

Gondang Function at the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon Ritual Ceremony

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the function of gondang bolon music in the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual, an ancestral ceremony performed once every four years by descendants of Ompu Mamontang Laut Ambarita in Sihaporas Village, Pematang Sidamanik District, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation during the ritual performance held on 22-24 October 2022. Alan P. Merriam's theory of the uses and functions of music was applied to examine how gondang bolon mediates communication between the Toba Batak community and Mulajadi Nabolon, the supreme creator in their traditional belief system. The findings show that gondang bolon performs at least seven interrelated functions within the ritual: accompanying the ceremonial sequence, guiding the tortor dance and ritual movement, communicating symbolic and religious meaning, expressing emotion, reinforcing social interaction, strengthening communal solidarity, and sustaining cultural continuity across generations. Performed by an ensemble of five taganing, one gondang, three to four ogung, one hesek, and a sarune bolon, gondang bolon proves to be far more than musical accompaniment: each tone produced functions as an intermediary that carries offerings, prayers, and petitions from the community to the spiritual realm. Comparison with related studies of gondang sabangunan in other Toba Batak ritual contexts confirms that these functions recur across ceremonies while taking locally specific forms in Sihaporas. The study concludes that gondang bolon is central to both the sacredness and the social cohesion of the ritual, and recommends further ethnomusicological research on its musical structure and long-term sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Gondang Bolon
Patarias Debata
Ritual Music Function
Toba Batak
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INTRODUCTION

The Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual is an ancestral ceremony of the Toba Batak community in Sihaporas Village, approximately 28 kilometers from Pematang Siantar toward Tigaras, Simarjarunjung. According to local oral history, the ritual was initiated around 1800 by Ompu Mamontang Laut Ambarita (hereafter OMLA), who migrated from Ambarita on Samosir Island across Lake Toba to Sihaporas Village, Pematang Sidamanik District, Simalungun Regency. Now roughly two centuries old, the ritual has been passed down through OMLA's descendants to the present day, and remains, in the community's own account, the highest and most sacred of the ceremonies observed by the Sihaporas indigenous community (Masyarakat Adat Sihaporas).

In Toba Batak, patarias means to convey the outpouring of the heart, or prayer, while debata means God. Patarias debata therefore means to glorify God—in this context, Mulajadi Nabolon, the creator of the sky and everything in it, and the supreme deity in the traditional belief system of the Toba Batak people. Before Christianization, adat and religious practice among the Toba Batak were largely inseparable, and communal ritual functioned simultaneously as law, cosmology, and social order (Vergouwen, 1964). The Patarias Debata

Mulajadi Nabolon ritual, preserved among OMLA's descendants alongside their adoption of Christianity, is one of the few contexts in which this older devotional structure, and the gondang music inseparable from it, continues to be performed largely intact.

Oral accounts collected from the ritual leader indicate that OMLA originally instructed his descendants to hold the ceremony every year. Over time, however, environmental and economic conditions in Sihaporas changed: the surrounding forest, once a reliable source of the wild game and natural materials required for the ritual, became increasingly degraded, and the community's economic circumstances grew more constrained. In response, OMLA's descendants petitioned the ancestors for permission to hold the ritual once every four years instead, a request understood locally as an adaptive negotiation between fidelity to ancestral instruction and the practical demands of a changing environment. This history of adjustment is itself informative: it shows that even a ceremony considered maximally sacred is not practiced as an unchanging relic but is continuously renegotiated by the community that sustains it.

Despite these adjustments, and despite broader advances in science and technology, the Sihaporas community continues to perform the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual with full solemnity. The ritual observed for this research was held on 22-24 October 2022 and lasted three days and two nights, its date determined according to the traditional Toba Batak calendar system known as Parhalaan. Through the ritual, OMLA's descendants give thanks for blessings received over the preceding four years while praying for health, soil fertility, abundant harvests, and protection from danger.

