



Gordang Sambilan as a Representation of Mandailing Art Preservation

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Abstract

This literature review examined Gordang Sambilan as a cultural representation through which Mandailing traditional art has been maintained, transmitted, and reinterpreted across generations. The study addressed a gap in existing scholarship, which has commonly discussed Gordang Sambilan separately as a ritual accompaniment, musical ensemble, historical artefact, or object of cultural protection, while less attention has been given to its combined role as a medium of cultural continuity. A qualitative literature review was conducted by purposively selecting recent journal articles, relevant earlier studies, Indonesian cultural policy sources, and UNESCO documents concerning intangible cultural heritage. The selected literature was analysed thematically around cultural identity, ritual and social function, intergenerational transmission, institutional support, transformation, and digital preservation. The review found that Gordang Sambilan represented Mandailing identity not merely through its distinctive nine-drum ensemble, but through its embeddedness in adat, communal relationships, ceremonial practice, musical knowledge, and collective memory. The literature also showed that preservation was strongest when communities, adat institutions, cultural groups, educational institutions, and government agencies shared responsibility for transmission. At the same time, modernisation, declining youth interest, functional shifts, and limited documentation created risks for continuity. The study therefore interpreted preservation as a dynamic process rather than the freezing of an unchanged tradition. Its implication was that sustainable preservation required transmission, contextual education, responsible innovation, documentation, and digital dissemination while retaining community authority over cultural meaning.

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1. Introduction

Gordang Sambilan occupies a distinctive position in the cultural life of the Mandailing people of North Sumatra. The ensemble is not simply a collection of percussion instruments; it is associated with adat, ceremonial practice, collective memory, social relationships, and the historical self-understanding of Mandailing communities. Government cultural documentation describes Gordang Sambilan as one of the cultural elements of Mandailing Natal and as a traditional musical heritage transmitted across generations. Its significance therefore extends beyond musical sound to the social circumstances in which the music is performed and interpreted.

The literature indicates that the position of Gordang Sambilan has changed over time. Earlier functions were closely connected with customary and ritual contexts, while contemporary performances increasingly appear in cultural festivals, public events, educational settings, tourism, and other forms of cultural presentation. Studies of Mandailing communities have documented both continuity and change: the instrument remains recognisable as a marker of Mandailing identity, yet its performance context, repertoire, aesthetic presentation, and relationship with modern music have been transformed. This duality makes Gordang Sambilan particularly relevant for examining cultural preservation as a living process rather than as a simple attempt to reproduce the past.

Previous studies have addressed important but relatively separate dimensions of Gordang Sambilan. Historical research has traced its development and use in Mandailing Natal; ethnomusicological research has examined its function in Horja Godang and other ceremonial contexts; preservation studies have discussed government and community initiatives; and more recent studies have examined transformation, education, legal protection, and digital opportunities. For example, Alwiyah and Rusdi (2021) identified community and government efforts such as routine training, festivals, social media dissemination, facilities, and local-content education. Sinulingga et al. (2024) emphasised the ensemble's symbolic, social, and cultural functions in Horja Godang, while Niari and Zebua (2025) described its transformation from predominantly sacred and ritual functions towards wider cultural performance and entertainment contexts.

The research gap lies in connecting these findings into a single interpretation of Gordang Sambilan as a representation of cultural preservation. Preservation is frequently reduced to the continued existence of the physical instrument or to the frequency of performances. Such a view is insufficient for intangible cultural heritage because the continuity of a tradition depends on knowledge, skills, meanings, social institutions, spaces of transmission, and the participation of its bearers. UNESCO emphasises that safeguarding intangible heritage involves maintaining its viability and transmission across

generations, with communities playing an active role in safeguarding processes. This perspective is particularly relevant to Gordang Sambilan because its identity is reproduced through practice, learning, ceremony, and social recognition rather than through the instrument alone.

