

Analyzing Historical Photographs from the British Colonial Period: The Federal Conference Group, Kuala Kangsar, 1897

Analisis Gambar Bersejarah dari Zaman Kolonial British: Kajian Kes Gambar Berkumpulan Persidangan Persekutuan (Durbar 1) di Kuala Kangsar pada tahun 1897

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ABSTRACT

Historically, photography has been used to document historical events; however, these images typically feature simply a brief synopsis of the year, the event's name, and the individuals depicted. Each subject in a photograph is a representation of the time period depicted and must be identified. As such, this presentation will analyse historical pictures through the lens of a Critical Visual Methodology (CVM). Objectively, this study will identify the visual features and analyse the photograph's composition. The study is based on a photograph of the inaugural Durbar Conference entitled Federal Conference Group, Kuala Kangsar, 1897 by G R Lambert & Co. The visual study reveals that each row of the group portrait indicates their status and hierarchy, beginning with the Sultan and ending with the British officer, aristocrat, and soldier.

Keywords: Durbar 1; group portrait; photograph; Critical Visual Methodology

ABSTRAK

Dari sudut sejarah, fotografi memainkan peranan yang penting dalam mendokumentasikan atau 'merekodkan' suatu peristiwa bersejarah pada waktu ketika itu. Namun begitu, gambar bersejarah tersebut hanya menyediakan sedikit informasi dan catatan peristiwa seperti tajuk gambar, tarikh peristiwa dan adakalanya disediakan nama individu di dalam gambar tersebut. Kita pada hari ini hanya disediakan sedikit maklumat mengenai sekeping gambar sejarah itu. Setiap komponen subjek dalam sekeping gambar tersebut perlu dikaji kerana ia mampu menceritakan suasana pada waktu dan ketika. Oleh yang demikian tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk menganalisis gambar bersejarah menggunakan kaedah Critical Visual Methodology (CVM). Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti elemen visual serta menganalisis komposisi dalam sekeping gambar. Gambar bertajuk Federal Conference Group, Kuala Kangsar, 1897 yang dihasilkan oleh G.R Lambert & Co dipilih untuk menjadi subjek kajian. Dapatan daripada hasil analisis visual mendapati setiap lapisan dalam gambar berkumpulan melambangkan suatu lapisan kedudukan ataupun pangkat mengikut aras iaitu hierarki bermula daripada Sultan, Pegawai British, Kerabat Di Raja, pembesar dan askar.

Kata kunci: Durbar 1; gambar berkumpulan; gambar; Critical Visual Methodology

INTRODUCTION

The adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is widely used throughout the world. It can be defined as a single image or an image with multiple interpretations and meanings depending on the viewer. In general, a photograph or image is a piece of paper, or occasionally a copper plate or a pair of spectacles, that has been produced digitally or by a chemical process that begins with the fabrication of negatives and continues until the image is set onto paper. According to Rose (2000), a photograph can

be viewed as either scientific documentation or an artistic aesthetic that demonstrates historically, culturally, and socially distinct ways of experiencing the world. As a result, each photograph serves as evidence of what occurred in the past. Barthes (1982) and Edkins (2013) argued that a photograph never lies and serves as a record of anything that was in front of the camera at some point in the past. Photographs have been used to document historical situations and occurrences, providing compelling evidence of our past.

According to Rose (2016), vision is the most fundamental of all senses, as “depiction, picturing, and seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which the majority of human beings come to know the world as it truly is,” and Berger (1973, p.7, cited in Rose (2016)) suggests that this is because “seeing comes before words.”

According to Alex Moh (2004), Malaysia’s first images were taken in the 1870s. This means that after 1870, a western photographer documented our historical history with a photograph. GR Lambert & Co, Satchler & Co, K. Freilberg, and Kaulfuss were among the first foreign photographers to set up operations in Singapore and Penang. At the time, studio portraiture was a prominent genre, which included group portraits, topography, and landscape. Due to the high cost of the equipment and mobile darkroom printing setup, which most people cannot afford, their studio photography services are used by local and international nobility, including aristocrats.

