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Heritage Practices in the Preservation of the Rondang Bintang Festival in Simalungun

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ABSTRACT

The Rondang Bintang Festival is a prominent annual celebration in Simalungun, with historical roots dating back to 500 AD. It originated as an agrarian tradition, conceived by the community to express gratitude for harvests and to serve as a venue for young people to meet potential partners. Over time, the cultural practices associated with this festival have evolved significantly. This article explores the cultural heritage practices and preservation efforts surrounding the Rondang Bintang Festival, highlighting its complex transition from a traditional custom into a formally managed government cultural event. Employing a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic approach, the study gathers primary and secondary data through the analysis of historical documents, direct participant observation, and in-depth interviews with cultural preservationists. The findings reveal a structural shift in cultural governance, culminating in the official takeover of the festival by the Simalungun Regency Government in 1981. The festival has since adapted its traditional rituals into structured, inter-district cultural competitions. The government's strategic initiative to position the festival at Lake Toba reflects a contemporary approach to preserving Simalungun identity through local tourism. The implications of this research lie in its comprehensive ethnographic examination of how bureaucratic intervention can coexist sustainably with cultural resilience, ensuring the continuity of authentic heritage practices. This process ensures that the traditional festival remains relevant, economically beneficial, and culturally meaningful for future generations.

Keywords: *Rondang Bintang, Tradition, Festival, Simalungun, Cultural Preservation*

1. Introduction

As a unitary country with various ethnicities and cultures, Indonesian society has interesting uniqueness in terms of traditions. Each region certainly has its own form of culture which is influenced by the environment. Culture can be interpreted as the totality of human ideas and works that must be familiarized with learning, along with the entirety of the results of these thoughts and works (Koentjaraningrat, 2015). Culture is presented through the beliefs, values, ways of thinking and views of community groups (Eko & Putranto, 2019; Sumarto, 2019). Cultural festivals serve as vital arenas for the practice of cultural heritage; they function not only as expressions of collective identity but also as dynamic spaces where local traditions negotiate with modernization. In the context of rapidly evolving societies, the survival of traditional cultural celebrations often hinges on complex transformations in how they are governed. The Rondang Bintang festival in Simalungun, North Sumatra, Indonesia, offers a particularly compelling case of such transformation. Originating around 500 CE as an agrarian thanksgiving ritual under the patronage of local kingdoms, the

festival has endured through profound socio-political shifts. In the process of its survival, Rondang Bintang underwent a complete institutional takeover by the local government in 1981, evolving from a community-led traditional ritual into a state-managed cultural tourism event.

The general understanding is that culture is the substance and symbol of society (Clevleland, 1995). Culture and subculture form an identity of the community that is part of or participates (Rahmaniah, 2012). Rondang Bintang is an annual celebration tradition that always has a special place in the hearts of the people of Simalungun and its surroundings. This celebration features arts and culture competitions, traditional dances, regional songs, Simalungun songwriting competitions, traditional games and agricultural exhibitions. Participants from each sub-district enthusiastically took part in the excitement of Rondang Bintang. Cultural celebrations are a community tradition that is carried out continuously and involves the surrounding community as a form of preservation. This celebration invites young people from surrounding villages to join in enlivening the event which is marked by singing, dancing, reading poetry and playing traditional Simalungun musical instruments. The celebration usually takes place at night, under the light of the moon and stars, and the entire village gathers in joyful celebration.

Preserving community culture is also carried out to maintain national identity so that it does not degrade and can be easily recognized widely. The concept of identity can be used as a sense of belonging to a particular group that is maintained collectively (Chen, 2014). Existing literature on Intangible Cultural Heritage and cultural resilience has extensively explored how traditions endure in the face of modernization. Nahak (2019), for instance, emphasizes that sustaining cultural values requires dynamic adaptation and precise responsiveness to changing conditions, while Abi-Hashem (2020) argues that cultural resilience hinges on a complex interplay of motivation and management. Concurrently, discourse on the governance of festivals and tourism events (Getz & Page, 2016; Laing, 2018) highlights the functional role of festivals in stimulating local economies and fostering community participation. Furthermore, Gray (2010) notes that cultural policy is frequently shaped by the intersection of local ideologies and government agendas.