This article therefore asks: in what ways does Gordang Sambilan represent the preservation of Mandailing traditional art, what factors support or challenge that preservation, and how can transformation and digitalisation be understood without reducing preservation to cultural standardisation? The objective is to synthesise the relevant literature and formulate an analytical interpretation of Gordang Sambilan as a living representation of Mandailing cultural continuity. The study is significant because it places musical practice, community identity, institutional support, intergenerational transmission, and contemporary adaptation within one framework. Such an approach can support future empirical research and provide a conceptual basis for cultural education and preservation programmes in Mandailing communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gordang Sambilan, Cultural Identity, and Mandailing Social Life

Cultural identity is formed and reproduced through symbols, practices, narratives, and social interactions through which a community recognises itself. In the context of traditional arts, music can function as a particularly powerful identity marker because it is simultaneously audible, performative, communal, and tied to specific social occasions. Research on Indonesian traditional music has shown that local cultural values can deepen cultural identity when they are incorporated into learning and performance processes. Hidayat et al. (2024), for example, found that local cultural values have an important relationship with traditional music learning, particularly when younger learners encounter music not merely as technical material but as part of a cultural environment.

For Mandailing communities, Gordang Sambilan is closely connected with adat and ceremonial life. Majid et al. (2013) identified functions including emotional expression, entertainment, symbolic representation, communication, and ethnic identity in Horja Godang. More recent research has similarly emphasised its symbolic and communal dimensions. Sinulingga et al. (2024) reported that Gordang Sambilan in Horja Godang functions beyond entertainment, contributing to solidarity and the affirmation of Mandailing cultural identity. These findings indicate that the ensemble represents identity through social use rather than through an isolated musical form.

The concept of representation is therefore useful because Gordang Sambilan does not merely reflect Mandailing identity; its performance actively produces a public and communal recognition of that identity. The ensemble brings together instruments, players, repertoire, ceremonial settings, audience participation, customary rules, and memories of

previous generations. When these elements are activated together, the performance becomes a cultural statement: it communicates who the community is, what it values, and which traditions it considers worth transmitting.

2.2 Preservation as Intergenerational Transmission

The contemporary concept of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage places emphasis on transmission rather than the static protection of cultural objects. UNESCO states that intangible heritage is continually recreated by its bearers and that its viability depends on the transmission of specialised knowledge and skills from person to person and from generation to generation. The 2003 Convention also stresses community participation, education, awareness raising, non-formal transmission, and capacity building. This framework is important for Gordang Sambilan because the preservation of the ensemble depends on musicians who know how to play, cultural figures who understand customary contexts, instrument makers who maintain technical knowledge, and younger generations who are willing and able to learn.

Research on Gordang Sambilan supports this transmission perspective. Alwiyah and Rusdi (2021) documented training programmes, introduction of Mandailing cultural values to younger people, festivals, social media promotion, facilities, and local-content education as preservation strategies. Gajah et al. (2022) also demonstrated the role of the Badan Pemangku Adat Mandailing Julu in developing Gordang Sambilan. These studies show that preservation is not undertaken by musicians alone. It involves cultural institutions and public authorities that create opportunities for learning, performance, recognition, and continuity.

The challenge is that transmission can weaken when intergenerational contact declines or when younger people perceive traditional arts as less relevant than contemporary cultural forms. UNESCO identifies migration, urbanisation, formal systems that devalue traditional knowledge, and intrusive mass media as possible threats to transmission. Research on other Indonesian traditional arts reaches comparable conclusions: preservation becomes more sustainable when younger generations participate actively and when traditional art is given meaningful spaces within contemporary social life. Cross-generational participation in ludruk, for instance, has been associated with maintaining performance continuity and increasing younger audiences' interest (Adiyani et al., 2024).

2.3 Transformation, Innovation, and Digital Preservation

Preservation does not necessarily mean retaining every historical feature in exactly the same form. UNESCO explicitly distinguishes safeguarding from freezing heritage in an unchanging state. Because intangible heritage is continually recreated, transmission can involve adaptation as long as the communities concerned remain active in defining and

maintaining the practice. This principle is relevant to Gordang Sambilan, whose contemporary performance contexts differ from earlier ritual settings.

