



The Meaning of Panaek Bungkulan in Mandailing Customs and Culture: A Symbolic Study and Local Wisdom

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Abstract

Panaek bungkulan is a Mandailing customary practice associated with the raising of the roof ridge of a newly built house. Although previous research has documented its sequence and identified local-wisdom values, the symbolic meanings that connect the material elements, social actors, and customary stages have received less focused discussion. This study therefore examined the meaning of panaek bungkulan within Mandailing adat and cultural life, with particular attention to kinship, reciprocity, gratitude, responsibility, and the relationship between people, nature, and the divine. The study used an interpretive qualitative design based on documentary and literature analysis. The principal data source was the documented description of panaek bungkulan among Batak Angkola/Mandailing communities, complemented by recent studies of Mandailing customary communication, Daliha Na Tolu, local wisdom, and symbolic ritual practices in Indonesia. Data were coded into stages, objects, actors, actions, and cultural values, then interpreted through a symbolic and local-wisdom perspective. The analysis indicated that panaek bungkulan can be understood as a cultural text in which the raising of the roof ridge signifies the transition from construction to inhabitable social space; collective participation signifies kinship and mutual responsibility; and the accompanying natural materials signify hopes for continuity, welfare, fertility, and environmental awareness. The practice also reinforces the social organisation of Daliha Na Tolu and provides a medium through which cultural knowledge is transmitted across generations. The study contributes an interpretive account that moves beyond listing ritual stages or values by explaining how those elements form an integrated meaning system. Its findings support the preservation and contextual teaching of Mandailing cultural heritage without separating customary knowledge from the social relationships in which it is practised.

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1. Pendahuluan

Panaek bungkulan is a customary practice found in the cultural life of Batak Angkola/Mandailing communities and is associated with the construction of a house. In its most visible form, the practice concerns the raising of the bungkulan, or roof ridge, but its social significance extends beyond a technical stage of building. A house in a customary community is not simply a physical structure. It is also a social space in which kinship, responsibility, hospitality, religious life, and collective identity are organised. For that reason, the raising of a roof ridge can become a cultural event involving relatives, customary actors, symbolic objects, food, and collective work.

Recent research has documented panaek bungkulan as a form of local wisdom. Gultom et al. (2024) identified a sequence that includes consultation among relatives, inviting the parties of Dalihan Na Tolu, laying the first stone, applying coconut milk to the roof ridge, covering the ridge with abit godang, raising the wooden ridge, raising banana, sugar cane, coconut, and kundur, planting a banana tree, and eating together. The same study identified eleven local-wisdom values, including politeness, social solidarity, commitment, gratitude, hard work, discipline, cultural preservation and creativity, and environmental concern. These findings establish that panaek bungkulan is a complex cultural practice rather than a single ceremonial action.

However, documenting stages and listing values does not fully answer a more interpretive question: what do the stages and objects mean as a coherent cultural system? A ritual may contain meanings that are distributed across actions, relationships, objects, speech, and spatial arrangements. Studies of Mandailing culture show that customary communication and social relationships are closely connected to cultural position and kinship. Tutar, for example, places speakers within a network of social roles and Dalihan Na Tolu relationships, while markobar functions as an oral form through which cultural knowledge and social values are articulated (Zulkarnain et al., 2023; Parinduri et al., 2024). The meaning of panaek bungkulan therefore needs to be read in relation to the social system that gives the ritual its cultural intelligibility.

Dalihan Na Tolu is particularly relevant to this interpretation. Contemporary studies describe it as a framework for social relationships among mora, kahanggi, and anak boru, with values such as affection, respect, solidarity, responsibility, and harmony (Rambe & Alfikri, 2022; Rohman et al., 2024). Research on Mandailing traditional communication likewise indicates that customary language and social roles help maintain harmony and appropriate interpersonal conduct (Zulkarnain et al., 2023). In this context, participation in panaek bungkulan can be understood as an enactment of social relationships rather than merely attendance at a ceremony.