Central to the ritual is the performance of gondang bolon, the traditional Toba Batak percussion-and-wind ensemble also referred to in the wider ethnomusicological literature as gondang sabangunan. The ensemble is typically played by six to seven pargonsi (musicians) and consists of sarune bolon, a double-reed wind instrument; taganing, a set of single-headed drums that carries the melody; gordang, a larger bass drum that anchors the rhythm; and ogung, a set of hanging gongs that produce interlocking rhythmic patterns (Hutajulu & Harahap, 2005; Purba, 2002b). In Toba Batak traditional philosophy, gondang music occupies a central position as the principal means of connecting humans with Mulajadi Nabolon: each tone produced during the ritual is understood as a medium that carries offerings, praise, and tonggo (supplication) from the community to the spiritual realm. This understanding of music as a mediating, quasi-linguistic force is consistent with the broader ethnomusicological view that music-making is inseparable from the social and cosmological order of the community that produces it (Blacking, 1973), and that ritual sound more generally functions as a technology for communicating with, and acting upon, an unseen world (Rappaport, 1968; Malinowski, 1954).

Gondang's centrality to Toba Batak ritual life has drawn sustained scholarly attention over the past half-century. Early organological and ethnographic work by Manik (1970) documented gondang as a vehicle for transmitting ancestral order ("Überlieferungsgestalt altvolkischer Lebensordnung"), while Purba's (2002a, 2002b, 2005) body of research has examined the structure, terminology, and instrumentation of the gondang sabangunan ensemble, as well as its contested place within Toba Batak Protestant church discipline following large-scale Christian conversion from the 1860s onward. Hutajulu and Harahap (2005) provide the most comprehensive account of gondang Batak Toba as a musical and cultural system, distinguishing gondang sabangunan from the string-based gondang hasapi ensemble used in more intimate or Parmalim ritual settings. More recent studies have extended this line of inquiry into specific ceremonial contexts: Simanjuntak et al. (2024) analyzed the musical structure and function of gondang sabangunan in Toba Batak death

rituals, Pane and Purba (2024) examined its use and function in the pasahat hoda Debata ceremony performed by the Ruma Parsaktian Ompung Raja Isumbaon community in Samosir, and Samosir (2026) analyzed gondang sabangunan's role in a contemporary ancestor-invocation festival, drawing additionally on performance theory (Schechner, 2013) to describe how ritual sacredness can persist even when a ceremony is staged in a public, festival setting.

Despite this growing body of literature, comparatively little has been documented about gondang's function specifically within the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual, a ceremony maintained by only a small circle of OMLA's descendants in Sihaporas Village and one that has not previously received close ethnomusicological attention. Because each Toba Batak ritual context, patarias, pasahat hoda Debata, mangokal holi (bone-cleansing), and others, carries its own sequence, participants, and spiritual objectives, Merriam's (1964) framework cannot simply be assumed to apply in the same configuration across all of them; each context requires its own close description before broader generalizations about gondang's function can be responsibly drawn. This research therefore focuses on how gondang bolon functions within the Patarias Debata ritual specifically: how it is presented across the ceremony's structured stages, what roles it performs at each stage, and to what extent it shapes the ritual's sacredness and continuity, before situating these findings alongside the comparable studies noted above.

Building on this background, the research is guided by three questions: (1) how is gondang bolon presented within the sequence of the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual; (2) what functions does gondang bolon perform in the ritual; and (3) to what extent does gondang bolon contribute to the ritual's sacredness and legitimacy. Accordingly, this study aims to describe the presentation of gondang bolon in the ritual and to analyze its functions using Merriam's (1964) theory of the uses and functions of music, read alongside recent comparative studies of gondang sabangunan in other Toba Batak ceremonial contexts.

METHOD

This research on the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual in Sihaporas Village, Pematang Sidamanik District, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra, uses a qualitative descriptive approach, consistent with standard qualitative research procedures in Indonesian social science (Moleong, 2018; Sugiyono, 2013). Primary data were obtained through direct observation of the ritual performance on 22-24 October 2022 and through semi-structured interviews with Ompung Morris Ambarita, the ritual leader and a descendant of OMLA, focusing on the ritual's background, participant roles, and implementation. Secondary data were drawn from documentation, including photographs and field notes taken during the ceremony, as well as from published ethnomusicological literature on gondang sabangunan used for comparative context.

Data were analyzed descriptively in three stages. First, observation and interview results were transcribed and organized chronologically to reconstruct the ritual's sequence of stages. Second, this reconstruction was cross-checked against documentation (photographs and field notes) to verify the presence, positioning, and instrumentation of gondang bolon at each stage. Third, each stage was interpreted in relation to Merriam's (1964) ten functions of music to identify which functions were empirically supported by the observed and reported data, rather than assumed in advance; only functions with clear supporting evidence from observation or interview are reported in the findings below.

