sections: the introduction presents the background, literature basis, research gap, objectives, and contribution; the method section explains the design and analytical procedures; the results section presents the visual design outcomes; the discussion interprets the findings through visual communication and semiotic perspectives; and the conclusion summarizes the main findings and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Illustration in children's books should be understood as a structured form of visual communication rather than as an accessory to written text. Zeegen and Wijlo (2023) explain that illustration has the capacity to clarify ideas, extend meaning, and translate abstract concepts into visual forms that are easier for audiences to interpret. In the context of children's media, this function becomes more significant because young readers often understand information through images before they fully process written explanations. Therefore, the illustrator's task is not only to create attractive images but also to construct visual messages that are meaningful, readable, and relevant to the intended audience.

Children's picture books rely on the interaction between image, text, space, rhythm, and sequence. Salisbury and Styles (2020) emphasize that visual storytelling requires a coherent relationship between narrative progression and visual composition. Images in picture books guide children's attention, support emotional engagement, and help them build meaning from one page to another. For this reason, visual consistency across characters, setting, color, and layout is important in maintaining children's comprehension. A well-designed picture book should allow young readers to follow the story intuitively while also encouraging them to observe visual details.

Graphic design principles provide an important foundation for organizing visual information in children's educational media. Ambrose and Harris (2019) state that hierarchy, balance, contrast, alignment, and typography are core elements in effective graphic communication. These principles help determine which visual elements should be seen first, how the reader's eye moves across the page, and how text can be integrated without disturbing the illustration. In children's books, the use of negative space, clear focal points, and readable typefaces is particularly important because excessive visual density may interfere with attention and comprehension. Thus, visual design must balance aesthetic appeal with functional clarity.

The cognitive characteristics of child readers also need to be considered in developing illustration-based media. Sari and Utami (2024) argue that children's visual perception is strongly influenced by color, shape, facial expression, and the simplicity of visual forms. Children aged 5–9 years tend to respond positively to rounded shapes, friendly characters, expressive faces, and color combinations that create a sense of comfort and curiosity. Visual complexity may enrich cultural detail, but when it is not properly simplified, it can create cognitive overload. Therefore, the transformation of cultural objects into child-friendly illustrations requires simplification without eliminating the essential identity of the object.

Cultural representation in children's illustration requires accuracy, sensitivity, and interpretive depth. Wulandari (2021) shows that picture books can strengthen children's understanding of cultural values when local traditions are presented through appropriate visual and narrative strategies. Ningsih and Prasetyo (2022) also emphasize that the representation of local identity in children's book illustration should not be reduced to decorative symbols. Cultural elements need to be positioned as meaningful signs that connect children with social values, collective memory, and local heritage. In this sense, children's illustration becomes a medium of cultural literacy because it introduces culture through visual experience rather than through formal explanation alone.

Malay visual culture contains symbolic elements that can be interpreted through ornaments, colors, clothing, architecture, and traditional objects. Hamzah and Ridwan (2023) explain that Malay houses and related visual forms represent local identity through structural and symbolic meanings. Aputra (2020) further notes that colors in Malay aesthetics are not neutral visual choices but are associated with cultural values, psychological impressions, and social meanings. For example, yellow is often related to dignity and glory, while green may be associated with harmony, growth, and religious identity. These meanings show that Malay visual identity should be interpreted as a system of cultural signs, not merely as a collection of visual decorations.

Semiotic theory provides a relevant framework for analyzing how cultural signs are transformed into illustration. Peirce's triadic model, consisting of sign, object, and interpretant, allows visual elements to be examined according to their form, cultural reference, and meaning produced for the reader. Through this framework, an ornament is not only seen as a pattern, but also as a sign that refers to cultural philosophy and produces a specific interpretation. This approach is useful in children's illustration because cultural elements often need to be simplified into basic shapes, softer colors, and more accessible compositions. By applying semiotic analysis, designers can maintain the symbolic value of Malay identity while adapting it to the perceptual needs of young readers.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design approach to examine and develop the visualization of Malay cultural identity in the children's storybook "Let's Get to Know the Malay Tribe." The qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting cultural signs, visual meaning, design structure, and the suitability of illustration elements for child readers. Rather than measuring visual elements numerically, this study analyzes how Malay cultural symbols are transformed into child-friendly visual forms through illustration, typography, color, composition, and narrative sequencing. The methodological process was organized into three main stages: cultural data collection, visual design analysis, and validation of the designed storybook.