Another relevant dimension is the relationship between customary practice and religious meaning. Research on Mandailing and Angkola communities has shown that adat practices have historically interacted with Islamic values, with some customary symbols and ritual meanings being reinterpreted within an Islamic worldview. Contemporary studies continue to find that local wisdom can support social harmony, moral formation, and religious coexistence when it is practised as a living social system (Harahap et al., 2024; Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). This is important for interpreting panaek bungkulan because symbolic meaning should not be assumed to be static or identical across generations.

Studies of other Indonesian rituals provide a useful comparative frame. Research on the Dukutan ceremony, for instance, demonstrates that ritual actions, offerings, and equipment can communicate meanings related to gratitude, social harmony, human–nature relations, and environmental conservation (Anindyarini et al., 2024). Research on the Bakti Purnamasari ceremony similarly shows that ritual symbolism can carry ethical and social values beyond the literal actions performed (Hapidzin et al., 2024). Such studies support an interpretive approach in which ritual objects are analysed as signs whose meanings emerge from cultural context rather than as isolated objects.

Despite these developments, a specific interpretive account of the meaning of panaek bungkulan remains limited. The available study has provided important descriptive evidence concerning stages and local-wisdom values, but there is room to examine how those elements form a coherent cultural narrative about building a home, establishing social belonging, expressing gratitude, and transmitting knowledge. The present study addresses this gap by asking: (1) what meanings are represented by the stages and symbolic elements of panaek bungkulan; (2) how are those meanings connected to Dalihan Na Tolu and Mandailing social relationships; and (3) what implications does the practice have for cultural continuity?

The objective of this study was therefore to interpret the meaning of panaek bungkulan as an integrated customary practice. The study is significant because it shifts the discussion from the question of what people do to the question of how the practice communicates cultural values. Such an interpretation can support cultural documentation, local-language and cultural education, and community-based preservation while recognising that customary practices may change in response to social and religious contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Panaek Bungkulan as Mandailing Local Wisdom

Local wisdom can be understood as knowledge, values, practices, and strategies developed and transmitted by a community in response to its social and environmental conditions. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that local wisdom is not simply a collection of old customs; it may function as a cultural resource for identity, social cooperation, environmental management, and intergenerational learning (Khoiriyah et al., 2025; Taniady et al., 2025; Alfari & Maharani, 2026). Its persistence depends on whether community members continue to recognise meaning in the practice and transmit it in changing social conditions.

In Mandailing communities, local wisdom is strongly associated with systems of kinship, oral tradition, customary communication, and collective work. Markobar and tutur illustrate how cultural knowledge is transmitted through language and social interaction (Zulkarnain et al., 2023; Zulkarnain et al., 2021; Parinduri et al., 2024). Marsialapari similarly demonstrates the importance of collective labour and reciprocity in Mandailing social life (Rohman & Siregar, 2024). These practices indicate that Mandailing local wisdom is relational: meaning is created through interaction between people rather than contained solely in an object or ceremony.

Gultom et al. (2024) provide the most direct documentation for panaek bungkulan. Their research identifies a sequence of collective preparation, customary participation, symbolic treatment of the roof ridge, the raising of the ridge, the placement of natural materials, planting, and communal eating. Their findings also identify eleven local-wisdom values. The present study uses this documented sequence as its principal empirical basis but focuses on interpreting the cultural meanings that connect the sequence into a whole.

2.2 Symbol, Ritual, and Cultural Meaning

Anthropological approaches to ritual regard symbolic actions as forms of cultural communication. A ritual does not communicate through words alone; objects, bodily actions, spatial arrangements, timing, and participation may all function as signs. In interpretive anthropology, cultural practices are read as webs of meaning that must be understood in relation to the social world in which they occur. Recent Indonesian studies of ritual symbolism similarly show that meanings can concern gratitude, social cohesion, environmental relationships, morality, and religious orientation (Rosidah et al., 2023; Anindyarini et al., 2024; Hapidzin et al., 2024).

Meaning is also produced through repetition and transmission. A cultural practice becomes a heritage resource when successive generations understand not only how to perform it but why it is performed. Research on cultural inheritance has shown that local rituals can serve as vehicles for transferring ethical, social, religious, and educational values (Arafah et al., 2023; Khoiriyah et al., 2025). The challenge for cultural preservation is therefore not merely to reproduce the external form of a ceremony, but to preserve its interpretive context.