To examine the function of gondang bolon as traditional music within the Toba Batak community, this research draws primarily on Alan P. Merriam's "Uses and Functions"

theory, which identifies ten functions of music within community culture: (1) emotional expression, (2) aesthetic enjoyment, (3) entertainment, (4) communication, (5) symbolic representation, (6) physical response, (7) enforcing conformity to social norms, (8) validation of social institutions and religious rituals, (9) contribution to the continuity and stability of culture, and (10) contribution to the integration of society (Merriam, 1964). Merriam's framework remains a foundational reference point in ethnomusicology precisely because it treats music not as an autonomous aesthetic object but as social behavior embedded in a particular cultural system (Nettl, 2015)—an orientation echoed in Blacking's (1973) argument that patterns of sound cannot be separated from patterns of human social organization.

This research uses Merriam's framework to examine gondang bolon's role as a mediating medium between ritual participants—particularly the organizers of the Patarias Debata ceremony—and Mulajadi Nabolon, Batara Guru, and ancestral spirits. Ritual, understood broadly as a patterned, often repetitive sequence of formalized actions invested with sacred significance (Rappaport, 1968), is here inseparable from adat, the customary system that governs communal life among the Toba Batak (Koentjaraningrat, 1990; Vergouwen, 1964). Within this tradition, and particularly among the Sihaporas community, gondang plays a visible mediating role throughout the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual. Through gondang sabangunan, petitions can be conveyed to Mulajadi Nabolon, Batara Guru, ancestral spirits, and other spiritual forces; accordingly, within this belief system, gondang sabangunan is regarded as sacred music, its sound treated less as accompaniment than as a form of ritual action in its own right (Hutajulu & Harahap, 2005; Malinowski, 1954).

Because gondang sabangunan is performed across a range of Toba Batak ceremonial contexts, this study also draws on recent comparative studies that apply Merriam's framework, or related performance-theoretical frameworks, to other rituals: gondang's function in death ritual (Simanjuntak et al., 2024), in the pasahat hoda Debata horse-offering ceremony (Pane & Purba, 2024), and in a contemporary ancestor-invocation festival, where Schechner's (2013) concept of liminality is used alongside Merriam's functions to explain how ritual sacredness can be sustained even in a semi-public performance setting (Samosir, 2026). These studies provide a comparative baseline against which the functions identified in the Patarias Debata ritual can be assessed for both convergence and local specificity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. The Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon Ritual Ceremony

The Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual observed for this research was held on 22-24 October 2022 at the Lumban Ambarita traditional house in Sihaporas Village, built by OMLA's descendants. The ritual's principal purpose is to honor and express gratitude to Mulajadi Nabolon, whose connection to the community is traced through OMLA's teachings, said to originate from Sisingamangaraja, King Uti, and Namboru Natinjo Nabolon. Within the adat life of the Sihaporas community, the ritual occupies the most elevated position among their ceremonial practices: it is regarded not merely as a seremonial act but as the peak expression of the community's religious devotion, understood locally as a medium for conveying the deepest possible reverence toward Mulajadi Nabolon and for strengthening the spiritual bond between the community and the divine.

1. Manggong: Pre-Ritual Notification

Before the main ceremony, the Sihaporas community holds *parsantabian*, or *manggong*, a preparatory event whose purpose is to formally notify and invite *Ompung Mulajadi Nabolon* to the forthcoming ritual. Every stage of *manggong* is arranged carefully to communicate detailed information about the coming *Ulaon Adat Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon*—literally, the customary work of glorifying the one supreme God—to be held at the *Lumban Ambarita* traditional house. *Manggong* is treated by the community not as routine preparation but as a sacred undertaking in its own right, a demonstration of readiness that itself carries spiritual weight.

2. Day One: Gathering and Prayer

The ritual proper begins on its first day with the collective gathering of natural materials from the surrounding forest, which will serve as ritual equipment. This is followed by a sequence of *pemanjatan* (“raising up”)—a set of prayers accompanied by the sound of *gondang Batak*, which functions here as a supporting and meaning-reinforcing element from the ritual's very first stage. Preparation for the ritual as a whole begins seven days beforehand with the purification of the officiants who will take part, ensuring their eligibility to perform ritual duties central to the ceremony's sacredness. All stages of preparation, from decorating the traditional house to preparing offerings, are carried out collectively. The process of making *itak* (rice-flour offering cakes), for example, requires the preparers to wear *kebaya* and *sarong* and to keep pounding the rice without interruption or a change of person, while *parboru* (female relatives from the descendant line) lead other collective tasks. This collective labor is not merely functional; the community frames it as a tangible expression of togetherness and cooperation in upholding ancestral values.

