



Contents lists available at Journal Global Econedu
Journal of Educational and Learning Studies
ISSN: 2655-2760 (Print) ISSN: 2655-2779 (Electronic)
Journal homepage: <http://jurnal.globaleconedu.org/index.php/jels>



Phenomenological study of margondang tradition and cultural resilience in mandailing society

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jul 28th, 2026
Revised Aug 02th, 2026
Accepted Aug 05th, 2026

Keyword:

Margondang tradition,
Phenomenology,
Indigenous cultural heritage,
Mandailing community

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the implementation of the Margondang tradition, identify the factors sustaining its existence, and examine its social implications within the Mandailing community of Sihapas Barumun District, Padang Lawas Regency, Indonesia. A qualitative study employing a phenomenological approach was conducted using purposive sampling. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews with customary leaders, religious leaders, village officials, youth representatives, and community members, as well as document analysis. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, including data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that Margondang comprises six interconnected ritual stages that reinforce customary governance, kinship solidarity, and cultural identity. Its continuity is sustained by strong adherence to customary values, collective participation, and the integration of cultural and religious principles, while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion and intergenerational cultural transmission. Margondang remains a resilient cultural institution that preserves indigenous knowledge and community identity while adapting to contemporary social change.



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Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage constitutes a fundamental component of community identity, social cohesion, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, particularly within indigenous societies where customary traditions continue to regulate social relationships and collective life (Hamid et al., 2024; Sahrul et al., 2024). Beyond serving as ceremonial practices, traditional rituals function as social institutions that preserve collective memory, reinforce kinship structures, and sustain cultural values across generations. Nevertheless, accelerating urbanization, globalization, technological advancement, and changing religious interpretations have increasingly challenged the continuity of many indigenous traditions. Within the Mandailing community, these socio-cultural transformations raise important questions regarding how customary traditions maintain their relevance while preserving their normative functions. Consequently, understanding the lived experiences, meanings, and social functions embedded in indigenous rituals has become essential for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in contemporary society (Janra, 2017; K. Nasution et al., 2025).

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that indigenous rituals contribute to cultural resilience, social cohesion, and the preservation of local wisdom. Research on the Temanten Mandi ritual showed that

traditional ceremonies strengthen community resilience while supporting local livelihoods (Zulkarnain et al., 2023). Likewise, phenomenological studies have emphasized that rituals should be understood as lived experiences through which communities construct ethical values, collective consciousness, and social solidarity rather than merely symbolic performances (S. S. Nasution et al., 2025; Syahputra et al., 2021). Within the Mandailing context, studies concerning Marsialapari, Pataru Indahan, Tolak Bala, and other indigenous practices have primarily highlighted cultural preservation, collective identity, tolerance, and revitalization efforts. Although these studies confirm that indigenous traditions remain adaptive amid social transformation, they have largely focused on individual cultural dimensions without comprehensively explaining how ritual practices operate as integrated social institutions that sustain customary governance and cultural continuity.

Despite the growing literature on indigenous traditions, research specifically addressing the Margondang tradition remains limited both conceptually and empirically. Existing studies have generally examined Margondang from historical, religious, or descriptive cultural perspectives, while only limited attention has been given to how community members experience, interpret, and assign meaning to the tradition in their everyday social lives (Awaru et al., 2026; Rytterström et al., 2009). Furthermore, previous studies have tended to discuss isolated aspects of Margondang, such as ritual symbolism or customary values, without integrating the complete sequence of ritual implementation, the socio-cultural mechanisms sustaining its continuity, and the broader social implications generated through its practice. Similarly, recent studies on other Mandailing traditions have focused primarily on cultural preservation and revitalization rather than explaining the experiential processes that enable traditional institutions to survive under contemporary socio-cultural change (Mulyani et al., 2025; Rambey et al., 2024). Consequently, the existing literature has not yet adequately explained why Margondang continues to remain resilient despite increasing modernization and cultural transformation.

Addressing this gap requires a phenomenological perspective that places the lived experiences of community members at the center of analysis. Unlike previous studies, the present research simultaneously examines three interconnected dimensions: the complete implementation process of the Margondang ritual, the socio-cultural factors sustaining its continuity across generations, and the perceived social implications emerging from its practice. This integrated perspective is particularly important because phenomenology seeks to understand how cultural meanings are constructed through everyday experiences and social interactions rather than through ritual symbolism alone. Therefore, the phenomenological approach provides an appropriate analytical framework for explaining how Margondang continues to function as a living customary institution within contemporary Mandailing society (Nuraini et al., 2018; Susiarti & Sambas, 2018).