For panaek bungkulan, a symbolic approach is useful because the ritual brings together the house, roof ridge, natural materials, kinship groups, collective labour, and communal food. Each element can be examined at two levels: its immediate practical function and its cultural significance. This distinction prevents the analysis from assuming that every object has a single fixed meaning. Instead, meanings are treated as culturally situated interpretations grounded in documented values, customary relationships, and comparative literature.

2.3 Dalihan Na Tolu, Kinship, and Cultural Continuity

Dalihan Na Tolu is a central framework for understanding social relationships in Mandailing and related Batak communities. The system is commonly expressed through the relational positions of mora, kahanggi, and anak boru. Contemporary research has shown that these positions are not simply genealogical categories; they organise expectations of respect, affection, assistance, communication, and decision-making (Rambe & Alfikri, 2022; Rohman et al., 2024). Research also indicates that Dalihan Na

Tolu can operate as a mechanism for social cohesion and conflict resolution in North Sumatra (Harahap et al., 2023; Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024).

Mandailing customary communication reinforces these relationships. Tutar places individuals within an appropriate kinship and interactional position, while markobar provides a structured communicative space in customary events (Zulkarnain et al., 2023; Parinduri et al., 2024; Nasution, 2025). The language of adat therefore works together with customary action. A ceremonial activity such as panaek bungkulan should consequently be interpreted as part of a broader system in which people know who should participate, how they should relate, and what forms of respect and cooperation are expected.

Cultural continuity is not equivalent to unchanged repetition. Studies of Mandailing oral traditions have documented shifts in customary practices and forms of transmission, especially under modernization and changing communication patterns (Lubis et al., 2024; Surip et al., 2024). This makes interpretation important: when younger generations understand the cultural rationale of a practice, preservation can occur through informed adaptation rather than through mechanical reproduction.

3. Metode

This study employed an interpretive qualitative design using documentary and literature analysis. The approach was selected because the research question concerned cultural meaning rather than measurement of frequency or causal relationships. The principal documentary source was the published study by Gultom et al. (2024), which specifically documented panaek bungkulan among Batak Angkola/Mandailing communities. Recent studies on Mandailing culture and Indonesian ritual symbolism were used as contextual and comparative sources.

Data were selected purposively according to three criteria: (1) direct relevance to panaek bungkulan or Mandailing customary practice; (2) publication in a scholarly journal or authoritative academic source; and (3) usefulness for interpreting kinship, symbolic action, local wisdom, cultural transmission, or religious-cultural relations. The analysis focused on the stages of panaek bungkulan, the objects and materials involved, the social actors, the collective actions, and the local-wisdom values reported in the source literature. Data analysis followed four interpretive steps. First, the documented stages were extracted and organised chronologically. Second, each stage was coded according to action, object, actor, and social function. Penulis Ketiga, codes were grouped into broader themes: transition and home-making, kinship and reciprocity, gratitude and hope, labour and responsibility, and cultural-environmental continuity. Fourth, the themes were interpreted in relation to Dalihan Na Tolu, Mandailing customary communication, and comparative research on symbolic rituals. The analysis deliberately distinguished source-reported findings from the researchers' interpretive synthesis.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation. The direct panaek bungkulan study was compared with independent studies of Mandailing social organisation, oral tradition, language, local wisdom, and ritual symbolism. The principal limitation is that this study did not conduct new field interviews or participant observation. Consequently, the meanings proposed here should be understood as a document-based interpretive synthesis rather than as a claim that all Mandailing communities attach exactly the same meanings to every object or stage. Variation by village, family, religious orientation, and generation remains possible.

4. Result

4.1 Stages and Symbolic Elements of Panaek Bungkulan

The documentary evidence showed that panaek bungkulan consisted of a connected sequence rather than an isolated act of lifting the roof ridge. The sequence began with social preparation and ended with communal eating. This structure is important because it indicates that the construction of a house was simultaneously treated as a social and cultural process. Table 1 summarises the principal stages documented by Gultom et al. (2024) and the interpretive meaning developed in this study.

Table 1. Documented stages of panaek bungkulan and their interpretive meanings.