Niari and Zebua (2025) identified changes in the function and aesthetic values of Gordang Sambilan, including movement from sacred ritual contexts towards cultural performance and entertainment and the incorporation of modern musical elements. Salsabila et al. (2024) likewise reported that Gordang Sambilan in Rabi Jonggor had undergone transformation to respond to changing times, although interest in it remained lower than interest in modern instruments such as keyboard. These findings suggest that change can be a mechanism of survival, but it can also create tension when adaptation weakens the cultural meanings that distinguish the tradition.

Digitalisation introduces another dimension. Studies of Indonesian cultural heritage show that digital media can broaden access, create archives, increase visibility, and engage younger audiences. Irfaniah (2023) demonstrated the role of community archives in maintaining collective memory and identity, while Sari and Ridwan (2025) showed how digital platforms can support the preservation and dissemination of oral cultural material. Rafianti et al. (2026) further emphasised that digital preservation should be collaborative and culturally grounded because digitalisation also raises concerns about authenticity, intellectual property, technical capacity, and governance. For Gordang Sambilan, digitalisation should therefore be understood as a complementary preservation channel rather than a substitute for community-based transmission.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative literature review design. It did not claim new field observations or interviews; instead, it synthesised published research and authoritative cultural documents to interpret Gordang Sambilan as a representation of Mandailing art preservation. This design was selected because the research question concerned patterns across existing studies, particularly the relationship among cultural identity, function, transmission, institutional support, transformation, and digital preservation.

The literature was selected purposively. Priority was given to studies published from 2019 to 2026 that directly addressed Gordang Sambilan, Mandailing cultural practices, traditional-art preservation, cultural identity, youth transmission, digital preservation, or traditional cultural expressions in Indonesia. Earlier publications were retained when they provided foundational descriptions of Gordang Sambilan's ceremonial and social functions. UNESCO's 2003 Convention and related safeguarding guidance were used as normative references for interpreting preservation as transmission and community participation. The review corpus was complemented by Indonesian government cultural documentation and legal scholarship concerning traditional cultural expressions.

Analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis. First, statements concerning the historical and social position of Gordang Sambilan were extracted. Second, the literature was grouped into themes of identity and representation, ritual and social function, intergenerational transmission, institutional participation, transformation and innovation, and digital preservation. Third, similarities and tensions among the studies were compared. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the safeguarding principles of community participation, transmission, education, documentation, and continuity. The main limitation of this method is that the conclusions depend on the scope and quality of available publications and cannot substitute for site-specific ethnographic research with musicians, adat leaders, young people, audiences, and cultural institutions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Gordang Sambilan as a Multilayered Representation of Mandailing Identity

The literature synthesis showed that Gordang Sambilan represented Mandailing cultural identity through at least five interconnected dimensions: musical form, ceremonial function, social participation, cultural memory, and public cultural visibility. Its nine-drum configuration makes the ensemble recognisable, but recognisability alone does not explain its cultural significance. The meaning of the ensemble emerges when the instruments are played by community members within culturally meaningful occasions and according to knowledge that has been transmitted across generations.

The first dimension is material and musical. Gordang Sambilan consists of nine drums with different sizes and sound characteristics, supported in performance by other instruments such as ogung, mongmongan, and sarune. Research on its presentation and organology demonstrates that the ensemble is a coordinated musical system rather than a single instrument. Maya et al. (2024) further showed that the physical form of the drums can be studied as a source of ethnomathematical knowledge, indicating that cultural knowledge is embedded even in the material construction of the instruments.

The second dimension is ceremonial. In Horja Godang, Gordang Sambilan has been documented as part of the sequence of customary events, including opening, accompaniment, welcoming, and closing functions. This ceremonial embedding gives the music a social purpose and places performance within a wider network of adat relationships. Majid et al. (2013) and Sinulingga et al. (2024) both indicate that its significance is connected to the ceremony rather than merely to the acoustic qualities of the ensemble.

The third dimension is social participation. A performance requires cooperation among musicians and other participants. The ensemble therefore becomes a practical space for learning discipline, coordination, responsibility, and communal participation. Research on the meaning of Gordang Sambilan performance has identified social education, harmony, togetherness, cooperation, and discipline as values communicated

through performance (Suprianto & Salam, 2019). In this sense, preservation occurs not only when a repertoire is repeated but when social relations and values associated with the repertoire are enacted.

