



## Cultural Transformation of Gordang Sambilan: Shifts in Function and Aesthetic Values

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the cultural transformation of Gordang Sambilan, a traditional musical ensemble of the Batak Mandailing community, by examining the shifts in its function and aesthetic values. Employing a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods, data were collected through field observations, in-depth interviews with cultural figures and musicians, and document analysis. The findings reveal a significant transformation: from its original function as a sacred medium in rituals and ancestral communication, Gordang Sambilan has evolved into a cultural performance and entertainment medium. Aesthetic values have also shifted with the incorporation of modern musical elements, affecting performance styles and repertoire. Despite these changes, Gordang Sambilan remains a vital symbol of Mandailing cultural identity, navigating the challenges of modernization and globalization.

**Keywords:** *Gordang Sambilan; Cultural Transformation; Aesthetic Values; Traditional Music; Cultural Identity*

### **Introduction**

Culture is a mirror of a collective identity that transcends the historical dimension, and is transformed into an expression of values, spirituality, and social structures that symbolically bind society. In Tylor's framework of thought (in Trang, 2024:1), culture is understood as a complex totality that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, and morals that are passed down from generation to generation. In the Indonesian context, intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional music, is not only an aesthetic artifact, but also a spiritual vehicle and a collective identity. The Gordang Sambilan music of the Batak Mandailing community is one such expression, which contains a long narrative of human, natural, and divine relationships, and binds the community in a transcendent rite and meaning.

However, the dynamics of the times marked by globalization, modernization, and urbanization create multidimensional pressures on the existence of traditional culture. Giddens (1991:54) asserts that modernity is a reflexive project that is constantly in motion, shaking social structures and forcing individuals and communities to redefine their identities in a fluid social landscape. In such conditions, Gordang Sambilan underwent a shift in function from the sacred and religious rites, to the realm of

popular entertainment in festivals and cultural performances (Harahap, 2020:115). This shift has serious implications, both in terms of meaning, aesthetic value, and in the vitality of the culture itself.

Aesthetics in traditional music do not stand neutral; It is a representation of the cosmological integrity and spirituality of society. Djelantik (2019:91) emphasizes that aesthetics in music are not only seen in form and performance, but also imply the philosophical weight and inner structure of the culture that gave birth to it. In the context of Gordang Sambilan, aesthetics that were once full of ancestral symbolism and spirituality, are now often commercialized in the entertainment stage, losing the sacred meaning that is the foundation.

This cultural transformation does not take place in a vacuum. According to Appadurai (2016:43), every cultural change is the result of an interaction between external pressures and internal resistance. The change in the function of Gordang Sambilan was triggered by the openness to foreign culture and the development of the mindset of the young people of Mandailing who are increasingly exposed to global narratives. This is reinforced by the findings of Lubis (2021:123), who shows that social and economic changes have caused many Mandailing people to no longer use Jordang Sambilan in traditional rites, but rather as an expression of modern entertainment.

Meanwhile, in terms of cultural identity, Giddens (2014:27) explained that identity is not something permanent, but is constantly reshaped in the dialogue between the past and the present. In this context, Gordang Sambilan remains a symbol of cultural identity, but the meaning attached to it has undergone a paradigmatic shift. Symbols no longer have a singular meaning, but are open to new interpretations that often erode their original values. This raises an urgent identity problem: how to maintain the continuity of traditional values in the flow of cultural transformation?

This problem is even more complex when the aesthetics of traditional music also undergo a metamorphosis. Djelantik (2019:98) argues that the aesthetic value in traditional art lies not only in its form, but also in the spiritual and social experiences it contains. The inclusion of modern musical elements into the Gordang Sambilan performance not only enriches the form, but also has the potential to obscure the structure of the meaning and sacredness of the music. Therefore, there is a need to retrace the aesthetic values that are now developing in the Gordang Sambilan performance.

It is within this framework that the urgency of this research becomes relevant. In the midst of rapid modernization and loss of meaning in cultural expression, it is necessary to make a serious effort to examine in depth how Gordang Sambilan has undergone a transformation—both in its function and aesthetic value. This research wants to be a space for reflection and the search for the possibility of a bridge between cultural heritage and the contemporary world, without having to sacrifice the noble meaning and spirituality it contains. Because, as Cohen (2016:55) says, cultural identity cannot be maintained only by the conservation of forms, but must also be contextualized reflectively.

Previous research by Matondang (2013:10) and Sakinah Nasution et al. (2021:6) has elaborated on the origin, ritual function, and history of Gordang Sambilan. However, their study has not specifically highlighted the changing aesthetic and functional values in an increasingly complex contemporary context. Therefore, this study fills this gap by providing a new perspective, namely how Gordang Sambilan was transformed by the Mandailing community in response to external pressures, as well as how its aesthetic values shifted in new interpretations.

In an ever-changing cultural dynamic, the choice to be adaptive or conservative becomes both an epistemological and practical challenge. Transformation is not merely a form of betrayal of tradition, but can be a survival strategy (Hasbi, 2018:72). Therefore, this research not only aims to uncover changes, but also formulate a reflective solution: how to preserve the sacred values and aesthetics of Gordang Sambilan in the midst of cultural openness. With this approach, it is hoped that this research will

contribute to strengthening cultural awareness and formulate a preservation strategy that is not only ceremonial, but also transformative.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the factors that affect the cultural transformation of Gordang Sambilan and identify the shifts in function and aesthetic value that occur. By exploring the context of change through a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research becomes an academic-philosophical effort in responding to contemporary challenges to local cultural heritage that continue to move in the vortex of globalization.