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the implementation of the Margondang tradition in Sihapas Barumun District, Padang Lawas Regency, through a phenomenological perspective by examining its ritual sequence, identifying the socio-cultural factors sustaining its continuity, and analyzing its perceived social implications for the local community. The novelty of this study lies in developing an integrated phenomenological explanation that connects ritual practices, customary governance, the Daliha Na Tolu kinship system, cultural resilience, and community identity within a single analytical framework. Unlike previous studies that examined these dimensions separately, this research demonstrates how Margondang simultaneously functions as a mechanism for preserving customary institutions, legitimizing social relations, strengthening intergenerational cultural transmission, and maintaining social cohesion amid ongoing social transformation. Consequently, this study contributes not only empirical evidence concerning one of Indonesia's enduring indigenous traditions but also extends the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge systems, cultural resilience, and the sustainability of customary institutions in contemporary society (Hsb et al., 2025; S. Z. Nasution et al., 2018; Tur et al., 2025).

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and cultural meanings attached to the Margondang tradition among the Mandailing community in Sihapas Barumun District, Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how community members perceive, interpret, and sustain the Margondang tradition within their socio-cultural context. The research particularly focused on the implementation process of the tradition, the factors underlying its continued existence, and its perceived social implications. Fieldwork was conducted throughout 2026 in several villages where the Margondang tradition remains actively practiced. Participants were selected purposively to ensure that they possessed extensive knowledge and direct experience regarding the tradition. The participants consisted of customary leaders, religious leaders, village heads, youth representatives, and community members who had participated in organizing or attending Margondang ceremonies.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation enabled the researchers to document the sequence of customary rituals, community interactions, and cultural practices during the implementation of Margondang. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding the tradition. Interviews focused on three principal issues: the implementation of Margondang, the factors contributing to its persistence, and its perceived social consequences. To ensure data accuracy, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Documentary evidence, including village profiles, official administrative records, photographs, and field notes, was also collected to complement and validate the observational and interview data.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of four iterative stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Throughout the analytical process, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials were continuously reviewed to identify meaningful patterns, recurring themes, and relationships among emerging categories. Data reduction involved selecting and organizing relevant information according to the research objectives, whereas data display facilitated systematic comparison across participant groups. The final themes were developed through repeated verification between different data sources to ensure consistency and credibility. Methodological triangulation was achieved by integrating evidence from observations, interviews, and documentation, while source triangulation was applied by comparing perspectives across customary leaders, religious leaders, village officials, youth representatives, and community members. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the research findings.

Results and Discussions

The findings of this study are organized into three major themes derived from the phenomenological analysis of participant observations, in-depth interviews, and documentary evidence. The first theme describes the implementation process of the Margondang tradition, illustrating the sequence of customary rituals practiced by the Mandailing community in Sihapas Barumun District. The second theme identifies the socio-cultural factors that sustain the continued existence of the tradition despite contemporary social transformation. The third theme presents the perceived social implications of Margondang as experienced by community members. These themes emerged through an iterative process of data reduction, categorization, and thematic analysis, revealing how the Margondang tradition functions as a cultural institution that shapes social interaction, customary governance, and community identity.

Process of the Margondang Tradition

The findings reveal that the implementation of the Margondang tradition in Sihapas Barumun District represents a structured customary process consisting of six interconnected stages. Rather than functioning solely as a ceremonial wedding celebration, Margondang serves as a cultural mechanism through which kinship, customary authority, social legitimacy, and collective identity are continuously reinforced. Data obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation demonstrate that each ritual stage possesses a distinct social function while simultaneously strengthening the Mandailing customary system based on the philosophy of Daliha Na Tolu.

Martahi: Collective Family Deliberation

The first stage identified during field observations was Martahi, a family deliberation conducted several weeks before the wedding ceremony. This meeting involved the extended family members, including kahanggi, anak boru, and mora, who collectively discussed the preparation of the ceremony, allocation of responsibilities, financial contributions, invitation lists, ceremonial equipment, and ritual schedules. The findings indicate that Martahi functions as the principal mechanism for achieving consensus among family members before the implementation of the customary ceremony.

Interviews with village leaders, customary elders, community members, and youth consistently emphasized that Martahi extends beyond administrative planning. Participants described it as an important forum for preserving customary values, transmitting cultural knowledge, and ensuring that every ceremonial procedure complies with Mandailing customary regulations. Informants further explained that this meeting provides opportunities for younger generations to understand their respective roles within the Daliha Na Tolu kinship structure while strengthening collective responsibility for organizing the ceremony.

Observational evidence also demonstrates that collective decision-making during Martahi promotes mutual assistance among relatives. Responsibilities were distributed according to customary roles rather than individual preferences, illustrating the cooperative nature of Mandailing society. Consequently, Martahi emerged not only

as an organizational activity but also as a social institution that reinforces solidarity and cultural continuity before the commencement of the wedding celebration.