However, despite these contributions, previous research has largely treated cultural preservation, community participation, and festival governance as separate analytical domains. Studies focusing on the preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (such as Al Hazmi, 2023; Yin, 2018) tend to romanticize community resilience while often overlooking the political mechanisms through which heritage is formally managed. Conversely, research in tourism management often frames state-led festivals purely as economic commodities, disregarding the deeply embedded socio-cultural values they contain. There remains a significant analytical gap regarding the state's role in the "construction of heritage." There is a lack of empirical synthesis explaining how ancient, community-driven intangible heritage is absorbed, institutionalized, and re-orchestrated by the modern state bureaucracy—without extinguishing authentic community participation.

Even though it has been going on for several decades, the Rondang Bintang festival is still ongoing with its management involving the government. In cultural management, there are fundamental differences in the form of understanding and rules that must be followed by the community as the owner of that culture. The greater the cultural differences with other cultures, the greater the challenge to adapt (Setyaningrum et al, 2022). Furthermore, the Simalungun Regency Government's aspiration to transform the Rondang Bintang Festival into a primary cultural tourism destination warrants critical and balanced consideration. The intersection of tourism promotion and the preservation of cultural heritage inevitably give rise to an inherent tension between local cultural priorities and the risks of commercialization. When traditional rituals are modified for tourist consumption, fundamental questions arise regarding the preservation of cultural authenticity versus the necessity for adaptation. This dilemma can be analytically compared to the cultural tourism model in the neighboring Samosir Regency. Festivals in Samosir—such as Gondang Naposo and the Samosir Music International Festival—have successfully commodified local traditions to attract global tourists, yielding significant economic benefits. However, such commercial success often carries the risk of reducing authentic cultural expressions to mere spectacles tailored for external audiences, potentially alienating local communities from their own cultural heritage (Aryandari et al., 2026). This study critically assesses whether the current government-led management of the Rondang Bintang Festival successfully navigates the fine line between economic commodification and the preservation of its authentic socio-cultural functions for the Simalungun community.

To understand the development of social traditions, one must examine their historical trajectory and the processes—including the management—by which they are sustained. As Gray (2010) suggests, effective cultural policy is shaped by the interplay between the ideology and hegemony of the aristocracy on one hand, and the agendas of the government on the other. To systematically analyze the historical evolution and management of the Rondang Bintang celebration, this study employs a cohesive theoretical framework that bridges the dynamic reproduction of culture with the functional roles of tradition. First, the study adopts a

dynamic approach to culture, viewing it not as a collection of static artifacts, but as a complex system of values, norms, and symbolic objects that undergo continuous reproduction and creative transformation (Barker & Jane, 2016). The dimension of creativity is crucial when observing cultural evolution within a society (Sumarto, 2019). By focusing on specific cultural forms, this approach allows us to perceive Rondang Bintang as a living, evolving tradition rather than merely a relic of the past.

Second, to understand why this tradition persists amidst transitions in governance, we examine its functional dimensions. Traditions passed down through generations endure precisely because they fulfill functional roles within a society (Al Hazmi, 2023). Furthermore, when culture is managed systematically within a specific group, it gives rise to various functional roles that unify the community (Aryandari et al., 2023). These roles encompass an individual's perception of their own position in relation to the expectations of others (Wehner, 2014). In functional terms, a role represents shared normative expectations imposed by society across economic, legal, and social spheres (Sesen, 2015). These interconnected concepts directly guide the interpretation of empirical data, specifically for evaluating how the original functional roles of a tradition are negotiated when the state intervenes and imposes new role expectations. This framework allows for an analysis of how a community's cultural identity adapts creatively to modern event management without losing its core symbolic values.

