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BATU NA PIR SITINJAK AS A CULTURAL TEXT: INTERPRETATIONS OF RITUAL AND FORM IN BATAK TOBA TRADITIONAL ART

Marfenas Marolop Sihombing¹, Ikhwanuddin Nasution², Agus Priyatno³
Master of Arts Creation and Study, Faculty of Cultural Studies, Universitas Sumatera
Utara, Medan, Indonesia¹²³

marfenasmsihombing@gmail.com¹, ikhwanuddin25@gmail.com², aguspriyatno1808@gmail.com³

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ABSTRACT

Batu Na Pir Sitinjak is a stone burial monument of the Batak Toba people that serves as a profound medium for cultural, spiritual, and social expression. This study aims to examine Batu Na Pir Sitinjak as a "cultural text" by interpreting its ritual practices and visual forms within the framework of traditional art. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the research utilizes Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, which positions cultural artifacts as texts whose meanings are shaped through a dialogical relationship between tradition, historical context, and the interpreter's experience. Data were gathered through field observations, visual documentation, and in-depth interviews with customary leaders. The findings reveal that the monument's structure, which resembles a *solu bolon* (traditional boat), symbolizes the soul's transition to the ancestral realm. Dominant visual elements, including oversized head sculptures representing *sahala* (spiritual power) and seated figures reflecting submission, indicate the ancestor's social and spiritual status. Furthermore, *gorga* ornamentation serves as a symbolic language for Batak cosmology, while the figure of a woman holding bowls represents the *panghurasan* (purification) ritual and the vital role of women as spiritual agents. This study concludes that Batu Na Pir Sitinjak is not merely a historical relic but a dynamic cultural text. Its meaning is continually reconstituted through the "fusion of horizons," where aesthetic, ritual, and social values remain alive and reinterpreted within the ongoing relationship between the living and their ancestors.

Keywords: *Batu Na Pir Sitinjak; cultural text; Gadamerian hermeneutics; Batak Toba customary rituals; traditional art*

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*Corresponding author:
marfenasmsihombing@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Batu Na Pir is a form of ancestral stone burial of the Batak Toba community that occupies a strategic position within their belief system, social structure, and traditional artistic practices. Its existence is not understood merely as a burial site, but rather as a symbolic medium that mediates the relationship between humans and their ancestors. Within Batak Toba cosmology, death is perceived as part of a continuous life cycle; therefore, burial spaces are not separated from the living environment of the community. On this basis, Batu Na Pir can be positioned as a cultural artifact that embodies ritual, aesthetic, and social values integrated into the life of Batak Toba society.

Among the surviving Batu Na Pir sites, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak demonstrates a richness of visual elements alongside the continuity of customary practices. The stone structure resembling a *solu bolon*, the presence of a sculpted head and seated human figure, gorga ornamental motifs, and a female figure holding two bowls associated with the *panghurasan* ritual reflect a complex symbolic system. Within the context of Batak Toba traditional visual arts, these elements are not treated merely as decorative features, but function as a symbolic language representing cosmological views, social relations, and ritual functions in communal life.

Studies on Indonesian traditional arts, as articulated by (Pasaribu, 2022) emphasize that symbols and ornaments in Batak art represent the relationship between humans, ancestors, and the universe. This perspective situates Batu Na Pir Sitinjak not only as a historical relic, but also as a medium of visual artistic expression imbued with philosophical values. In line with this view, (Rodino, 2022) asserts that traditional cultural artifacts are worthy of scholarly examination as works of art that contain aesthetic qualities and the cultural meanings of the communities that produced them. Accordingly, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak holds academic legitimacy for analysis within the fields of visual arts and cultural studies. To uncover the meanings embedded in Batu Na Pir Sitinjak, a research approach is required that extends beyond formal description to include interpretative analysis. Therefore, this study employs a hermeneutic approach as its analytical method to understand the meanings underlying the visual

forms and symbols attached to the stone burial. This approach allows cultural objects to be treated as texts that must be read by considering their historical context, spiritual values, and underlying symbolic structures. (Sihombing et al., 2025)

Visual art analysis and hermeneutics are applied complementarily in this study. Through a visual arts approach, elements such as form, composition, ornamental motifs, and aesthetic structure can be examined in depth, while hermeneutics facilitates the interpretation of symbolic meanings that shape Batak Toba cultural identity. As noted by (Siburian, 2021). traditional artworks do not merely present visual beauty, but also reflect the spirituality and collective identity of the societies that sustain them.