The first stage involved the identification and collection of cultural data related to Malay identity, particularly Malay culture in Medan and North Sumatra. Data were obtained through literature review, observation of Malay visual elements, and interviews with informants who had knowledge of Malay culture. The collected cultural elements included traditional ornaments, clothing, houses, foods, weapons, wedding customs, and social values represented in Malay daily life. These data were used as the basis for determining which cultural objects and symbolic elements should be included in the storybook illustration. At this stage, the researchers also considered the extent to which each cultural element could be visually adapted for children aged 5–9 years.

The second stage was visual semiotic analysis using Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model, which consists of sign, object, and interpretant. This framework was applied to interpret the relationship between visual elements and their cultural meanings. In this study, the "sign" refers to the visual form presented in the illustration, such as ornaments, colors, houses, traditional clothing, and character gestures. The "object" refers to the original Malay cultural referent represented by the visual element. The "interpretant" refers to the meaning expected to be understood by child readers, such as harmony, hospitality, bravery, dignity, and cultural pride.

The third stage consisted of comparative visual analysis. This analysis was conducted by comparing the designed storybook with existing children's picture books that use cultural or educational themes. The comparison focused on layout structure, visual hierarchy, typography, character design, color use, readability, and the relationship between image and text. This stage helped identify strengths and weaknesses in the proposed design, particularly in terms of whether the illustrations were visually attractive, culturally recognizable, and readable for children. The analysis also ensured that cultural content was not presented as excessive decoration but as an integrated part of the story's visual communication.

An audience-oriented SWOT analysis was then conducted to evaluate the design from the perspective of child readers and cultural literacy needs. The strengths of the design were examined in relation to its ability to present Malay identity through colorful, friendly, and accessible illustrations. Weaknesses were identified by considering possible limitations, such as visual complexity, text density, or cultural objects that may be difficult for children to understand. Opportunities were analyzed in relation to the growing need for local-culture-based educational media in children's literacy. Threats were considered in relation to children's preference for global digital content and the possibility of cultural simplification leading to misrepresentation.

After the visual concept was formulated, the design process continued with the transformation of cultural data into storybook illustrations. The researchers applied shape simplification to adapt complex Malay cultural objects into child-friendly visual forms. Traditional ornaments, houses, weapons, clothing, culinary objects, and wedding scenes were simplified through geometric forms, rounded shapes, and clear outlines. Typography was selected based on readability and suitability for early readers, while the layout was arranged using visual hierarchy and negative space to prevent text from overlapping with illustration details. The color palette was also adjusted to maintain Malay cultural identity while creating a soft and comfortable visual experience for children.

The final stage involved validation through expert judgment and user readability testing. Expert judgment was used to assess whether the visual representation of Malay cultural identity remained accurate and culturally appropriate. Meanwhile, user readability testing was conducted with children aged 5–9 years to observe whether the storybook could be understood, followed, and visually enjoyed by its target audience. The validation focused on children's ability to recognize cultural objects, follow the visual sequence, understand the relationship between text and image, and respond emotionally to the characters and illustrations. The results of this validation were used to refine the visual design and ensure that the final storybook functioned as both a cultural literacy medium and a communicative children's illustration product.

RESULTS

The design results of the children's storybook "Let's Get to Know the Malay Tribe" show that Malay cultural identity can be visualized through a combination of illustration, typography, color, layout, and narrative sequencing. Each visual element was designed to introduce cultural knowledge in a way that is accessible to children aged 5–9 years. The visual structure does not only present cultural objects as decorative elements but also positions them as meaningful signs within the story. The following results describe how Malay cultural identity is represented through the main visual components of the storybook.