Based on the identified issues, the primary objective of this research is to critically analyze the structural transformation and contemporary preservation of the Rondang Bintang Festival. To establish a focused and manageable scope, this study specifically addresses the following three research questions: (1) How have the authority and governance of the festival transitioned historically—from traditional kingdoms to the local government? (2) How is this contemporary festival structured, organized, and managed to support the government's cultural tourism agenda? (3) How do local stakeholders and the community perceive and negotiate the socio-cultural consequences of this structural shift? By answering these questions, this research aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the Rondang Bintang Festival, examining how traditional cultural heritage practices are preserved and adapted within the framework of modern cultural governance.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic approach. The qualitative method is rooted in the philosophy of post-positivism and is applied within natural, real-world settings (Creswell, 2015). Ethnography, meanwhile, is an approach that immerses researchers in the social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions that unfold within community groups (Reeves et al., 2008). The ethnographic approach was specifically chosen because it is well-suited to addressing the established research questions. In the study of culture, ethnography focuses on the qualitative exploration of values and meanings within the context of specific ways of life—such as those concerning cultural issues (Barker & Jane, 2016). This approach facilitates an in-depth, localized exploration of "cultural heritage practices" and "role negotiations" as they are lived and experienced by the Simalungun community. By immersing the researcher in the local context, this approach captures the nuanced tensions between state-led cultural governance and bottom-up cultural resilience during the Rondang Bintang Festival.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Simalungun Regency over a five-month period, from January to June 2023. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals directly involved in the history and current management of the festival. Ten key informants were recruited, consisting of: (1) traditional elders and cultural preservationists, including the head of the Simalungun customary council (Partuha Maujana Simalungun); (2) two government officials from the Simalungun Office of Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy; and (3) seven members of the local community and festival participants. Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. To ensure that authentic cultural nuances were accurately captured, the interviews were conducted using a mix of Indonesian and the local Simalungun language. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Furthermore, participant observation was carried out systematically throughout the festival preparations and the main event. The observation process focused on spatial arrangements (such as the open-air stage at Lake Toba), traditional performances, and the socio-cultural interactions between government organizers and local attendees. To triangulate the primary data, documentary sources—including local government decrees, cultural tourism master plans, historical archives, and official event programs—were extensively reviewed.

The collected data were processed using Spradley's (2016) ethnographic analysis framework, which was explicitly aligned to address the three research questions. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and subjected to domain and taxonomic analysis to categorize recurring themes. These themes include shifts in historical authority, bureaucratic event management structures, and public perceptions of cultural authenticity. By synthesizing interview transcripts, observational field notes, and archival documents, the researcher

constructed a comprehensive analytical narrative regarding the structural transformation of the festival.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Historical Transition of Authority: From Monarchy to Modern Governance

The Rondang Bintang Folk Festival is a tradition that has been carried out for generations and is managed by the government and involves the community. To be able to preserve traditions effectively, the government has considered someone who holds leadership in the cultural sector. In this case, the responsibility for the Rondang Folk Festival is held by the Head of the Simalungun Traditional Service at Partuha Maujana Simalungun, whose name is Djapaten Purba. He also serves as Chair of the Traditional Council at the Presidium of the Partuppuan Stakeholder for Customs and Culture of Simalungun at his residence in Huta Bayu. Djapaten Purba also has knowledge about the history of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival so he has knowledge regarding the implementation of this tradition.

According to the community's historical memory and local oral traditions as recounted by Djapaten Purba, the origins of this festival can be culturally traced back to the founding of the first kingdom in Simalungun—the Kingdom of Nagur—which, according to local narratives, was established around 500 AD under the leadership of King Damanik (Damanik, 1974, p. 33). However, it is crucial to analytically distinguish between this collective cultural memory and verified historiography. Given the scarcity of definitive archaeological evidence and independent documentary corroboration from that specific era, this precise chronology remains highly debated and difficult to verify empirically. Therefore, in this study, the "500 AD" timeline is understood not as an absolute empirical fact, but rather as a vital cultural narrative—a foundational myth—that legitimizes the community's perception of the festival's deep ancestral roots. As time went by, this kingdom expanded, and by 1906, it had transformed into seven different regions. These include the Siantar Kingdom under King Damanik, the Panai Kingdom led by King Purba Dasuha, the Silau Kingdom led by King Purba Tambak, the Javanese Tanoh Kingdom led by King Sinaga, the Raya Kingdom under King Saragih Garingging, the Purba Kingdom led by King Purba Pakpak, and the Silimakuta Kingdom ruled by King Purba Girsang (Siregar, 2020).