The fourth dimension is cultural memory. Historical studies have documented changes in materials, performance contexts, and uses while also noting continuity in the identity and sound of the ensemble. Nasution et al. (2021) found that the instrument developed in construction and materials but retained its characteristic meaning and sound. This suggests that continuity can coexist with material and contextual change. The preservation of Gordang Sambilan is therefore better understood as continuity of cultural reference and practice than as absolute material sameness.

The fifth dimension is public visibility. Contemporary performances at cultural events, festivals, educational programmes, and digital platforms allow Gordang Sambilan to function as a visible representation of Mandailing culture beyond the immediate community. Alwiyah and Rusdi (2021) identified festivals and social media as part of preservation efforts, while studies of other Indonesian traditional arts demonstrate that digital visibility can help reconnect younger audiences with local cultural forms. Public visibility becomes meaningful for preservation when it is accompanied by contextual explanation and active community participation.

Table 1. Dimensions of Gordang Sambilan as a Representation of Mandailing Art Preservation

Dimension	Evidence in the literature	Preservation meaning
Musical and material form	Nine-drum ensemble, supporting instruments, distinctive sound and construction.	Maintains recognisable artistic knowledge and technical skills.
Ceremonial function	Use in adat and Horja Godang and other cultural events.	Links music with customary practice and collective memory.
Social participation	Cooperation among musicians, cultural figures, audiences and community members.	Transfers values, skills, discipline and communal relationships.
Intergenerational transmission	Training, local-content education, cultural groups and adat institutions.	Ensures knowledge and performance skills reach younger generations.
Contemporary adaptation	Festivals, public performances, modern arrangements and digital dissemination.	Keeps the tradition socially visible while requiring attention to cultural integrity.

Source: Synthesised from the reviewed literature.

4.2 Preservation Through Ritual, Social Function, and Cultural Memory

The synthesis indicates that the strongest basis for preservation is the continued meaningful use of Gordang Sambilan. A tradition that is performed only as a museum-like display may remain visible but can lose the social environment that gives it meaning. By contrast, performance within adat, community celebrations, educational activities, and cultural events provides recurring occasions for knowledge to be enacted. In this sense, function is a mechanism of preservation.

Historical and ethnomusicological studies consistently connect Gordang Sambilan with ceremonial life. The ensemble has been associated with Horja Godang, where it supports the sequence and atmosphere of the ceremony. The literature also records older ritual functions and subsequent changes associated with the development of Islam and changing social conditions. Matondang et al. (2023) discussed the disappearance of the Udan Potir repertoire and connected this loss with changes in religious and social practice. This case is important because it demonstrates that preservation involves repertoire, meaning, and context, not only the survival of the instruments.

The transformation of religious and ritual functions should not automatically be interpreted as cultural failure. The literature instead suggests a more complex process of negotiation. When a ritual function becomes less common, the community may develop other contexts in which the musical form remains meaningful. Niari and Zebua (2025) observed this movement from sacred and ritual uses towards cultural performance and entertainment. The preservation question therefore becomes whether the new contexts continue to transmit cultural knowledge and identity, rather than whether they reproduce the historical context exactly.

This interpretation aligns with UNESCO's principle that safeguarding should support the continued evolution and interpretation of intangible heritage. Preservation can involve change if the community remains an active bearer of the tradition. For Gordang Sambilan, this means that cultural programmes should not only organise performances but also explain repertoire, customary contexts, musical roles, instrument making, and the values associated with the performance. Without contextual transmission, public performance may preserve the sound while weakening the knowledge system surrounding it.

4.3 Intergenerational Transmission and Institutional Support

The second major finding concerns the institutional ecology of preservation. Gordang Sambilan is more likely to remain sustainable when responsibility is distributed among families, musicians, adat institutions, schools, cultural communities, local government, and cultural organisations. Alwiyah and Rusdi (2021) documented multiple forms of government and community involvement, including training, facilities, festivals, social media, and local-content education. Gajah et al. (2022) demonstrated the role of the

Badan Pemangku Adat Mandailing Julu in developing Gordang Sambilan. These findings point to a shared rather than individual model of preservation.