The front cover was designed as the first visual entry point for introducing Malay cultural identity to young readers. As shown in Figure 1, the cover applies a symmetrical layout with Malay ornamental elements placed at the top and bottom of the composition. This framing technique directs the reader's attention toward the title in the center while creating a strong cultural impression. The use of a bold and rounded sans-serif typeface strengthens readability and gives the book a friendly appearance suitable for children. The cover also uses sufficient empty space to prevent visual overcrowding and to maintain the title as the main focal point.



Figure 1. Front cover of the children's storybook "Let's Get to Know the Malay Tribe". Source: Suprianingsih (2026)



Figure 2. Illustration of the daily life of the Malay people. Source: Suprianingsih (2026)

The next visual result presents the daily life of Malay people, particularly their close relationship with coastal environments. Figure 2 illustrates the Malay community through visual elements such as stilt houses, boats, coconut trees, and characters wearing traditional clothing. These elements were simplified into child-friendly geometric forms without removing their cultural references. The text is placed in the upper part of the illustration, utilizing the empty sky area to maintain readability. This layout allows children to understand the cultural setting while still enjoying the narrative flow of the image.

Malay social values are further represented through the visualization of hospitality. In Figure 3, the characters are depicted with smiling facial expressions and relaxed body gestures to communicate warmth, friendliness, and togetherness. The use of a speech balloon creates a

conversational atmosphere, making the cultural explanation feel more natural for children. The background elements, such as the stilt house and natural environment, maintain visual continuity with the previous page. Through this composition, the value of hospitality is introduced not as abstract moral instruction but as a visual experience embedded in everyday interaction.



Figure 3. Visualization of Malay hospitality values. Source: Suprianingsih (2026)

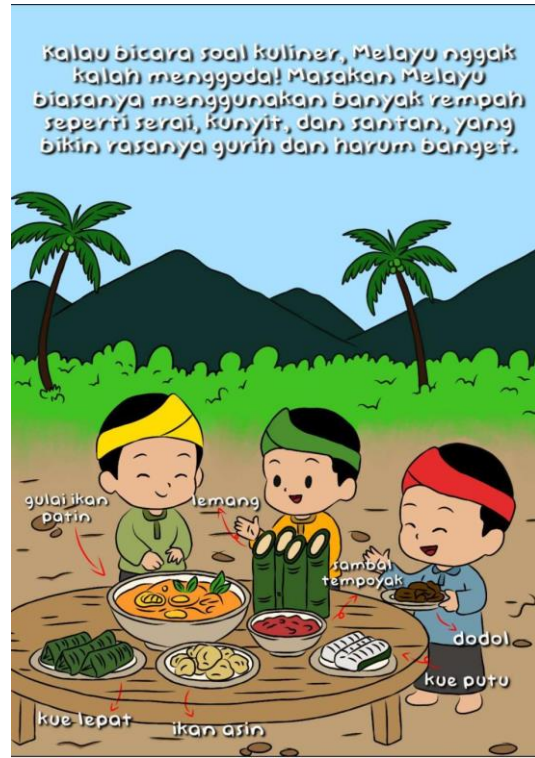


Figure 4. Visualization of traditional Malay culinary culture. Source: Suprianingsih (2026)

The storybook also introduces Malay culinary culture through a visually engaging composition. As presented in Figure 4, several traditional Malay foods are displayed on a table and identified using simple labels and directional lines. This design strategy helps children recognize each food item while guiding their visual attention across the page. The bright colors and expressive character gestures create an inviting atmosphere that supports children's curiosity. The composition successfully transforms culinary knowledge into a more interactive visual reading experience.

Malay ornaments are presented as one of the most significant visual identities in the storybook. Figure 5 shows the use of floral and geometric ornamentation against a dark background to highlight the decorative details and symbolic value of the motif. The contrast between the bright ornament colors and the black background creates a strong focal point. This visual approach emphasizes that Malay ornaments are not only decorative patterns but also cultural symbols related to harmony, beauty, and philosophical meaning. The simplified

explanation accompanying the image helps children understand the cultural function of ornamentation in daily life.