3. Day Two: Martutu Aek and Animal Sacrifice

On the second day, the community carries out *marhobas*, the ceremonial slaughter of a chicken, followed by a coordinated sequence of further stages—*martutu aek*, *mardaung pogu*, *manortor*, and further *marhobas*—culminating in an evening *manortor* session in which the community presents offerings while performing traditional dance.



Figure 1. *Martutu Aek* at the *Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon* Ritual Ceremony

The centerpiece of the second day is Martutu Aek, a solemn procession in which the Sihaporas community moves together toward the village's spring, accompanied throughout by the harmony of gondang, which enriches and paces their steps toward the water. At the spring, participants wash themselves as a symbolic act of purifying body and spirit, overseen by adat leaders and followed with solemnity by the whole community. Locally, Martutu Aek is regarded as the most fundamental of the ritual's constituent ceremonies, given the centrality of water as a basic element of life: the act of purification simultaneously reaffirms the community's position as part of, rather than separate from, the natural world, and carries an implicit ecological message about the responsibility to protect the forest and water sources on which the ritual itself depends. A white goat and red and white roosters are also sacrificed during this stage as offerings to Mulajadi Nabolon.

4. Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata: The Ritual Climax

The ceremony's climax is Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata, understood by the community as the moment of most direct spiritual communication with Ompu Mulajadi Nabolon, undertaken with the aspiration of receiving health and sustenance for the whole Sihaporas community. In preparation, participants undertake Pangoromon, a seven-day fast observed both before and after Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata, reflecting the community's commitment to bodily and spiritual purification ahead of direct engagement with the sacred. During Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata itself, gondang is played continuously for two days and two nights, underscoring that its presence at this stage is not incidental accompaniment but a sustained ritual undertaking in its own right. Within this stage, the community also performs Manettek Angir, a divinatory rite in which prayers are offered over coconut oil held in a white cup to discern whether the community's hopes and petitions will be granted. This divinatory function situates gondang's mediating role within a wider ritual apparatus in which sound, prayer, and material sign together constitute the community's channel of communication with the divine.

5. Ritual Media and Symbolism

Several categories of material offerings carry symbolic weight throughout the ritual. Kaffir lime and water drawn from the spring used in Martutu Aek are treated as media of purification, symbolizing the cleansing of both body and intention before approaching Mulajadi Nabolon. Betel leaf with its accompanying condiments, together with fruits such as watermelon and various bananas, are presented as offerings, while firewood gathered specifically from the forest—rather than purchased—is used to cook the ritual food, underscoring a preference for materials drawn directly from nature as a marker of purity and authenticity. Ulos (traditional woven cloth), the white goat, red and white roosters, and ihan batak (*Neolissochilus thienemanni*), a fish endemic to Lake Toba, also figure among the ritual's required media, each carrying its own customary significance in marking respect, sacrifice, and blessing. Together, these elements situate gondang bolon within a wider symbolic ecology in which music is only one of several media through which the community communicates with the spiritual world, working alongside water, fire, food, cloth, and animal offerings rather than standing apart from them.

B. The Gondang Bolon Ensemble

The gondang bolon ensemble performed in the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual is played by six to seven pargonsi and comprises five taganing (single-headed drums, tuned to different pitches, that carry the ensemble's melodic line), one gondang (a larger, lower-pitched drum that anchors the ensemble's rhythm and signals transitions between musical

sections), three to four ogung (hanging gongs—oloan, ihutan, panggora, and doal—that produce interlocking, cyclically repeating rhythmic patterns), one hesek (a small percussion instrument, often an empty bottle or metal plate, that keeps steady time for the ensemble), and one sarune bolon (a double-reed wind instrument that carries a secondary, often improvisatory melodic line above the drums). In smaller six-person formations, the sarune part is played by a single musician who alternates between melodic phrases and moments of rest. This instrumentation corresponds to the gondang sabangunan tradition documented among the Toba Batak more broadly (Hutajulu & Harahap, 2005; Purba, 2002b), distinguished from the string-based gondang hasapi ensemble used in more intimate or Parmalim ritual settings.