Mangalo-alo Mora: Expressing Respect toward the Mora

Following Martahi, the ceremony proceeded with Mangalo-alo Mora, a ritual dedicated to welcoming and honoring the mora, the wife's family, who occupy the highest position within the Dalihan Na Tolu kinship system. Observations revealed that this stage included ceremonial greetings, traditional music, tortor performances, and the symbolic presentation of customary gifts before the arrival of the mora.

Across all participant groups, interviews consistently highlighted that the ritual symbolizes respect, gratitude, and acknowledgment of the wife's family. Informants regarded the presence of the mora as indispensable because their blessing legitimizes the continuation of the wedding ceremony. Several respondents further explained that the ritual strengthens relationships between both families and creates an atmosphere of harmony before the commencement of the main customary procession.

Field observations further indicated that the participation of community members, including village officials and local youth, contributed significantly to the ceremonial reception. Younger participants actively combined traditional tortor performances with contemporary expressions while maintaining customary etiquette, suggesting that cultural adaptation has occurred without diminishing the symbolic importance of the ritual.

Makkobar: Establishing Customary Consensus

The third stage identified in this study was Makkobar, a customary deliberation attended by traditional leaders, representatives of Dalihan Na Tolu, village elders, and the host family. Observational findings show that this meeting served as the formal decision-making forum in which ceremonial procedures, responsibilities, customary obligations, and ritual legitimacy were confirmed before the commencement of the principal celebration.

Interview data consistently portrayed Makkobar as the foundation of customary governance within the Margondang tradition. Participants explained that the absence of Makkobar would jeopardize the legitimacy of the ceremony because it represents collective agreement among all customary stakeholders. Traditional leaders emphasized that the meeting ensures compliance with inherited customary norms, while religious leaders described the deliberation as compatible with Islamic principles of consultation and mutual agreement.

Observational evidence also demonstrated that Makkobar functions as an effective conflict-prevention mechanism. Through open discussion and collective consensus, potential misunderstandings regarding ceremonial responsibilities were resolved before the implementation of the event. Consequently, this stage strengthened social cohesion while simultaneously preserving customary authority within the community.

Panaek Gondang and Manortor: Ritual Legitimation through Music and Dance

The beginning of the principal celebration was marked by the ritual known as Panaek Gondang, followed by Manortor. During field observations, researchers documented the ceremonial performance of the traditional gondang sambilan ensemble, whose first musical performance officially signified the opening of the customary celebration. Immediately afterward, participants representing different kinship groups performed the traditional tortor dance according to the prescribed customary sequence.

Interview findings indicate that participants viewed this stage as more than artistic entertainment. Instead, the traditional music and dance symbolized the official recognition of the ceremony, collective joy, gratitude, and respect toward ancestors. Community members described the sound of the gondang as an invitation for all relatives and villagers to participate in the celebration, thereby transforming the event into a communal rather than an individual family occasion.

Young participants expressed considerable enthusiasm toward this stage and suggested integrating selected contemporary musical elements without eliminating the authenticity of traditional performances. This finding indicates that cultural preservation is increasingly accompanied by adaptive strategies that seek to maintain the relevance of Margondang among younger generations.

Naik Nacar: Symbolic Recognition of Social Status

The fifth stage observed during the study was Naik Nacar, which represents the ceremonial climax of the Margondang tradition. Researchers observed that the bride and groom were escorted to an elevated ceremonial platform (nacar), where the groom formally received his customary title from traditional authorities. The ritual was accompanied by traditional music, public witnessing, and the participation of family members representing the Dalihan Na Tolu structure.

Interview data consistently identified this stage as the highest symbolic moment of the ceremony because it officially recognizes the groom's new social identity within Mandailing customary society. Participants

emphasized that receiving a customary title signifies the transition into adulthood, legitimizes future participation in customary affairs, and confirms the groom's responsibilities toward his family and community. Traditional leaders further explained that the public nature of the ceremony reinforces collective recognition of this new social status.

Field observations additionally revealed that community members regarded Naik Nacar as a cultural milestone that should be preserved because it strengthens collective identity and maintains the continuity of Mandailing customary institutions.

Mangupa: Moral and Spiritual Reinforcement

The final stage documented in this study was Mangupa, a ritual meal accompanied by blessings, prayers, and moral advice delivered by parents, customary leaders, and religious figures. Observations indicated that the ceremony involved the presentation of traditional foods with symbolic meanings, followed by verbal guidance concerning marital responsibility, family harmony, religious commitment, and social obligations.

Interview findings demonstrate broad consensus among participants that Mangupa represents the moral culmination of the entire Margondang tradition. Informants described the ritual as an opportunity to express gratitude, seek divine blessings, strengthen family relationships, and transmit ethical values to the newly married couple. Although religious leaders emphasized that certain ritual elements should remain consistent with Islamic teachings, participants generally agreed that Mangupa constitutes an important cultural practice that integrates customary values with religious principles.