Youth transmission is particularly important. Traditional arts face competition from contemporary entertainment and modern instruments, and previous studies have identified limited youth interest as a recurring problem. Sibuea's earlier study in Medan found that the presence of modern instruments and limited institutional support affected the existence of Gordang Sambilan. More recent research on Mandailing communities has likewise reported that keyboard and other modern forms can attract greater interest among younger people. Although these findings are location-specific and should not be generalised to all Mandailing communities, they highlight the importance of creating learning environments in which traditional music is accessible, relevant, and socially valued.

Education can connect cultural preservation with formal learning. The local-content approach reported by Alwiyah and Rusdi (2021) is important because it moves cultural knowledge from occasional performance into a structured learning environment. Hidayat et al. (2024) similarly showed that local cultural values can influence traditional music learning. For Gordang Sambilan, educational integration could involve practical playing, history, vocabulary, instrument construction, repertoire, adat contexts, and reflective discussion. The purpose would not be to turn adat into a simplified school subject, but to create an additional transmission channel while maintaining the authority of cultural bearers.

Cross-generational participation is also important because knowledge is often tacit. Adiyani et al. (2024) found that cross-generational participation supported the continuity of ludruk and increased younger generations' interest. Comparable principles can be applied conceptually to Gordang Sambilan: young players should learn directly from experienced musicians, while experienced practitioners can also learn how to communicate through contemporary media and educational formats. Preservation then becomes reciprocal rather than one-directional.

4.4 Transformation, Authenticity, and Cultural Integrity

The literature presents transformation as both a condition of continuity and a source of risk. Gordang Sambilan has changed in function, performance setting, materials, and aesthetic presentation. Nasution et al. (2021) noted changes in construction materials while identifying continuity in meaning and sound. Niari and Zebua (2025) documented shifts in function and aesthetic values. Salsabila et al. (2024) reported transformation in the Rabi Jonggor community while noting continuing interest in the tradition. These studies collectively suggest that the tradition is not static.

The analytical challenge is to distinguish adaptation from cultural displacement. Adaptation occurs when new forms or contexts help the community continue to recognise, practise, and transmit the tradition. Displacement occurs when the original cultural reference becomes secondary to external forms of consumption. For example, introducing Gordang Sambilan into festivals can increase visibility and create performance opportunities, but if performances are detached from the cultural knowledge that explains their significance, the tradition may become an aesthetic commodity rather than a living cultural practice.

This tension is also relevant to intellectual property and cultural ownership. Legal scholarship on Indonesian traditional cultural expressions has pointed to challenges involving communal rights, documentation, commercial use, and digital circulation. Setiyono et al. (2024) discussed obstacles to safeguarding traditional cultural expressions in the digital era, while Suratno and Faujura (2024) examined the effectiveness of legal instruments for protecting traditional cultural expressions. Simatupang et al. (2025) further situated Gordang Sambilan and Tortor within debates about historical traces, communal ownership, and state recognition.

Accordingly, cultural integrity should be approached as community-defined continuity rather than as an external test of whether a performance is 'pure'. The relevant questions are: who controls the cultural meaning, who decides which changes are acceptable, whether younger bearers can learn the underlying knowledge, whether community participation remains central, and whether external uses provide fair recognition and benefits. This approach allows Gordang Sambilan to develop without treating every innovation as a threat or every traditional form as automatically authentic.

4.5 Digitalisation as a Complementary Preservation Strategy

Digitalisation emerges from the literature as an opportunity to extend the reach of Gordang Sambilan preservation. Video documentation, digital archives, educational media, social networking, and online exhibitions can record performances that might otherwise be difficult to access. Research on Indonesian local performing arts has shown that digital platforms can increase visibility and enable local arts to reach audiences beyond their geographical communities. Zandra and Hidayatullah (2024), for example, examined trending TikTok videos of Indonesian local performing arts and highlighted the visibility opportunities associated with digital circulation.