Within Sihaporas's Patarias Debata ritual, the combination of melodic drums, bass drum, interlocking gongs, timekeeping percussion, and wind melody produces the dense, layered texture through which the community understands gondang bolon to carry its ritual functions. The taganing set typically initiates and structures each musical phrase, the gondang provides rhythmic grounding and cues transitions, the ogung's interlocking parts sustain a continuous cyclical pulse across long stretches of ritual time (a musical property that becomes especially significant during the two-day, two-night performance at Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata), the hesek maintains tempo stability across the ensemble, and the sarune bolon's melodic line is frequently described by musicians and participants alike as the most vocal or “speaking” element of the ensemble, closest in character to a sung supplication.



Figure 2. Gondang musicians at the Patarias Debata ceremony

C. The Function of Gondang Bolon in the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon Ritual

Within the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual, gondang bolon is not merely a musical accompaniment but a medium that carries spiritual, social, and cultural weight. Analysis of the ritual performance and interview data, read through Merriam's (1964) ten functions of music, indicates that gondang bolon performs at least seven interrelated functions, discussed below.

1. Accompaniment and Validation of the Ritual Sequence

Gondang bolon functions as the ritual's central guide, providing the rhythm and harmony that frame each stage of the three-day ceremony from the opening pemanjatan on day one through the two-day, two-night performance at Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata. Its presence does

more than accompany the proceedings: the music also builds a solemn atmosphere while animating key moments of the ritual, and participants describe the ensemble's sound as deepening their sense of spiritual readiness. In this respect, gondang bolon performs what Merriam (1964) terms the function of validating social institutions and religious ceremonies—its performance acts as a seal that authenticates and formalizes each stage of the ritual, reinforcing gondang bolon's place as an inseparable part of Sihaporas's cultural inheritance rather than incidental accompaniment. Pane and Purba (2024) report a closely comparable validating function of gondang sabangunan in the pasahat hoda Debata ceremony, where its performance likewise marks the formal legitimacy of each ceremonial stage rather than simply providing background sound, suggesting that this validating role is not unique to Sihaporas but recurs wherever gondang sabangunan accompanies major Toba Batak adat ceremonies.

2. Accompanying Tortor and Ritual Movement

The Patarias Debata ritual includes tortor (traditional dance) and other patterned movement performed by community members, most visibly during the evening manortor session on the second day, and gondang bolon governs the tempo that these movements follow. Beyond providing a rhythmic backdrop, the ensemble sets the pace that each dancer's step must match, producing a close coordination between music and movement that becomes a visible focal point of the ceremony. Because participation in tortor is broad rather than limited to specialists, this coordinated movement also becomes a form of social interaction in its own right, embodying Merriam's (1964) physical response function: gondang bolon's rhythm elicits a shared, patterned bodily response from the community that reinforces collective participation in the ritual. Samosir's (2026) study of gondang sabangunan in an ancestor-invocation festival similarly finds that tortor participation, paced by taganing and marked by sarune bolon's melodic line, generates what she describes, drawing on Schechner (2013), as a liminal condition in which the felt presence of ancestors becomes collectively accessible to participants—a dynamic broadly consistent with what this study observed during Martutu Aek and the evening manortor at Sihaporas.

3. Communicating Symbolic and Religious Meaning

Participants and the ritual leader describe the patterns of sound, rhythm, and melody produced by gondang bolon as carrying meaning beyond aesthetic enjoyment. Specific combinations of tone, tempo, and volume are associated with particular stages and intentions of the ritual, functioning as a symbolic language legible to those familiar with the tradition—much as Pane and Purba (2024) found that specific gondang pieces in the pasahat hoda Debata ceremony (such as gondang mandudu and gondang manggora sahala) are matched to specific ritual intentions rather than played interchangeably. Through this patterning, gondang bolon operates simultaneously as Merriam's (1964) communication function and symbolic function: it conveys values, norms, and cultural symbols associated with the ritual, and its melodic and rhythmic choices stand in for meanings—offerings, prayers, petitions—that are otherwise difficult to put into words. Ritual leaders describe the ensemble as directing participants' attention and feeling toward the significance of each stage, suggesting that gondang bolon's communicative function operates alongside, rather than instead of, its more overtly religious role of carrying petitions to Mulajadi Nabolon, Batara Guru, and ancestral spirits during stages such as Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata and the divinatory Manettek Angir.