Furthermore, aesthetic paradigms within traditional societies, as proposed by (Sihotang, 2020) are closely linked to the use of ornaments and symbols in cultural products. Similar to the Baroque and Rococo styles in Europe, which are rich in symbolic meaning, Batak society perceives ornaments in their art as elements that possess both sacred and aesthetic dimensions. Within this framework, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak functions as a visual medium that connects humans with spiritual and social values through symbolic language.

Nevertheless, existing studies on Batu Na Pir have largely positioned it as an archaeological object or a historical remnant. Meanwhile, its symbolic meanings and the living processes of cultural interpretation embedded within it remain insufficiently explored, particularly from the perspectives of visual arts and hermeneutics. To address this gap, the present study positions Batu Na Pir Sitinjak as a cultural text that requires interpretation. Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach is employed to understand Batu Na Pir as a text whose meaning is not fixed, but is continually formed through dialogue between tradition, effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and the interpreter's experience. Through this approach, the study is expected to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the development of Batak Toba traditional art studies and to enrich contemporary academic discourse on cultural heritage preservation.

METHODOLOGY

This study use a descriptive qualitative

method with a Hans-Georg Gadamerian hermeneutic approach. The hermeneutic approach of Hans-Georg Gadamer was chosen because it enables the researcher to interpret Batu Na Pir Sitinjak as a cultural text whose meaning is formed through a dialogical relationship between tradition, historical context, and the interpreter's experience. Within this framework, the object of study is not treated as an inert artifact, but as a text that possesses a history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and is continuously reinterpreted within the cultural dynamics of Batak Toba society.

Data were collected through field observation, visual documentation, and in-depth interviews. Field observations focused on direct examination of the physical form of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak, including its structure, visual composition, sculptural forms, and gorga ornamental motifs. Visual documentation was carried out through photography and systematic visual recording as material for art analysis. Interviews were conducted purposively with customary leaders and key informants who possess knowledge of the history, ritual practices, and symbolic meanings of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak, in order to obtain an in-depth contextual understanding.

Data analysis was conducted through three stages: description, interpretation, and meaning construction. In the descriptive stage, visual and verbal data were inventoried and classified according to form, motif, and ritual function. The interpretative stage involved relating visual and narrative findings to concepts of Batak Toba traditional art. Subsequently, the meaning-construction stage employed Gadamerian hermeneutics to understand symbolic meanings through a dialogue between the text (Batu Na Pir Sitinjak), tradition, and the researcher's horizon of understanding. This process proceeds in a circular and reflective manner in accordance with the principles of the hermeneutic circle. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation by comparing the results of observations, visual documentation, and interviews. In addition, researcher reflexivity was applied to acknowledge the interpreter's positionality and background in the meaning-making process, thereby ensuring that the resulting interpretations remain contextual, critical, and academically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Batu Na Pir Sitinjak as a Cultural Artifact and Ritual Space

The findings of this study indicate that Batu Na Pir Sitinjak is an ancestral stone tomb that performs strong ritual, social, and symbolic functions within Batak Toba society. Based on an interview with Amani Toba Sitinjak, this Batu Na Pir was constructed through a lengthy process involving the extended family and the surrounding community. The transportation of the stone from the hill took many years and was accompanied by the sacrifice of buffaloes as a customary requirement. This process demonstrates that Batu Na Pir is not perceived as an inert object, but as a sacred medium legitimized through collective ritual practices.

The Sitinjak site is among the most visually and symbolically impressive. The human head sculpture is clearly carved, and the *gorga* ornaments surrounding the back and upper part of the head remain well preserved. This indicates that the stone carvers did not merely create a grave marker, but also a symbol of the owner's dignity and spirituality. Beneath the head sculpture, there is a seated human figure with legs crossed and hands resting on the knees, suggesting an attitude of calmness and submission to a higher power (Sinaga et al., 2020).

Figure 1. Front view of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak



Source: Researcher, 2024

According to Amani Toba Sitinjak, this stone was transported down from the hill over a period of many years. The process took a very

long time, involved the sacrifice of numerous buffaloes as a ritual requirement, and included the *panghurasan* ceremony, or the sprinkling of holy water, performed by the wife of the stone's owner. This ritual does not merely symbolize purification, but also represents an act of affection and a means of escorting the husband's spirit toward eternal existence. In this context, women are not merely complementary figures, but spiritual agents who play a crucial role in the continuity of tradition.

Batu Na Pir Sitinjak does not contain only a single burial. Several descendants who have undergone the *mangongkal holi* process are also interred within the stone. However, not everyone may be buried there; only those with direct blood relations who have completed the customary purification process are eligible. Notably, the burial site is not located in forests or remote areas, but in the center of the household courtyard. This indicates that ancestors remain an integral part of everyday life rather than being marginalized or distanced from the living community.