However, digital visibility does not automatically produce cultural preservation. A short video can preserve an image or sound while omitting the social and historical context that makes the performance meaningful. Rafianti et al. (2026) identified authenticity, digital literacy, infrastructure, financial barriers, and intellectual property as issues that must be considered in digital preservation. Irfaniah (2023) also demonstrated the value of community archives as repositories of memory and identity. These findings imply that a

digital Gordang Sambilan archive should ideally include metadata about the performers, repertoire, occasion, location at an appropriate level of specificity, cultural meaning, customary permissions, and date of documentation.

Digitalisation should also respect community authority. Not every ceremonial performance or cultural explanation necessarily needs to be placed online. UNESCO emphasises access to intangible heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of heritage. Consequently, digitisation should include a permission protocol that distinguishes public educational material from restricted cultural knowledge. The objective is not to expose everything but to preserve and transmit what communities decide can be shared.

A culturally grounded digital strategy for Gordang Sambilan could therefore combine four components: community-led documentation, educational content for younger audiences, responsible public dissemination, and digital protection of cultural records. The strategy could include short explanatory videos, interviews with musicians and adat figures, demonstrations of instrument making, annotated performance recordings, bilingual descriptions, and a community-managed digital repository. Such a model would connect traditional transmission with contemporary communication without making digital media the sole basis of preservation.

4.6 An Integrated Model of Gordang Sambilan Preservation

The synthesis supports an integrated model in which Gordang Sambilan preservation is understood as a cycle rather than a single programme. The cycle begins with cultural recognition: communities identify the ensemble as part of Mandailing identity. Recognition is followed by transmission through practice, education, and mentoring. Continued practice creates opportunities for performance and social participation. Contemporary contexts then generate adaptation and innovation. Documentation and digital dissemination expand visibility and support memory. Finally, community evaluation determines which adaptations remain culturally meaningful and which should be reconsidered.

This model explains why preservation cannot be assigned exclusively to government institutions or artists. Government can provide policy, funding, infrastructure, educational support, and documentation systems, but cultural meaning remains grounded in communities and practitioners. Adat institutions can provide normative guidance, while musicians maintain embodied knowledge. Schools and universities can create learning pathways, researchers can document and analyse the tradition, and digital platforms can broaden access. The strongest preservation ecology is therefore collaborative.

The model also suggests that preservation indicators should be broader than the number of performances. Relevant indicators include the number and diversity of active learners, the continuity of master-apprentice relationships, the availability of instrument

makers, the retention of repertoire knowledge, the presence of contextual teaching, the participation of adat institutions, the quality of documentation, and the extent to which young people recognise the cultural significance of the ensemble. Such indicators would provide a more meaningful picture of cultural continuity than performance frequency alone.

5. Conclusion

This literature review concluded that Gordang Sambilan can be understood as a strong representation of Mandailing art preservation because its continuity involves musical form, ceremonial practice, social participation, cultural memory, and intergenerational transmission. Its significance does not reside only in the survival of nine drums but in the knowledge, relationships, values, and cultural contexts activated through their performance.

The reviewed studies also demonstrated that preservation is dynamic. Gordang Sambilan has experienced changes in function, aesthetic presentation, materials, performance contexts, and modes of dissemination. These changes do not necessarily eliminate its cultural identity; they can provide new pathways for continuity when the community remains an active bearer and decision-maker. The principal risks arise when transformation removes cultural context, weakens intergenerational transmission, reduces community authority, or turns the tradition primarily into an external commodity.

The contribution of this study is the formulation of a representation-based understanding of preservation: Gordang Sambilan represents cultural continuity when it simultaneously maintains recognisable artistic knowledge, remains embedded in meaningful social practice, is transmitted to younger generations, receives institutional support, and adapts responsibly to contemporary conditions. Future research should test this model through ethnographic studies involving musicians, adat leaders, instrument makers, teachers, young people, audiences, and cultural institutions in different Mandailing communities. Comparative studies between Mandailing Natal, urban Mandailing communities, and diaspora settings would also clarify how place and migration influence the continuity of Gordang Sambilan.

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