Figure 5. Visualization of traditional Malay ornaments. Source: Suprianingsih (2026)



Figure 6. Illustration of traditional Malay weapons. Source: Suprianingsih (2026)

Traditional Malay weapons are visualized to introduce children to cultural artifacts that contain symbolic meaning. In Figure 6, the weapons are arranged in a parallel structure to make their shapes easy to observe and compare. The dark background is used to emphasize the contours, carvings, and distinctive forms of each weapon. Text labels are placed near the objects to support recognition without disrupting the visual composition. This page demonstrates how cultural artifacts can be introduced to children through a controlled and informative visual arrangement.

The visualization of traditional Malay wedding attire highlights the ceremonial dimension of Malay culture. Figure 7 presents the bride and groom in a symmetrical composition, supported by decorative wedding elements in the background. The symmetrical arrangement creates a formal and sacred impression that is appropriate for representing a wedding ceremony. The use of strong colors on the clothing directs the reader's attention to the main characters. This visual strategy allows children to recognize traditional attire while also understanding the ceremonial context in which it is used.

The Malay wedding procession is further developed through the visualization of pencak silat performance. As shown in Figure 8, the silat performers are placed in the foreground with expressive poses and motion lines to create a sense of movement. The musicians, audience, and bride and groom are placed in different visual layers, creating depth and narrative dynamics. This spatial arrangement helps children understand that pencak silat is not only a martial performance but also part of cultural celebration. The page successfully combines action, ceremony, and cultural identity in a single visual scene.

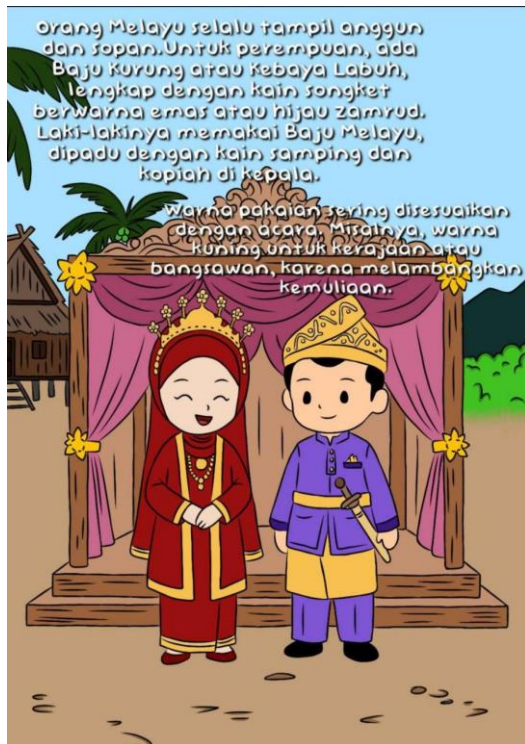


Figure 7. Visualization of traditional Malay wedding attire. Source: Suprianingsih (2026)

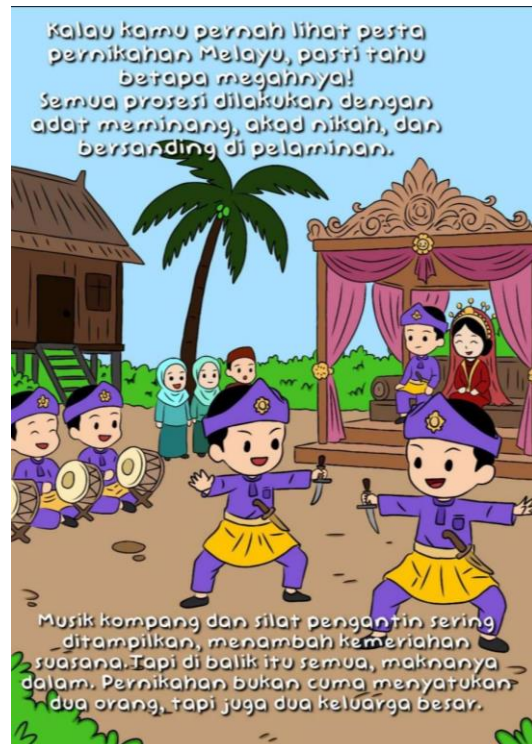


Figure 8. Illustration of Malay traditional pencak silat in a wedding procession. Source: Suprianingsih (2026)