Despite the fact that images preserve our past, each acquired image has only a brief description such as a date, an individual, and a location, which can result in image misunderstanding, particularly among the younger generation. As a result, visual analysis is required to identify the shot. This study will focus on the image of the Federal Conference group in Kuala Kangsar in 1897, courtesy of GR Lambert & Co. The purpose of this research paper is to identify the visual element and to analyse the photograph’s composition. The Critical visual methodology framework (Rose 2016) is used to assess the following study objectives:

1. To ascertain the sort of photographic printing method used in the production of historical images.
2. To recognise the aesthetic aspects incorporated into images.
3. To conduct an analysis of the images’ group portrait compositions.



FIGURE 1. Federal Conference group, Kuala Kangsar in 1897 (courtesy of GR Lambert & Co)

Source: Falconer, J. (1987). *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya. The Photographs of G. R. Lambert & Co., 1880-1910.* Times Eds.

METHOD

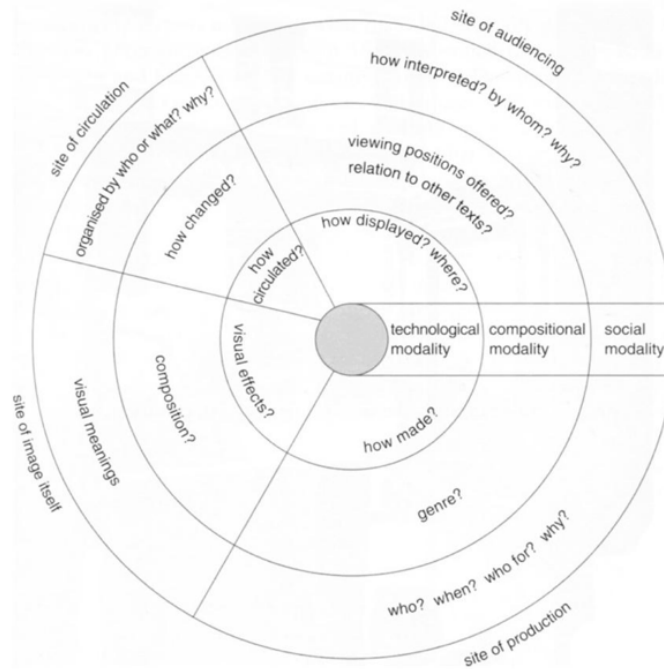
For this research paper, Critical Visual Methodology (CVM) was used to analyse the sampled photographs (Rose 2016). The meanings of images are formed

at four sites and three modalities: the site(s) of image production, the site of the image itself, the site of its circulation, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences. For the modalities, there are three items that can contribute to critical

understanding: technological, compositional, and social. This research paper will only focus on sites of production, such as

1. The technology used in making images (the technological modality),
2. visual component (compositional mode)
3. social modality

TABLE 1. Critical Visual Methodology

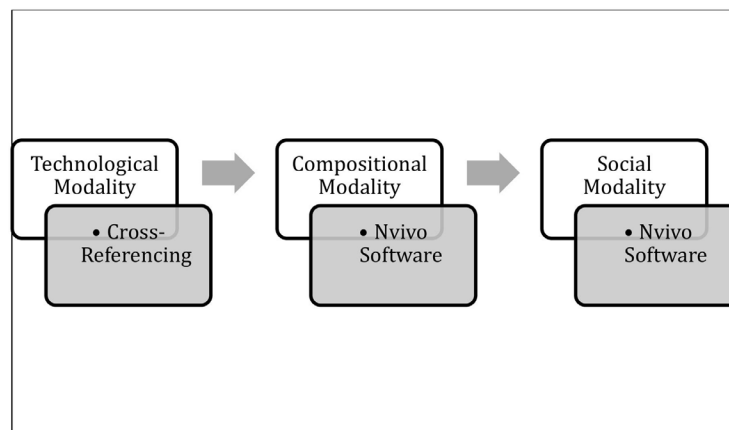


Source: Rose 2016

The Critical Visual Methodology (CVM) framework is used as a guideline to the audience or viewer on how to read the visual, especially in photographs by using four directions of view known as “site.” Then each view has three modalities, which can guide the viewer to interpret step by step. For this research paper, focus only on the site of the

production, which relates to the objective of the research. The photograph must first be identified as a technological modality by determining the sort of printing technique that was employed in 1897. The compositional and social modality of the photograph will be analysed by using NVivo software.