Djapaten Purba further explained that these kingdoms consisted of various village areas which were the birthplace of the Rondang Bintang festival. During the reign of these kings, the majority of Simalungun residents farmed, relying on agricultural products to meet their living needs. They have a tradition of mutual cooperation known as marsialop ari and marharoan bolon. Marsialop ari involves the daily collaborative work of six people in the fields, taking turns. Meanwhile, marharoan bolon is a collective effort involving 24 or more people in cultivating agricultural land and kingdoms. This communal practice is the basis for the celebration of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival and the creation of typical Simalungun songs and dances known as tortor haroan bolon (Irwansyah, 2020).

In the past, communal agricultural activities were synchronized, culminating in a major harvest season around June or July. According to an oral account shared by Djapaten Purba during an in-depth interview, the Simalungun people would, during this period, present their harvest to the king as an act of gratitude. The timing for this celebration was not chosen arbitrarily; rather, it was meticulously determined by the *Baggal Guru*, a senior spiritual advisor serving within the royal court. To illustrate this historical practice, Djapaten Purba detailed the advisor's role:

> "In the era of the kings, the *Baggal Guru* was the only one who possessed the esoteric knowledge required to read the stars and the moon. It was he who determined the precise night for the festival, ensuring that the universe would bestow its blessings upon the harvest." (Interview on March 10, 2023)

Drawing from this oral tradition, it is understood that the *Baggal Guru* renowned for his extensive knowledge—was tasked by the king with ensuring the festival coincided with the most auspicious moment: specifically, a night marked by a full moon and a star-studded sky. The *Baggal Guru* would perform specific rituals to seek guidance from the ancestors regarding this propitious date. This reliance on cosmological signs explains why the *Rondang Bintang* Folk Festival is traditionally held on a night when the stars shine brightly—a detail that consistently resonates within the collective memory of the Simalungun elders who were interviewed.

The Rondang Bintang Folk Festival is traditionally held at night when the stars shine brightly. The baggal guru will perform a ritual to ask the ancestors for guidance regarding the auspicious day of the festival. In essence, this festival is a celebration of the abundant harvest obtained by the Simalungun people. Life during the monarchy revolved around agriculture and the Simalungun people mostly worked as farmers. This is in line with Wade & Tana (2012) observation that people in Asia rely on agriculture for their livelihoods and

enjoy their free time at night for entertainment, singing, partying and having fun. Participation in celebrations, rituals, and communal feasts is a social obligation for Southeast Asian people, as important as productive work. Therefore, it is not surprising that the people of Simalungun collectively celebrate their harvest.

During the monarchy, the king instructed the palace staff to convey the necessary preparations for the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival to each village chief or headman. In the past, the continuity of this festival relied on the collective responsibility of all members of society. The village head then conveyed these instructions to his people to prepare the harvest for the king's consumption. The harvest will be processed and distributed on the eve of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival. The joyful atmosphere experienced by ordinary citizens during these communal gatherings reflected the benevolence of their rulers. As the historical record in Hikayat Banjar states, "men, women and children were delighted with everything they saw and heard." The crowds of people from various villages who gathered during these celebrations highlighted the large population of the region and demonstrated the ruler's ability to attract their attention in various ways. Through the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival, the king demonstrated his authority by giving orders to his people and showing generosity by allowing celebrations within the palace grounds.

The festival took place in the palace grounds, where residents from each village gathered to present their harvest to the king. Young girls collectively pound rice in a vessel called losung bolon. In this activity, young men usually dance, sing and play traditional Simalungun music. In addition, communal games typical of Simalungun culture are played collectively. This opportunity also provides an opportunity for young men and women to socialize and potentially find a life partner. These ancient customs are the historical basis for the continuity of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival to this day. In the monarchy era, the king played the role of leader who organized his people to celebrate the harvest together in the palace yard. This allowed the people of Simalungun to witness the king's residence. Palace staff will then inform village heads and community leaders about the upcoming Rondang Bintang Folk Festival and the necessary preparations. The preparations made by the community consist of offerings from their crops and livestock, such as rice, vegetables, shallots, chilies, chicken and fish, which everyone will eat during the celebration. The king did not determine the number of offerings, but the people of Simalungun contributed according to their generosity and ability.