The final visual page functions as a closing element that reinforces the overall identity of the storybook. Figure 9 uses a green circular framing technique and reintroduces Malay ornamental elements to create visual continuity with the cover page. The absence of human characters allows readers to focus on the final message of the story. This closing composition provides a calmer visual rhythm after the more dynamic scenes presented in the previous pages. It also strengthens the coherence of the book by linking the final page back to the visual identity introduced at the beginning.

Overall, the results show that the visualization of Malay cultural identity in the storybook was developed through careful integration of cultural symbols and child-oriented design principles. The illustrations use simplified shapes, readable typography, controlled visual

hierarchy, and culturally meaningful colors to support children's understanding. Each figure contributes to a specific aspect of Malay identity, including daily life, social values, culinary traditions, ornaments, cultural artifacts, ceremonial clothing, and performance traditions. These results indicate that visual storytelling can serve as an effective medium for introducing local cultural identity to children when cultural accuracy and visual accessibility are balanced.

DISCUSSION

The design of the children's storybook "Let's Get to Know the Malay Tribe" demonstrates that cultural identity can be communicated effectively to young readers when visual elements are organized through a clear hierarchy and a child-oriented design strategy. The results show that each illustration does not merely function as a decorative component but as a visual system that guides children in recognizing, interpreting, and emotionally engaging with Malay cultural elements. This finding is consistent with Ambrose and Harris (2019), who argue that hierarchy, balance, contrast, and spatial organization are essential in directing visual attention and strengthening message delivery. In the context of children's picture books, such organization becomes more important because young readers depend heavily on visual cues to understand narrative and meaning (Salisbury & Styles, 2020). Therefore, the storybook's visual structure can be seen as a bridge between cultural complexity and children's cognitive accessibility.

The visual hierarchy applied in the storybook plays a central role in directing children's attention toward the most important elements on each page. In Figure 1, the symmetrical cover composition positions the title as the main visual focus, while Malay ornaments serve as a cultural frame that introduces the book's identity before the story begins. This use of framing and balance reflects the principle that graphic design must organize information according to visual priority and communicative purpose (Ambrose & Harris, 2019). Meanwhile, Figures 2, 3, and 8 use more dynamic compositions to support narrative movement and social interaction. This variation between symmetrical and asymmetrical layouts shows that visual structure is not applied rigidly, but adjusted to the meaning and atmosphere of each page.

Typography and text placement also contribute significantly to the readability of the storybook. The use of rounded sans-serif typography creates a friendly visual tone that is suitable for early readers. Text is generally placed in areas with sufficient negative space, such as the sky area in Figure 2 or the central empty area in Figure 1, which prevents competition between text and illustration. This supports the view that layout and typography must work together to ensure clarity, readability, and visual comfort (Ambrose & Harris, 2019). For children aged 5–9 years, readability is not only determined by font type, but also by spacing, contrast, visual density, and the relationship between written and illustrated information (Sari & Utami, 2024).

From a semiotic perspective, the visual transformation of Malay cultural identity in this storybook can be understood through the relationship between sign, object, and interpretant. The ornaments, houses, traditional clothing, food, weapons, and ceremonial scenes function as signs that refer to specific objects within Malay culture. However, these signs are not reproduced in fully realistic or overly complex forms; instead, they are simplified into illustrations that remain culturally recognizable and visually accessible. This approach is relevant to Hamzah and Ridwan's (2023) argument that Malay visual elements contain symbolic meanings that must be interpreted beyond their physical appearance. Thus, semiotic simplification does not necessarily weaken cultural meaning, as long as the primary visual markers and cultural context are preserved.