TABLE 2. Process of analysing the data



FINDINGS

TECHNOLOGY APPLIED IN IMAGE MAKING (TECHNOLOGICAL MODALITY)

Technology is a part of the development of photography. Based on the cross-referencing with the other studies, findings show that the photograph of the Federal Conference group, Kuala Kangsar, in 1897, used albumen print as a photographic printing process method during the time. The results of albumen print are a purplish brown and a sepia tone. According to Bautze J.K (2020), in his research entitled G.R. Lambert & Co.: Creator S of the Lasting Image of Nineteenth-Century Singapore, most of G.R. Lambert's photographs during the 1890-1900 period were made using the albumen print process from glass negatives (10 x 12 inch plate). Albumen prints became popular during this time because the main chemical factors were easy to find; all that was needed was an egg yolk, which created an albumen.

According to Keith Dotson (2020), egg whites were used as a coating for the paper stock, giving the paper a gloss coat that served as an emulsion to support and bind the light-sensitive chemicals.

THE GENRE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH (COMPOSITIONAL MODALITY)

A genre is a type of style photograph. According to Rose (2016), genre is a way of classifying visual images into groups. The findings show the photograph can be classified as group portrait photography and can be defined as a portrait photograph. According to Merriam Webster, a portrait can be defined as a pictorial representation of a person, usually showing the face. Therefore, in the photograph, we can clearly see the faces of the people posing directly in front of the camera. During the period from 1890 to 1900, there were only three genres: topography, portrait, and landscape.

VISUAL ELEMENTS

TABLE 3. Props and weapons on a photo

Props and weapons on a photo	
Items	Total
Weapon (<i>Keris</i>)	5
Weapon (<i>Sword</i>)	4
Weapon (<i>Tombak</i>)	12
Umbrella	2
Tepak Sirih Diraja	5

Findings on Table 3 show there are five weapons of keris; three were Keris Panjang and two were Keris Pendek. While only four swords are visible in the photograph, one of them is that of Ernst Woodford Birch, Secretary to the Government of Perak.

However, there are 12 Tombak, or spears, that can be seen in a photo that is located at the back and side of the group portrait. There are two umbrellas on the last row, while there are five tepak sirih located on the first row.



FIGURE 2. Props and weapons on a photo

Source: Falconer. J. (1987). *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya. The Photographs of G. R. Lambert & Co., 1880-1910.* Times Eds.

SOCIAL MODALITY

The social modality for the site of production includes who, when, and the events. Based on Table

4, there are fifty-six (56) people in a group portrait in a photograph and there are five levels of row in a group, ranging from seated on the floor to seated on a chair to standing on various levels of tier.

TABLE 4. Total persons on a row

Props and weapons on a photo	
Items	Total
Row 1 (seated on the floor)	9
Row 2 (seated on the chair)	9
Row 2 (stand)	6
Row 3	10
Row 4	8
Row 5	9
Uncategorized	5

Only nine (9) people are seated, which suggests the highest rank, such as Sultans from four states, the Governor of Straits Settlements, and the British Resident from four states. From left to right: Hugh Clifford (Resident of Pahang), John Pickersgill Rodger (Resident of Selangor), Sir Frank Swettenham (Resident General), Sultan Ahmad

(Sultan of Pahang), Sultan Abdul Samad (Sultan of Selangor), Sir Charles Mitchell (Governor of the Strait Settlements), Sultan Idris (Sultan of Perak), Tuanku Mohammed (Yang Dipertuan Besar Negeri Sembilan). The segmentation of rows can be seen in Figure 2 below.