However, this collaborative system is sufficient to meet food needs for the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival. Next, the community worked together to clean the palace grounds and prepare the location for traditional Simalungun games. Palace officials and village heads supervised this process. Young men and women took turns performing songs and dancing before the king, providing entertainment for the people and the ruler. During this time, kings also took advantage of the opportunity to select court consorts and offered special awards to the best dancers, singers, or musicians. This award was given officially by the king and affixed with the king's signature, which emphasized the authority of the ruler towards the people of Simalungun through the holding of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival.

The proclamation of Indonesian independence in August 1945 brought about profound political change; however, the collapse of the Simalungun monarchies was not a direct or automatic consequence of that proclamation. Instead, the post-independence period created a complex and volatile political climate that triggered the East Sumatra Social Revolution in March 1946. Historical studies on northern Sumatra document that this social revolution was driven by anti-feudal sentiment, political mobilization, and a push to integrate locally autonomous kingdoms into the structure of the new republic (Reid, 2014). Consequently, the seven Simalungun monarchies abruptly lost their sovereign authority and political power.

What is analytically significant is that, despite the intense upheaval caused by the 1946 social revolution and the sudden loss of royal patronage, the cultural heritage practices of the Simalungun people persisted. According to Djapaten Purba, the Rondang Bintang folk festival demonstrated remarkable cultural resilience; communities continued to celebrate the festival independently in their respective villages, without any instruction from a king. This grassroots survival mechanism persisted until the modern state apparatus intervened formally. In 1964, during the tenure of Simalungun Regent Rajamin Purba, the Partuha Maujana Simalungun was established.

Under government management, the implementation of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival is fully supervised by the Department of Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy and the Regent of Simalungun. Includes budget planning, event concept, committee formation, determining the time and location of the festival, as well as participant selection, all under the supervision of Partuha Maujana Simalungun as the custodian of Simalungun traditions (Hutauruk & Ginting, 2019). To understand the profound implications of this cultural governance, an analytical comparison between the arrangements before and after government intervention is necessary, covering five key dimensions: decision-making authority, community autonomy, resource allocation, participant selection, and ritual practices.

First, decision-making authority and community autonomy have shifted from a foundation rooted in local

and cosmological contexts toward a complex bureaucratic system. Historically, *baggal guru* (traditional leaders) and village elders determined the timing of festivals based on harvest cycles and the lunar calendar, granting local villages significant autonomy to organize their own celebrations. Under government management, however, the regency's administrative calendar now dictates the schedule and location—utilizing a rotation system across 32 sub-districts or designating specific sites, such as Lake Toba, to promote tourism. Consequently, community autonomy has been significantly diminished; local residents, who were once the independent organizers of these events, have now become formal participants operating within a state-sanctioned framework. As emphasized by an official from the Department of Culture, the second shift concerns resource allocation: the system has moved from one based on communal contributions—where villagers pooled their harvests and livestock—to a state-funded model reliant on the regional government budget. Third, the selection of participants has shifted from inclusive, unstructured communal gatherings to an exclusive, competitive process involving designated representatives. In the past, all village youth (*garama* and *anak boru*) participated freely, using these events for socialization and courtship. Today, participants are formally vetted and sent by their respective sub-district heads to compete as official representatives.

Finally, these structural shifts have directly impacted ritual practices. Spontaneous, authentic agrarian thanksgiving celebrations and traditional forms of entertainment have been systematically institutionalized. Traditional dances (such as *manduda*) and games (such as *margalah* and *mandihar*) have been repackaged—transforming from organic communal celebrations into highly regulated inter-district competitions, complete with a trophy from the Regent. This analysis demonstrates that while state intervention has succeeded in preserving the physical forms of these cultural heritage practices, it has fundamentally reconfigured their functional role—shifting them from organic social bonds into formalized regional spectacles.

3.2 Management of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival

To resolve chronological ambiguities regarding the administrative history of the festival, it is essential to delineate the specific roles played by various stakeholders in its institutionalization. Following the collapse of the monarchy in 1946, the festival was sustained organically by the grassroots community for nearly two decades. The first formal intervention occurred in 1964, when the Regent of Simalungun, Rajamin Purba, officially designated the Partuha Maujana Simalungun (a council of traditional Simalungun elders) as the cultural custodians responsible for preserving the authenticity of the festival.