Stage / element	Documented cultural function	Interpretive meaning
Musyawaharah kaum kerabat	Collective consultation before the activity	Legitimacy, shared decision-making, and collective responsibility
Inviting mora, kahanggi, and anak boru	Involving Dalihan Na Tolu	Recognition of kinship and reciprocal social obligations
Peletakan batu pertama	Beginning the house construction process	Foundation, continuity, and commitment to the new household
Applying coconut milk to the bungkulan	Ritual treatment of the roof ridge	Purification/auspiciousness interpreted as a wish for a good beginning
Covering the ridge with abit godang	Use of a culturally meaningful textile	Protection, honour, and continuity of cultural identity
Raising the wooden bungkulan	Central ceremonial action	Completion of a major transition from building to inhabitable home
Raising banana	Placement of a productive plant	Growth, continuity, and hope for household wellbeing
Raising sugar cane	Placement of a plant associated with sweetness	Hope for a harmonious and pleasant household life

Raising coconut	Placement of a useful perennial plant	Sustenance, resilience, and long-term continuity
Raising kundur	Placement of a food plant	Provision, sufficiency, and everyday livelihood
Planting banana and communal eating	Closing collective actions	Regeneration, reciprocity, gratitude, and social solidarity

Table 1. Documented stages of panaek bungkulan and their interpretive meanings.

The table indicates that the ritual's meaning was distributed across the sequence. The initial consultation established a social foundation, while the raising of the bungkulan marked a material and symbolic transition. The plants and other materials extended the meaning of the ceremony from the structure of the house to the anticipated life of its occupants. The final communal meal brought the process back to social relations, showing that the house was not understood only as a physical achievement but as a place embedded in collective life.

4.2 Meaning of Panaek Bungkulan as a Cultural Transition

The first major meaning identified was transition. The bungkulan is physically the highest structural component of the roof, and its raising represents a visible point in the completion of the house. At the cultural level, this action can be interpreted as marking the movement from an unfinished building toward a socially recognised home. The meaning is therefore not limited to construction technology. It concerns the establishment of a new domestic space in which family life will take place.

The transition is reinforced by the order of the ceremony. Consultation precedes the central action, and communal eating follows it. The sequence creates a narrative: people gather, recognise their relationships, participate in the work, raise the central structure, and then share food. This ordering makes the house a product of social cooperation as much as individual ownership. Such a reading is consistent with studies showing that Mandailing cultural practices often connect material activities with kinship and collective responsibility (Rohman & Siregar, 2024; Rohman et al., 2024).

The meaning of transition should nevertheless be treated as an interpretive synthesis rather than as a universal theological claim. The available documentation establishes the stages and values of panaek bungkulan, but it does not demonstrate that every participant explicitly articulates the same symbolic explanation. The present interpretation therefore connects documented practice with the broader symbolic logic of local wisdom.

4.3 Meaning of Kinship, Reciprocity, and Dalihan Na Tolu

The second major meaning concerned kinship. The invitation of mora, kahanggi, and anak boru places panaek bungkulan within the relational structure of Dalihan Na Tolu. Participation is not merely a matter of increasing the number of people at an event. It recognises culturally defined relationships and activates reciprocal responsibilities. This interpretation is supported by research describing Dalihan Na Tolu as a framework that organises affection, respect, solidarity, and decision-making (Rambe & Alfikri, 2022; Rohman et al., 2024).

The presence of kinship actors also helps explain why the ritual can be understood as a public recognition of the household. A house becomes socially meaningful when the relevant social network acknowledges and participates in its establishment. This corresponds with the broader function of Mandailing customary communication. Tutur places people within kinship positions, while markobar provides formalised oral communication in customary events (Zulkarnain et al., 2023; Parinduri et al., 2024). Panaek bungkulan adds a material dimension to the same relational system.

Reciprocity is also visible in the collective labour surrounding the ceremony. The documented values of social solidarity, commitment, hard work, and discipline indicate that the practice constructs the new household through shared contribution rather than isolated individual action (Gultom et al., 2024). This meaning parallels marsialapari, in which collective work functions as an expression of cooperation and social cohesion (Rohman & Siregar, 2024). Panaek bungkulan can thus be interpreted as a cultural reminder that domestic wellbeing is embedded in community relations.