4. Expressing Emotion

Beyond its structural and communicative roles, gondang bolon serves as a channel for emotional expression among ritual participants. The melodies and rhythms produced by the ensemble are described by participants as capable of conveying a wide emotional range—from the solemnity and quiet reverence of Martutu Aek to the joy and celebration of the evening manortor—depending on the stage of the ritual. This aligns with Merriam's (1964) emotional expression function: gondang bolon allows individuals and the community collectively to articulate feeling that accompanies the ritual's shifting moods, from the seriousness of purification to the festivity of communal celebration, without relying on words. This capacity for emotional range across a single extended ceremony resonates with Blacking's (1973) broader observation that musical structure and the structure of collective feeling are mutually constitutive rather than separable phenomena.

5. Reinforcing Social Interaction

The performance of gondang bolon requires close coordination among its musicians, and this coordination itself models and reinforces the value the Sihaporas community places on cooperation, echoing the same collective ethic visible in the community's shared labor during ritual preparation. As the pargonsi synchronize their playing, and as ritual participants respond to and move with the music, the ensemble becomes a site of social interaction that extends beyond the musicians themselves to include everyone present. This corresponds to Merriam's (1964) function of contributing to the integration of society: gondang bolon's performance draws musicians and participants into a shared musical and social experience that strengthens bonds among community members during the ritual.

This interactional function is not confined to the moment of playing itself. Because five taganing, one gondang, three to four ogung, one hesek, and one sarune bolon must interlock precisely to produce a single coherent musical texture, the ensemble stands as a working demonstration of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) rendered in sound: each musician performs a distinct part, yet none of those parts carries meaning in isolation from the others. Interview data indicate that the Sihaporas community reads this musical division of labor symbolically, as unity within diversity, a coordination in which every individual has a unique role but works toward one shared ritual purpose. Gondang bolon's social function therefore operates on two connected levels at once: within the ensemble, where synchronized playing enacts cooperation among the pargonsi themselves, and beyond it, where the resulting sound draws the wider community—observers, dancers, and officiants alike—into a single shared field of attention and participation for the duration of each ritual stage.

6. Strengthening Communal Solidarity

Related to, but distinct from, its role in social interaction, gondang bolon also contributes to a felt sense of togetherness among ritual participants. Interview data suggest that the shared experience of hearing and moving to gondang bolon during the ritual, particularly across the sustained two-day, two-night performance at Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata, is remembered collectively by the Sihaporas community, becoming part of a shared repertoire of ritual memory that reinforces group identity across the four-year interval between ritual performances. In this way, gondang bolon's rhythm and harmony function as a kind of social adhesive, deepening solidarity in a way that persists beyond the ritual's three days.

Participants describe gondang bolon's sound as doing more than marking the presence of others: it produces a felt emotional bond that is remembered alongside, and sometimes

more vividly than, the ritual's individual visual or procedural details. Because the ensemble plays continuously across long stretches of the ceremony rather than in short, isolated pieces, its sound becomes woven into the community's shared sensory memory of the event as a whole—an auditory experience held in common that participants describe returning to, in memory, well after the ritual itself has ended. This shared soundscape also plays a quiet role in constituting collective identity: hearing gondang bolon together, rather than merely standing together, is what participants describe as the moment the gathering of individual descendants becomes, felt and audible, one Sihaporas community. Solidarity generated in this way outlasts the ceremony itself, carrying forward into the four years that separate one performance of the Patarias Debata ritual from the next and helping sustain the sense of common belonging on which the next performance will, in turn, depend.

7. Sustaining Cultural Continuity

Finally, gondang bolon plays a central role in the transmission of Toba Batak cultural heritage across generations. Its continued performance in the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual, largely unchanged in musical substance despite the community's own adjustment of the ritual's frequency in response to environmental and economic change, reflects a deliberate effort to preserve gondang bolon as both a musical practice and a marker of cultural identity even as other aspects of the ceremony have adapted. This corresponds to Merriam's (1964) function of contributing to the continuity and stability of culture: by maintaining gondang bolon's place in the ritual, OMLA's descendants ensure that the knowledge, skill, and meaning associated with the ensemble are carried forward to future generations, rather than fading alongside other customary practices under pressure from modernization.