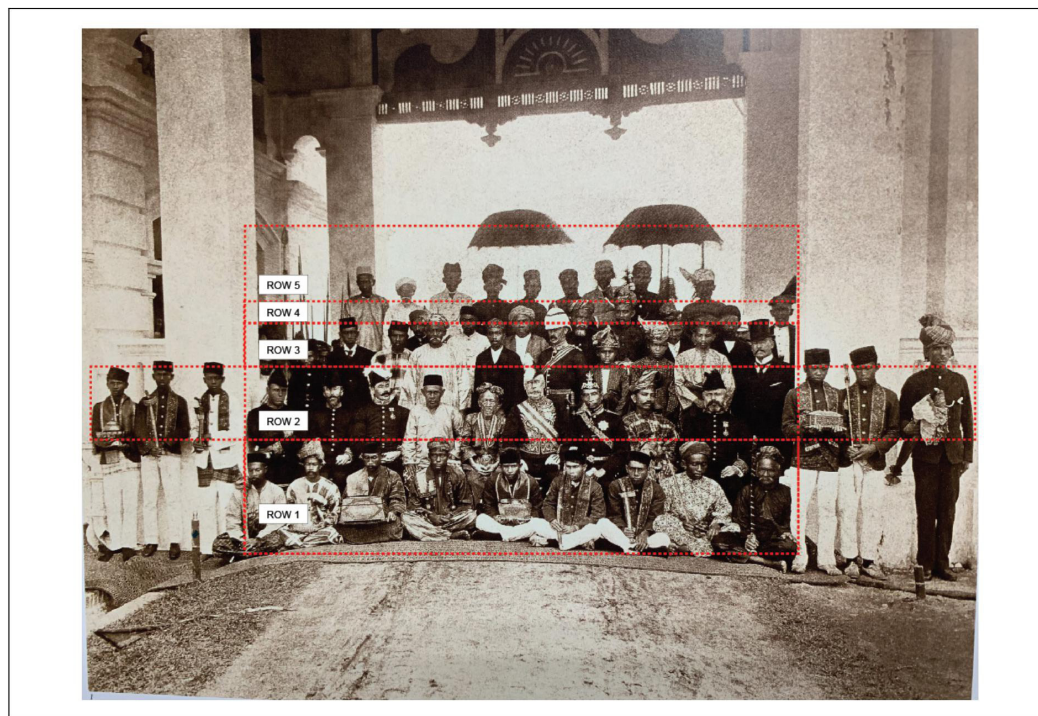


FIGURE 3. Segmentation of rows

Source: Falconer. J. (1987). *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya. The Photographs of G. R. Lambert & Co., 1880-1910.* Times Eds.

Meanwhile, in row number three, which depicts individuals standing behind the Sultans and identified as the Governors of the Strait Settlements and Residents, there are 10 people who have the second highest rank in the hierarchy, such as the grandson of Sultan Abdul Samad, Sir Alauddin Sulaiman Shah, and Ernst Woodford Birch, Secretary to the Government of Perak. However, there are limitations to identifying the other person whose data was not recorded.

DISCUSSION

The historical photograph of the Federal Conference group, Kuala Kangsar in 1897, is an event of the Federal Conference called Durbar 1, which was located in Istana Kuala Kangsar, Perak, including the Sultans of Selangor, Sultan of Pahang, Sultan of Negri Sembilan, Sultan of Perak, British Resident and General. Technically, the picture was taken in

the afternoon, and the bright white background can be seen clearly. During that period, the photographer used a glass negative and printed with an albumen technique, which was more convenient and popular. It was because some printing processes, such as the daguerreotype technique, employed a different type of chemical that was dangerous. Aside from that, depending on the type of light-sensitive material chemical utilized, each chemical reaction for each process has a distinct exposure duration ranging from 5 to 20 seconds. If the photographer employed the Daguerreotype technique, for example, he would need to carry a hazardous substance such as mercury and expose it for at least 20 seconds, which is impossible for a group picture of 56 individuals waiting for the camera to expose. The drawbacks of daguerreotypes at the time were that it was difficult to duplicate them. As a result, anybody who wants a duplicate of a photograph will have to re-photograph it.

Portrait photography has been a popular genre since 1890, alongside topography and landscape. Due to the Victorian era's influence, a western photographer established a studio in Singapore that offers studio portraits. Props such as Keris, Pedang, Tombak, Payung, and Tepak Sirih are among the items that can be seen in the photograph. Several keris have been identified, such as Pedang Cura Si Manja Kini and Keris Panjang Curam, that can be seen in the photo. Perak's Pedang Cura Si Manja Kini and Keris Panjang Curam are instruments of Perak's royal grandeur, according to a cross-reference with the Sultan's Office website (sultan.perak.gov.my, n.d). It symbolises the majesty and power of the King of the government, history, and design. According to Ahmad, A.M.Z. (2016) cited by Abdul Aziz, A.Z., Abidin, S.Z., & Anwar, R. (2019), keris types are followed by their origin district with cultural clan influences within Malaysia. Based on the photographs shown, each of Keris's different types represents and symbolises the power of each state.