4.4 Meaning of Natural Materials: Continuity, Provision, and Hope

The third meaning emerged from the use of plants and natural materials. Banana, sugar cane, coconut, and kundur are not random additions to the ceremony because their inclusion extends the symbolic field from the roof of the house to the natural world and everyday livelihood. Gultom et al. (2024) documented these materials as parts of the sequence and connected the practice to values including gratitude, environmental concern, and cultural preservation. The present analysis interprets them as material signs of continuity and household provision.

Banana can be read as a sign of growth and regeneration because the practice includes both raising banana and planting a banana tree. The interpretive emphasis is therefore on continuity: the household is expected not simply to exist at the moment the house is completed but to develop and reproduce social life. Sugar cane may be interpreted as a metaphor of sweetness and harmonious relations, while coconut represents durability and sustained usefulness. Kundur, as a food plant, can be read in relation to sufficiency and everyday provision. These interpretations are presented as contextual symbolic readings rather than fixed lexical definitions.

This interpretation is comparable to broader studies of Indonesian ritual symbolism in which food, plants, vessels, textiles, and other objects become signs of gratitude, wellbeing, social harmony, and relationships with nature (Anindyarini et al., 2024; Rosidah et al., 2023; Hapidzin et al., 2024). The significance of the materials in panaek bungkulan lies precisely in their ability to connect the built environment with ecological and livelihood concerns.

The environmental dimension is especially relevant to contemporary cultural preservation. Local wisdom research increasingly treats cultural practices as repositories of knowledge about relationships between people and their surroundings (Khoiriyah et al., 2025; Alfariz & Maharani, 2026). In panaek bungkulan, the presence of living plants makes the house-building ceremony symbolically open toward the natural environment rather than closed within the architecture of the house.

4.5 Meaning of Gratitude, Responsibility, and Cultural Continuity

The fourth meaning concerned gratitude and responsibility. The documented values of gratitude, commitment, hard work, discipline, and social solidarity indicate that the ceremony recognises both the achievement of constructing a house and the responsibilities associated with maintaining it (Gultom et al., 2024). The communal meal at the end of the sequence is particularly significant because it transforms labour into social celebration and reinforces relationships among participants.

Gratitude in this context should not be reduced to a private emotional response. It is expressed publicly through collective participation and customary recognition. Studies of Mandailing culture similarly show that customary practices can integrate social and religious values, particularly through kinship institutions and oral communication (Harahap et al., 2024; Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). The meaning of the ceremony is therefore partly produced by the community's shared acknowledgement of a new stage of life.

Cultural continuity forms the fifth major meaning. A ceremony survives when knowledge of its actions, objects, language, and reasons for participation is transferred. Research on Mandailing language revitalisation and oral traditions has highlighted the importance of preserving not only linguistic forms but the cultural knowledge embedded in them (Surip et al., 2024; Parinduri et al., 2024). Panaek bungkulan provides a comparable case: if the practice is preserved only as a sequence of physical actions, its cultural meaning may become progressively opaque.

The contemporary challenge is therefore not simply whether panaek bungkulan continues to be performed. It is whether younger generations understand the relationships and values that the practice communicates. Studies of local wisdom transmission show that cultural heritage can remain relevant when it is connected to education, identity, and contemporary social needs (Arafah et al., 2023; Khoiriyah et al., 2025).

5. Discussion

The findings position panaek bungkulan as a multidimensional cultural text. Its central action, the raising of the roof ridge, acquires meaning from the sequence of consultation, kinship participation, symbolic treatment of materials, collective labour, and communal eating. This interpretation extends the descriptive findings of Gultom et al. (2024) by showing that the eleven local-wisdom values can be organised into a smaller number of interconnected meanings: transition, kinship, reciprocity, provision, gratitude, responsibility, and cultural continuity.