Community members describe gondang bolon in terms that go beyond musical accompaniment, characterizing it as a keeper of the flame of tradition (*penjaga api tradisi*): an active custodian of Sihaporas's cultural inheritance rather than a passive artifact preserved from the past. Each performance of gondang bolon in the ritual is understood locally not simply as entertainment but as a renewed act of safeguarding, one that keeps the community's cultural heritage alive and relevant to present circumstances rather than fixed as a historical relic. This continuity function also carries a spiritual dimension: participants describe gondang bolon's sound as summoning the presence of cultural and ancestral spirit (*roh budaya*) that underlies the Patarias Debata ritual, so that sustaining the music is, in the community's own understanding, inseparable from sustaining the ritual's religious meaning. Because the ensemble's five *taganing*, *gordang*, *ogung*, *hesek*, and *sarune bolon* parts require years of embodied practice to play correctly together, their transmission depends on successive generations of *pargonsi* learning directly from their elders; the ritual's four-year interval, in this light, functions not only as a religious cycle but as a recurring occasion on which that musical knowledge must be actively rehearsed, performed, and passed on, or else risk being lost.

D. Comparison with Other Toba Batak Ritual Contexts

Read alongside recent studies of gondang sabangunan in other Toba Batak ceremonial settings, the findings from Sihaporas suggest that gondang's core functions—validation, communication, symbolic representation, and social integration—recur consistently across ritual contexts, even as their specific expression is shaped by each ceremony's particular structure and purpose. Simanjuntak et al. (2024) found that in death ritual, gondang sabangunan's musical structure is closely tied to marking status and lineage within the

deceased's kin group, a function less salient in the Patarias Debata ritual, which is oriented instead toward collective supplication to Mulajadi Nabolon rather than the recognition of individual status. Pane and Purba (2024) documented a strong validating and symbolic function of gondang sabangunan in the pasahat hoda Debata ceremony, closely paralleling what this study found in Sihaporas, while Samosir (2026) showed that even when a ritual is partly restaged for a public festival audience, gondang sabangunan's capacity to generate a liminal, ancestor-invoking atmosphere can persist. Taken together, these comparisons suggest that gondang sabangunan functions less as a fixed script and more as a flexible ritual technology, one whose particular configuration of functions is calibrated to the specific spiritual objective of each ceremony in which it is performed.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to describe how gondang bolon is presented within the Patarias Debata Mulajadi Nabolon ritual and to analyze the functions it performs there. The findings show that gondang bolon, played by an ensemble of taganing, gordang, ogung, hesek, and sarune bolon, is far more than an accompanying soundtrack to the ceremony: it structures the ritual sequence from the first day's pemanjatan through the sustained two-day, two-night performance at Ulaon Hu Pattar Debata, guides tortor and ritual movement, communicates symbolic and religious meaning, expresses emotion, strengthens social interaction and communal solidarity, and sustains the ritual's transmission across generations.

Read through Merriam's (1964) theory of the uses and functions of music, gondang bolon's role in the Patarias Debata ritual illustrates how a single musical practice can simultaneously perform religious, social, communicative, and expressive functions within one ceremonial context. For the descendants of Ompu Mamontang Laut Ambarita in Sihaporas Village, gondang bolon is not incidental to the ritual's sacredness but constitutive of it: each tone produced is understood as carrying offerings, prayers, and petitions between the human and spiritual worlds. Comparison with related studies of gondang sabangunan in death ritual (Simanjuntak et al., 2024), the pasahat hoda Debata ceremony (Pane & Purba, 2024), and a contemporary ancestor-invocation festival (Samosir, 2026) indicates that these functions are not unique to Sihaporas but recur, in locally specific configurations, across Toba Batak ritual life more broadly.

These findings suggest two directions for further research. First, closer musicological analysis of gondang bolon's melodic and rhythmic structure in the Patarias Debata ritual—building on prior structural studies of gondang sabangunan (Hutajulu & Harahap, 2005; Purba, 2002b; Simanjuntak et al., 2024)—could clarify how specific musical patterns correspond to specific ritual meanings, including the divinatory Manettek Angir stage. Second, given that the ritual is performed by a comparatively small circle of OMLA's descendants once every four years, research on the intergenerational transmission of gondang bolon performance skill in Sihaporas would help clarify the ritual's long-term sustainability.

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