Each prop represents a state from Pahang, Perak, Selangor, or Negeri Sembilan that was used

for a specific event. Tepak Sirih is a very common term in Malay culture. It can be described as a gift. Besides that, according to Salleh (2014), Tepak Sirih is a symbol of non-verbal communication to start a conversation, as a statement to agree, accept or reject. In the context of group composition, the photographer has setup a group row based on the hierarchy. The person who has a higher rank will be seated on the chair (row number two) based on seniority. Sir Charles Mitchell (Governor of the Strait Settlements) seems to have more dominance at the centre than Sultan Abdul Samad (Sultan of Selangor), who is ranked fifth in a row with nine people. Each row represents a level of rank in the hierarchy. The person who is seated on the floor can be described as an army or warrior from each state. It shows the weapons such as Keris and Pedang located in row number one. Row number three can be identified as a row of aristocrats or the 2nd highest ranked officer after the Sultan and the British resident. Meanwhile, in row number four, there are two people wearing a serban, which represents an ulama, or Islamic scholar, who advises the Sultan on Islamic religious matters.



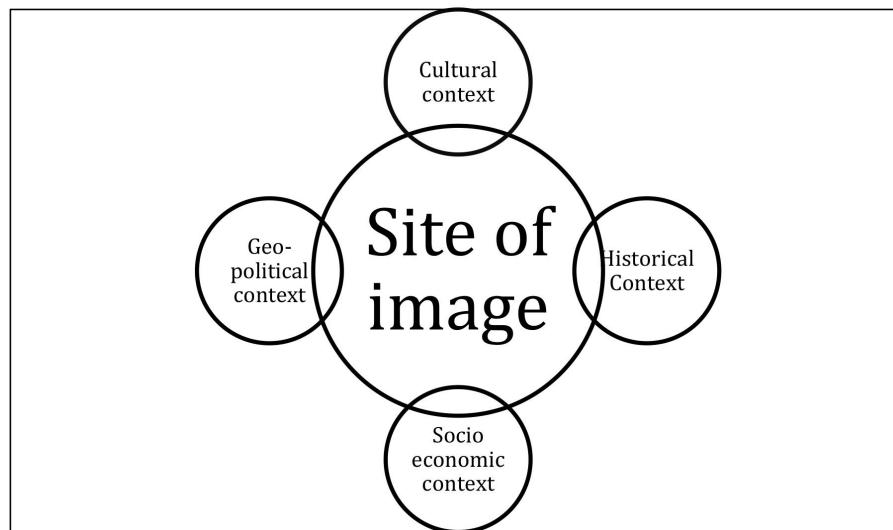
FIGURE 4. Types of headgear

Source: Source: Falconer, J. (1987). *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya. The Photographs of G. R. Lambert & Co., 1880-1910. Times Eds.*

Based on Figure 3, which shows the variety of headgear such as Serban, Tanjak, and Songkok, which symbolised Malay and Islam during the time. According to Philip (2020), the word “Songkok” comes from the Malay word for the stiff, oval headgear worn over the brow by Muslim males only. It illustrates that, despite the fact that songkok originated in Turkey during the Ottoman Empire, it was extensively used throughout the time the image

was taken in 1897. By integrating technological, compositional, and social modalities (site of images), the spectator or audience may begin to critically narrate the tale of the photograph, despite the fact that it has limited information. A single photograph may tell a tale about the past by placing it in the context of history, culture, and the socioeconomic situation of the people at the time.

TABLE 5. Integrating component from site of image



CONCLUSION

In this study, it is learned that each subject in a photograph has its own context, which must be deciphered in order to gather historical data. In reading a photograph, we definitely have to have a view in the context of the photographer itself on how he manages a photographic setup for a group portrait and what type of photographic printing process they used. Even though some of the historical photos didn't provide the year the photo was created, we can still identify the year by identifying the type of the photographic printing process. Each type of photographic process has its own age based on technological advancements at the time. It's crucial to know the year the image was taken since it's linked to the chronology of history at the moment. According to the findings, a study of re-colouring historical pictures, especially historical Malay

photographs, is required to determine audience understanding for future research. It will enrich the audience's understanding of history.

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