From the perspective of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, the meaning of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak is constituted through tradition and a living history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) embedded in the customary practices of Batak Toba society (Gadamer, 2020). The informant's statement that "this stone is not merely a grave, but a place where our ancestors remain with us" reflects an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present. Accordingly, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak functions as a cultural text that is continuously reinterpreted through ritual practices and collective memory.

2. The Solu Bolon Form and the Interpretation of the Ancestors' Spiritual

Visually, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak exhibits a structural form that resembles a *solu bolon*. Based on field observations and explanations provided by Amani Toba Sitinjak, this form is interpreted as a symbolic vessel that facilitates the soul's passage to the ancestral realm. The informant emphasized that the spirit of the deceased "does not remain within the stone, but departs toward the domain of the ancestors." This perspective reflects the Batak Toba cosmological view in which death is understood as a transitional journey rather than the termination of life.

Within cosmological symbolism theory, the boat is commonly interpreted as a medium of transition between the profane and the sacred realms (Marpaung, 2021). Through the lens of Gadamerian hermeneutics, the *solu bolon* form is understood as a symbol whose meaning emerges through a dialogical interaction between Batak Toba tradition and the interpretive experiences of subsequent generations. Such meaning is not fixed or static, but remains dynamic and continuously reactivated through ongoing ritual practices, reflecting a process of *fusion of horizons* (Gadamer, 2020).

Figure 2. Side View of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak



Source: Researcher, 2024

Batu Na Pir Sitinjak displays a form analogous to a *solu bolon*, a large traditional boat historically used by the Batak Toba people to navigate major bodies of water such as Lake Toba and surrounding rivers. Visually, the structure is elongated, with upward-curving sides resembling a boat's hull, while the front and rear ends taper or slightly rise, evoking the bow and stern of a vessel. The primary material of Batu Na Pir consists of andesite or other naturally occurring large stones, which were manually shaped through carving and abrasion over many years by skilled stone craftsmen using simple tools passed down through generations.

Within Batak Toba tradition, the *solu bolon*, once employed by kings and customary leaders, functioned not merely as a means of transportation but also as a symbolic medium of transition between the earthly and the sacred realms. The symbolic role of the *solu bolon* as a spiritual vehicle is reflected in the

decorative elements on its bow and stern, such as buffalo head motifs and *gorga* ornaments, which signify ancestral protection and strength (Silalahi, 2021). Its elongated structure and anthropomorphic configuration suggesting a human body with a head at one end reinforce its interpretation as a vessel of the soul within rites of passage, particularly in ceremonies of departure or migration (Siregar, 2020). Accordingly, just as the head orientation of Batu Na Pir is directed toward *Banua Ginjang*, the *solu bolon* likewise symbolizes a vertical spiritual pathway within Batak cosmology. Both function as mediating forms that transcend physical utility, embodying spiritual and social dimensions within the cultural structure of Batak Toba society.

3. Head Sculptures and Seated Figures as Representations of Ancestors

The presence of clearly carved human head sculptures and seated human figures constitutes the dominant visual elements of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak. According to Amani Toba Sitinjak, these sculptures are not intended to depict the physical likeness of the ancestors, but rather to symbolize dignity and honor. The seated posture with crossed legs and hands resting on the knees is understood as an expression of calmness and submission to a higher power.

Figure 3. Seated Sculpture of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak



Source: Researcher, 2024

Within Batak Toba traditional art theory, human figures in ritual artifacts

function as symbols of social and spiritual status rather than as anatomical representations (Siburian, 2021). Through Gadamerian hermeneutics, these sculptures are interpreted as visual texts whose meanings emerge through a dialogue between artistic form, oral tradition, and the social experience of the community. Accordingly, the ancestral figures on Batu Na Pir Sitinjak represent idealized ancestors who are revered and positioned as central reference points for cultural values.

Figure 4. Head Sculpture of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak



Source: Researcher, 2024

Based on the accounts of Amani Toba Sitinjak and Ompung of the Sidabutar clan, the enlarged head carved on Batu Na Pir is also interpreted as a symbol of *sahala*, referring to spiritual power and charisma transmitted through the ancestral lineage. The prominently carved head is regarded as an indicator of authority held during the ancestor's lifetime, as well as a sign of the spirit's readiness to return to the creator, *Mula Jadi na Bolon*. They further explained that the elevated and highly visible head form is intended to ensure that the ancestor's *sahala* remains present and perceptible to subsequent generations. In local understanding, *sahala* does not merely signify worldly authority, but represents a vital force integrated with nature and the divine. Consequently, the enlarged head becomes a symbol of the culmination of spiritual attainment that enables an individual to return to their origin with full honor.