## ***Research Methods***

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with ethnographic methods. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the symbolic and narrative meanings of Gordang Sambilan music in the context of Mandailing culture in depth and comprehensively. As explained by Spradley (2016:3), the research sites include the village of Pidoli Dolok, as well as several art performance sites and traditional institutions that still maintain the traditional music practice. Data collection techniques use observation, interviews and documents. The data collected includes both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and audio-visual documentation. Data is analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. This model of analysis refers to the opinion of Miles and Huberman (1994:10), which states that in qualitative research, data is not only collected but also processed reflexively and interpretively in order to produce contextual and theoretical understanding. In this context, the data were analyzed with the theoretical framework of cultural transformation (Appadurai, 2016), art aesthetics (Djelantik, 2019), and cultural identity (Giddens, 1991), which interdisciplinary allows a comprehensive interpretation of changes in the functions and values of Gordang Sambilan.

## ***Results and Discussion***

### **A. Factors Influencing the Cultural Transformation of Part-Time Gordang**

The results of research in the field show that the cultural transformation of Gordang Sambilan is driven by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include changes in the social structure of the Mandailing community and a shift in the mindset of the younger generation. According to Giddens (1991:54), the dynamics of modernity have given rise to a constant reflection on traditional identities, where society no longer sees culture as a static legacy, but rather as something that must be renegotiated in a contemporary context.

Observations show that the young generation of Mandailing tends to consider Gordang Sambilan as a form of cultural expression that must be adaptive to modern aesthetic needs. This is in line with the findings of Kiatanto (2020:88) that cultural change is often a strategy to maintain the existence of groups in an ever-changing world. For example, in the performance observed at the Mandailing Natal Cultural Festival, Sambilan Gordang no longer only accompanies sacred ceremonies, but is also used for the opening of public entertainment events, accompanied by modifying the rhythm to make it more dynamic.

Meanwhile, external factors mainly come from the influence of globalization, mass media, and government policies in developing cultural tourism. Appadurai (2016:43) states that globalization creates new "landscapes of culture" in which local traditions must negotiate with global values. In the case of Gordang Sambilan, efforts to promote local culture sometimes obscure the sacred value contained in the music, as seen in performances outside the traditional context of modern improvisation. This transformation shows that traditional culture is not solely crushed by modernity, but is actively shaping itself in the crossover between resistance and adaptation.

## B. Changes in the Function of Part-Time Gordang

The cultural transformation of Gordang Sambilan is most evident in the change in its function. Originally functioning as a spiritual communication tool and medium in religious rites, it has now shifted to an entertainment medium and a means of popular cultural performance. Merriam (2016:90) stated that changes in the function of music in society are indicators of profound social change, where the function of spiritual communication is replaced by aesthetic and recreational function. In the documentation of the Horja Godang traditional event, it was found that Gordang Sambilan is now more often performed as an opening performance before the main procession, rather than as an integral part of the ritual. This indicates the degradation of spiritual meaning, as noted by Harahap (2020:115) that shifting the function of traditional musical instruments in modern society often leads to cultural secularization.

As for regional art festivals, Gordang Sambilan is played with a new rhythmic pattern that is more rhythmic and varied, adapting to the more modern tastes of the audience. Mismada (2013:67) reminds that in such a change, values that were once sacred become profane, and ritualistic functions shift to purely artistic functions.

## C. Shifting Aesthetic Values in Part-Time Casting

Along with the change in function, the aesthetics of Gordang Sambilan have also undergone a significant shift. In the past, the aesthetic value of this music rested on rhythmic simplicity, the repetition of sacred motifs, and the close relationship between sound and spiritual meaning. Now, aesthetic value is more directed towards rhythmic diversity, musical innovation, and visual appeal of performances.

According to Djelantik (2019:98), aesthetic values in traditional art contain three dimensions: appearance, substance, and performance. Field data shows that in modern Gordang Part-time performances, the performance aspect is particularly prominent — the costumes of the performers become more decorative, the musical arrangements are more varied, and they are often combined with non-traditional instruments such as electric guitars or keyboards.

This aesthetic interpretation marked a shift from transcendental aesthetics to performative aesthetics. Bruner (2019:27) argues that aesthetic experience in modern culture emphasizes more on direct emotional experience than spiritual contemplation. This is what happened in today's Gordang Part-time show: more aimed at mesmerizing audiences than connecting them to the supernatural world.

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional and Modern Part-time Gordang Aesthetics

Aspects	Traditional	Modern
Rhythm	Monotonous, slow, repetitive	Varied, dynamic, fast
Supporting Instruments	Gong, traditional flute	Keyboard, guitar, sound system
Costume	Simple traditional clothing	Decorative and modern clothing
Aesthetic Function	Spirituality, ancestral communication	Entertainment, artistic impressions

## D. Implications of Transformation on Mandailing Cultural Identity

The transformation of the function and aesthetics of Gordang Sambilan has consequences in the realm of cultural identity. Cohen (2016:55) asserts that cultural symbols, when drastically redefined, can blur the line between authenticity and new creation. In Mandailing, while Gordang Sambilan is still seen as a symbol of identity, the meaning of it is now more flexible and open to reinterpretation.

The young Mandailing community, for example, no longer considers it necessary to maintain the authenticity of the form and function of Gordang Sambilan in every performance, as long as the collective spirit is alive. This is in line with the theory of cultural transformation put forward by Sunarya et al. (2001:84), that traditional values are not completely lost, but undergo renewal in a new structure that allows culture to survive change.

Thus, although Gordang Sambilan has been functionally and aesthetically transformed, it still plays an important role as an identity marker in an ever-changing world.

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