The first contribution concerns the relationship between material construction and social construction. The physical house is constructed through wood and other materials, but the culturally recognised home is constructed through social participation. This distinction helps explain why the participation of Dalihan Na Tolu is important. Contemporary research describes Dalihan Na Tolu as a living relational system that supports respect, affection, social cohesion, and decision-making (Rambe & Alfikri, 2022; Rohman et al., 2024). Panaek bungkulan can consequently be viewed as one arena in which that relational system is enacted.

The second contribution concerns symbolic materiality. The plants and textile elements used in the ceremony connect architecture with hopes for the future. Similar patterns have been found in Indonesian ritual studies, where material objects communicate ideas about wellbeing, gratitude, nature, and social harmony (Rosidah et al., 2023; Anindyarini et al., 2024). The important point is not that banana, sugar cane, coconut, or kundur possess universally fixed meanings, but that their cultural significance emerges from the way the community places them within the ritual sequence.

The third contribution concerns the relationship between local wisdom and cultural identity. Studies of Mandailing markobar and tutur show that language and customary interaction maintain social identity by teaching people how to position themselves in relation to others (Zulkarnain et al., 2023; Parinduri et al., 2024). Panaek bungkulan complements this linguistic dimension with embodied and material action. It teaches through participation: people learn who should be present, what should be done, how collective labour is organised, and how a new household is recognised by the community.

The fourth contribution concerns continuity under social change. Recent research on Mandailing oral tradition and language indicates that cultural practices can experience shifts in form and transmission (Lubis et al., 2024; Surip et al., 2024). Such change should not automatically be interpreted as cultural disappearance. Instead, the critical issue is whether the cultural logic remains intelligible. A practice can adapt in form while retaining its central values if the community continues to transmit the meanings that justify it.

The relationship between adat and Islam also requires careful treatment. Existing scholarship has documented interaction between Mandailing customary structures and Islamic values, including processes through which older ritual interpretations have been

recontextualised within Muslim practice. Contemporary research in Mandailing Natal similarly finds that local wisdom can contribute to social and religious harmony (Harahap et al., 2024; Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). The present study therefore does not assign a single religious interpretation to panaek bungkulan. Instead, it recognises that contemporary participants may understand the ceremony through an integrated adat-religious framework, with meanings shaped by local history and current belief.

The findings also have implications for cultural education. If panaek bungkulan is introduced in schools or universities, teaching should move beyond naming the objects or memorising the stages. Learners can be asked to analyse how each stage relates to kinship, cooperation, environmental awareness, and household responsibility. Such an approach is consistent with current scholarship that treats local wisdom as a resource for culturally grounded learning and identity formation (Khoiriyah et al., 2025; Taniady et al., 2025). Digital documentation can also help preserve oral explanations, vocabulary, photographs, and narratives associated with the ceremony, provided that community ownership and cultural context are respected.

At the same time, the study has a methodological limitation. Because the analysis was documentary, it cannot determine the degree to which the proposed meanings are shared by all Mandailing communities. Villages and families may differ in terminology, sequence, materials, and interpretation. Future ethnographic research should therefore conduct participant observation and interviews with traditional leaders, household builders, women and men involved in the ceremony, younger participants, and religious figures. Such research could compare villages and examine whether symbolic meanings are changing over time.

Overall, the discussion suggests that panaek bungkulan should be preserved as a living cultural practice rather than as a museum-like sequence. Its cultural significance lies in the interaction of material symbols, kinship, collective labour, customary communication, and aspirations for the future. This integrated interpretation adds analytical depth to previous documentation and provides a basis for further research into Mandailing house-building traditions.

6. Conclusion

This study interpreted panaek bungkulan as a culturally meaningful practice in Mandailing adat rather than as a technical stage of house construction alone. The analysis showed five interconnected meanings: transition from an unfinished structure to a socially recognised home; affirmation of Dalihan Na Tolu kinship and reciprocal responsibility; expression of hopes for continuity and household provision through natural materials; public gratitude and responsibility through collective work and communal eating; and transmission of cultural identity across generations.

The study's main contribution is an interpretive synthesis that connects the documented stages and local-wisdom values of panaek bungkulan into a coherent meaning system. The findings suggest that cultural preservation should maintain both the practice and the knowledge that explains why it is performed. Future ethnographic research is needed to examine variation among Mandailing communities and changes in interpretation across generations.

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