4. Gorga Ornamentation as a Symbolic Language and Marker of Sacredness

The *gorga* ornamentation surrounding the rear and upper sections of the head sculpture remains well preserved. Based on interview data, informants emphasized that *gorga* motifs are not applied arbitrarily, as they embody meanings associated with protection and cosmic balance. The presence of *gorga* signifies that Batu Na Pir functions as a sacred space that demands respect and ritual awareness.

Comparative analysis of *gorga* motifs on Batu Na Pir with those found in everyday cultural contexts such as traditional houses, boats, and ritual equipment reveals strong visual continuity. Similarities in spiral forms, broken lines, and animal symbols indicate an interconnected visual language linking sacred and profane domains. However, within the context of Batu Na Pir, these motifs appear on a more monumental scale and are executed with greater symbolic restraint and ritual caution.

The recurrence of identical motifs across differing contexts demonstrates the close integration of spiritual values with the daily life of Batak Toba society. Batu Na Pir thus reinforces the understanding that Batak traditional aesthetics extend beyond visual expression, permeating the existential dimension of cultural life.

Figure 5. Upper side view of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak showing the *gorga simeoleol* carving



Source: Researcher, 2024

Within Batak Toba art theory, *gorga* functions as a visual symbolic system that articulates Batak cosmology, particularly the interrelationship between the upper world, the middle world, and the lower world (Sitorus, 2023). Emphasizes that ornamentation in Indonesian traditional art reflects the worldview and cultural values of the society

that produces it (Suharyanto et al., 2024). From a hermeneutic perspective, *gorga* may be understood as an open symbol whose meanings are continuously reinterpreted through customary rituals and oral narratives (Gadamer, 2020).

5. Female Figure and the *Panghurasan* Ritual

The female figure holding two bowls constitutes a significant visual element that is directly associated with the *panghurasan* ritual. Based on interviews with Amani Toba Sitinjak, this ritual is performed by the wife of the Batu Na Pir's owner as an act of purification and as a means of guiding the husband's spirit. The informant emphasized that without the performance of this ritual, the spirit is believed to be unable to fully enter the ancestral realm. (Sitorus, 2023)

Figure 6. Seated female sculpture holding two bowls (*panghurasan*) at Batu Na Pir Sitinjak



Source: Researcher, 2024

Field findings at Batu Na Pir reveal a consistent and prominent formal characteristic, namely the sculptural emphasis on an elevated and projecting head that functions as the primary focal point of visual attention. The seated female figure holding two bowls (*panghurasan*) at Batu Na Pir Sitinjak exemplifies this feature through a head positioned higher than the body, supported by an elongated neck that extends upward. The facial expression is not directed downward but faces forward, conveying an impression of firmness, attentiveness, and ritual awareness. (Simbolon, 2024)

In ritual studies, water is commonly understood as a medium of purification and

transition (Sitorus, 2023). Through the lens of Gadamerian hermeneutics, this female figure is interpreted as a symbolic embodiment of affection, loyalty, and the spiritual agency of women within Batak Toba culture. The presence of this figure underscores that women are not merely supportive companions but occupy a central role as principal actors in mortuary rites and the continuity of tradition.

6. Batu Na Pir Sitinjak as a Cultural Text

Based on the results of observation, visual documentation, and interviews, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak can be understood as a cultural text that embodies ritual, aesthetic, social, and spiritual meanings. The hermeneutic approach of Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasizes that the meaning of Batu Na Pir is not fixed or final, but is continuously constituted through a dialogical interaction between customary tradition, history, and the interpreter's experience (*fusion of horizons*) (Gadamer, 2020). The hermeneutic approach in this study is employed as a methodological framework for interpreting Batu Na Pir by positioning it as a cultural text. The interpretive process is carried out through a dialogical interaction between the researcher, the artifact, and the socio-cultural context of Batak society. Drawing on the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, interpretation is not understood as an objective translation of meaning, but as a methodological process involving the fusion of horizons between the tradition embedded in the object and the researcher's contemporary perspective.