The representation of Malay hospitality in Figure 3 is particularly important because it shows how intangible cultural values can be visualized through character design and body language. Hospitality cannot be represented as a single material object in the same way as food, houses, ornaments, or clothing. Therefore, the design communicates this value through smiling expressions, relaxed gestures, direct interaction, and a conversational speech balloon. This finding aligns with Sari and Utami (2024), who explain that children respond strongly to expressive facial features, friendly gestures, and emotionally clear character designs. In this case, the illustration transforms an abstract social value into a visual situation that children can understand through emotional and social cues.

Color selection also plays a strategic role in shaping the emotional tone and cultural meaning of the storybook. The use of soft and bright colors in the scenes of daily life, hospitality, and culinary culture creates warmth, curiosity, and comfort for young readers. At the same time, the darker backgrounds in Figures 5 and 6 create visual emphasis on ornaments and traditional weapons, allowing children to focus on the form and detail of the cultural objects. This treatment modifies traditional Malay color symbolism, which often uses strong and saturated colors to express dignity, spirituality, and social meaning (Aputra, 2020). The use of softer tones also supports Dameria's (2019) view that desaturated colors may reduce visual fatigue and create a more comfortable reading experience for children.

The simplification of forms is another key design strategy found in the storybook. Complex cultural objects such as traditional houses, ornaments, wedding attire, and weapons are translated into geometric shapes, rounded forms, and clear outlines. This strategy is relevant for child readers because excessive detail may reduce comprehension and shift attention away from the intended cultural message. Zeegen and Wijlo (2023) explain that illustration functions to clarify and translate ideas into visual language, which means that simplification can be necessary when the

audience requires more accessible visual forms. However, the simplification must remain culturally responsible so that the illustrated objects do not lose their identity or become generic decorative forms.

The visualization of Malay wedding culture in Figures 7 and 8 further illustrates how the storybook integrates cultural ceremony, clothing, performance, and social space into a coherent visual narrative. Figure 7 uses symmetry to emphasize the formal and sacred atmosphere of traditional wedding attire, while Figure 8 introduces movement through pencak silat performance. The use of foreground, midground, and background in Figure 8 creates spatial depth and helps children understand the relationship between performers, musicians, audiences, and the wedding couple. This is consistent with Salisbury and Styles (2020), who emphasize that children's picture books rely on sequential visual storytelling, where images must guide readers through action, setting, and meaning. Through this layered arrangement, children are not only shown isolated cultural objects but are invited to observe how cultural practices operate within a social event.

Overall, the discussion shows that the storybook's main strength lies in its ability to integrate cultural accuracy with visual accessibility. The illustrations introduce Malay identity through multiple dimensions, including material culture, social values, ceremonial practices, and symbolic ornaments. This supports Wulandari's (2021) finding that picture books can strengthen children's understanding of cultural values when visual and narrative elements are designed appropriately. It also aligns with Ningsih and Prasetyo (2022), who emphasize that local identity in children's illustration should be represented as meaningful cultural content rather than as decorative imagery. Therefore, this study contributes to the development of culturally based children's media by showing how semiotic interpretation, visual communication principles, and child-oriented design can be integrated into one coherent illustration framework.

CONCLUSION

This research successfully formulated a design framework in transforming Malay visual identity into a visual storytelling medium for children. Through a Peircean semiotic approach and the implementation of strict visual communication principles, traditional cultural identity can be presented in a relevant way for a contemporary audience aged 5–9 years without losing its cultural authenticity. This picture storybook proved effective as a communicative cultural literacy instrument. Further research is recommended to explore the effectiveness of this medium when adapted into an interactive digital animation format to measure the level of children's cognitive retention in the long term.

The design of the illustrated book "Let's Get to Know the Malay Tribe" integrates elements of Malay tradition into a story book through visualization and narrative that are packaged in a modern and attractive way without leaving the essence and philosophy contained therein, through a visual communication design approach, illustrations act as an excellent cognitive instrument for readers aged 5-9 years. Through the use of characters and colors that are relevant to the Malay tribe and also children, it will arouse children's interest in reading and learning, especially regarding Malay culture in the city of Medan. Children's understanding of culture from an early age will increase self-confidence and a sense of nationalism towards the country because culture is no longer something primitive but becomes a pride in the richness of culture in Indonesia.

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