The findings indicate that Mangupa functions as the principal mechanism through which cultural values, religious ethics, and intergenerational knowledge are transmitted to newly established families. Consequently, the ritual serves not only as the closing ceremony of Margondang but also as a medium for preserving Mandailing cultural identity while promoting social cohesion and moral responsibility.

The findings demonstrate that the Margondang tradition extends beyond a customary wedding ceremony and functions as an integrated institution that reinforces customary governance, kinship, and cultural continuity within the Mandailing community. Each ritual stage, from Martahi to Mangupa, performs complementary social functions that sustain the Daliha Na Tolu kinship system. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasized ritual symbolism, this study shows that Margondang also institutionalizes collective responsibility and social legitimacy. These findings support anthropological perspectives that traditional ceremonies reproduce social order through shared cultural practices and collective participation (Bakthavatsalu et al., 2025; Feizi et al., 2023; S. Z. Nasution, 2015) and are consistent with studies highlighting the continued role of indigenous rituals in strengthening social cohesion and community identity despite modernization (Israfil et al., 2025; Kelly & McAllister, 2013; Topsakal & Topsakal, 2019).

Another important finding is the central role of Martahi and Makkobar as participatory deliberation forums that establish consensus, clarify responsibilities, prevent conflict, and legitimize customary authority. These findings support participatory governance theory, which emphasizes that community deliberation strengthens trust, cooperation, and institutional legitimacy (Konecki, 2017; Wines et al., 2015). They also corroborate previous studies showing that indigenous governance remains sustainable through collective responsibility and adherence to customary norms (Amatullah et al., 2020; Batts et al., 2024; Hung et al., 2014). The present study further demonstrates that these governance mechanisms remain relevant because they continue to adapt through active community participation.

The rituals of Panaek Gondang, Manortor, and Naik Nacar illustrate how cultural performances construct social identity and legitimize social status within the Mandailing customary system. These findings support Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, whereby cultural recognition strengthens social legitimacy and collective prestige (Atkins et al., 2023; Faridi et al., 2024; Stancil et al., 2026). Likewise, previous studies have shown that ritual performances reinforce communal identity while transmitting cultural values across generations (Esmailnia et al., 2026; Forbes et al., 2021; Hadi et al., 2025; Tunca & Durmuş, 2024). The active involvement of younger generations further indicates that cultural preservation is achieved through adaptive innovation without diminishing the essential meaning of the tradition.

The findings also reveal that Mangupa serves as an important mechanism for transmitting ethical, religious, and cultural values across generations. The integration of Islamic teachings with customary values demonstrates that cultural continuity is maintained through adaptation rather than contradiction. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that local traditions remain sustainable when they successfully accommodate religious values while preserving their symbolic meanings (Dwirahayu et al., 2026; Molero et al., 2018). Accordingly, the continued acceptance of Margondang is closely associated with its ability to integrate customary and religious values within contemporary society.

Collectively, these findings extend previous scholarship by providing an integrated phenomenological explanation of how ritual implementation, customary governance, kinship, cultural resilience, and moral values interact to sustain the Margondang tradition. This study addresses the identified research gap by demonstrating that the resilience of Margondang depends not only on ceremonial obligations but also on its multidimensional social functions. The findings contribute to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural resilience, while suggesting that future preservation efforts should strengthen community participation, customary education, and collaboration among customary leaders, religious authorities, educational institutions, and local governments to ensure the long-term sustainability of Mandailing cultural heritage (Huang et al., 2009; Jabbari & Duncan, 2024; Saldıray, 2025).

Conclusions

This study concludes that the Margondang tradition remains a resilient customary institution that extends beyond its function as a wedding ceremony by reinforcing customary governance, the Dalihan Na Tolu kinship system, community identity, and intergenerational cultural transmission within the Mandailing community. The phenomenological findings demonstrate that the six interconnected ritual stages collectively sustain the continuity of the tradition through strong adherence to customary values, collective participation, and the integration of indigenous practices with contemporary religious and social contexts. These adaptive processes enable Margondang to preserve its essential cultural values while remaining relevant amid ongoing social transformation.

This study addresses the identified research gap by providing an integrated phenomenological explanation of how ritual implementation, socio-cultural sustainability, and perceived social implications interact within a single analytical framework. The findings contribute theoretically to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage, cultural resilience, and indigenous knowledge systems by demonstrating that the sustainability of customary institutions depends not only on preserving tradition but also on their capacity to negotiate cultural continuity through adaptive social practices. Future research is recommended to examine how the meanings and implementation of Margondang evolve across different Mandailing communities, particularly in relation to the changing roles of younger generations and the long-term sustainability of customary institutions in contemporary society.

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