Within the framework of Batak Toba traditional visual art theory, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak can be understood as a ritual artwork that simultaneously integrates sacred and aesthetic functions (Limbong et al., 2025). Accordingly, Batu Na Pir Sitinjak should not be regarded merely as a historical relic, but as an expression of traditional art that remains alive and is continuously reinterpreted within the cultural dynamics of Batak Toba society. The aesthetics of Batu Na Pir are not solely concerned with the creation of visual beauty, but constitute part of a symbolic system imbued with cultural meaning. Visual elements such as the stone coffin structure, human figures, head ornaments, and *gorga* decorative motifs represent collective knowledge and the worldview of the Batak Toba community. In this context, a cultural hermeneutic approach

becomes relevant, as it allows these visual symbols to be read as expressions of spiritual, social, and cosmological values. Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasizes that understanding emerges through a dialogue between the contemporary horizon and the inherited horizon of past traditions (Sihombing & Purba, 2024).

Thus, the aesthetics of Batu Na Pir function as a mediating medium between visual form and the process of meaning-making. Beauty is not positioned as an end in itself, but as a means for conveying transcendental messages from ancestors to subsequent generations. Traditional visual art, in this context, is understood as a cultural text that remains open to continuous interpretation, in which aesthetics are inseparable from ethics, cosmology, and the relationship between the visible and the transcendental. The interpretation of Batu Na Pir is conducted by integrating visual aspects, carved motifs, and ritual contexts into a unified cultural meaning. Through qualitative methods such as participatory observation and in-depth interviews, material symbols are understood to possess living spiritual and social dimensions. This affirms that the meaning of the tomb cannot be separated from ritual practices such as *panghurasan* and *mangongkal holi*, which reflect beliefs in the continuity of relationships between the living and their ancestors. From an artistic perspective, the carving techniques employed in Batu Na Pir demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship. Despite being executed with simple tools, the carvings exhibit precision, consistent visual rhythm, and refined details that reflect the aesthetic mastery of Batak Toba artisans. Consequently, Batu Na Pir functions not only as a spiritual artifact but also as a monumental work of visual art that reflects the aesthetic achievements of its supporting community (Andini, 2025).

Referring to Ernst Cassirer's concept of symbolism, the aesthetics of Batu Na Pir may be understood as a system of symbolic communication, in which visual elements such as *gorga*, sculptural figures, and stone coffin structures function as cultural signs articulating Batak Toba perspectives on life, death, and ancestral relationships. These symbols form a dense visual language that represents how the Batak Toba community structures reality and spiritual life. Within

Gadamer's hermeneutic perspective, Batu Na Pir is positioned as a cultural text that remains open to plural meanings and historical transformation. The dialogue between local tradition and social change, including processes of acculturation with modernity, demonstrates that cultural meaning is dynamic rather than static. This approach affirms that understanding does not arise from an objective distance between researcher and object, but from historical engagement and dialogical interaction between horizons of understanding (Gadamer, 2020). Accordingly, the study of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak reveals not only the symbolic meanings embedded within the artifact, but also its existential dimension namely, how cultural heritage shapes identity, social relations, and the worldview of the Batak Toba community. Hermeneutics thus becomes a means of understanding not only what is visually presented by the artifact, but also what is believed, revered, and lived by the community that created it.

CONCLUSION

Based on field observations, visual documentation, and in-depth interviews, this study confirms that Batu Na Pir Sitinjak is a cultural artifact that functions as a cultural text within the ritual, social, aesthetic, and spiritual systems of the Batak Toba community. Its existence cannot be understood merely as an ancestral burial site, but rather as a symbolic medium that articulates the relationship between humans, ancestors, and Batak Toba cosmology within living cultural practices. Through Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, the meaning of Batu Na Pir Sitinjak is understood as the result of an ongoing dialogue between customary traditions, the history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and the contemporary interpreter's horizon of understanding (fusion of horizons). Visual elements such as the *solu bolon*-like structure, head sculptures and seated figures, *gorga* ornamental motifs, and the female figure associated with the *panghurasan* ritual function as a symbolic language that represents cosmological perspectives, social status, and spiritual values of the Batak Toba community, rather than serving merely as decorative elements or anatomical representations.

The findings demonstrate that Batak Toba traditional aesthetics are integral to belief systems and ritual practices, in which visual

symbols operate as vehicles of existential meaning. The oversized head figure is interpreted as a symbol of *sahala*, or spiritual power; *gorga* functions as a marker of sacredness and cosmological balance; and the female figure affirms the central role of women as spiritual agents in mortuary rites and the continuity of tradition. Accordingly, this study contributes to the development of traditional art and cultural studies by positioning Batu Na Pir Sitinjak as an active and dynamic cultural text. The application of Gadamerian hermeneutics demonstrates that traditional artifacts are not confined to historical remnants but continue to be reinterpreted through ritual practices and collective memory. This approach enriches academic discourse on the preservation of Batak Toba cultural heritage within the context of visual art and contemporary cultural studies.

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