A structural turning point—marking the transition to an event managed entirely by the state—took place in 1981. Recognizing the festival's uniqueness and its potential for tourism, the Governor of North Sumatra proposed integrating the event into a broader, state-sponsored framework. Acting on this provincial-level proposal, the Regent of Simalungun authorized the official takeover of the festival, incorporating it into the regency's formal calendar of events. Consequently, day-to-day operational management and budgetary responsibilities were delegated to the Simalungun Office of Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy.

In this contemporary arrangement, the division of roles is clearly defined: the Regent of Simalungun serves as the ultimate authorizing body. The Department of Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy acts as the technical organizer, managing logistics, marketing, and competitions; meanwhile, Partuha Maujana Simalungun retains its 1964 mandate to act as a cultural overseer, ensuring that the traditional essence—guided by the values of Pancasila is preserved amidst modern event management. As explained by Getz & Page (2016), state-managed cultural festivals of this nature can foster cultural development, preserve traditions, and cultivate group understanding. Furthermore, festivals or celebrations serve as a means to introduce a culture and its traditions to the wider community (Santiana et al., 2024).

The Rondang Bintang Folk Festival, which is an annual event officially recognized in the Simalungun Regency event calendar, is very dependent on the leadership of the Simalungun Regent. The regent makes important decisions, approves event committees, and participates in opening and closing ceremonies. The Simalungun Regency Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy Service plays an important role in planning and implementing the festival, working together with other related parties, including the regent and local cultural experts. Within the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy, there are several units that have a special role in managing the festival. Event management teams require a variety of skills, including event planning, marketing, financial management, and legal aspects (Laing, 2018; Teevan, 2021). The Culture, Arts and Creative Economy Unit is tasked with designing and managing the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival. The Tourism Marketing Unit handles event promotion. All decisions within these units require the approval of the department heads and the District Head.

Several steps were taken in planning the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival, such as the concept of the event, determining the date and location, and forming an organizing committee. The theme of the festival is very important in uniting the image of the event and should complement its objectives. Articles can be

historical and ethnic in nature, guiding various aspects of the event, including the event name, logo, decorations, uniforms, activities, entertainment, lighting, music, special effects, food, drinks, mascots and merchandise. Bearing in mind that the aim of this festival is to preserve ancestral culture, the Department of Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy designed activities based on Simalungun cultural traditions, including traditional games, art, and participant clothing. The choice of event location is critical to its success and must align with the event theme. Considerations include size, amenities, visibility, centrality, accessibility, cost, history, personal preferences, and other factors (Yeoman et al., 2012). The Rondang Bintang Folk Festival rotates in 32 districts in Simalungun. The selection considers factors such as capacity, infrastructure and accessibility. In some cases, this festival is held at Lake Toba in Parapat to support the government's efforts to promote Lake Toba as a tourist destination. When determining the date of the festival, factors such as the time of the community's harvest and the presence of the full moon and stars are taken into consideration.

Traditionally, this festival is held in June or July, but the timing may vary due to various considerations. Effective management of the Rondang Bintang Festival relies heavily on a structured allocation of human resources. Based on a document review of the Regency-level Organizing Committee Decree—further corroborated by field observations—the organizing committee is drawn entirely from within the structure of the Department of Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy. For the 2023 event, human resources were organized into a committee structure, which, as observed in the field, consisted of the following:

Table 1. Committee Structure for the 2023 Rondang Bintang Festival

Committee Structure	Duties and responsibilities
Event Coordination Unit	Responsible for the overall coordination and management of the festival, ensuring that all aspects of the event run smoothly. The head of this unit is usually a government official and works closely with the Regent of Simalungun.
Culture, Arts and Creative Economy Unit	This unit designs and organizes cultural activities and traditional games that are in line with Simalungun cultural traditions. They strive to create an authentic and culturally rich festival experience.
Tourism Marketing Unit:	Responsible for promoting the festival and attracting tourists and visitors from inside and outside Simalungun Regency. They handle marketing campaigns, advertising, and other promotional activities.
Finance and Budgeting Unit	Manages the financial aspects of the festival, including budget planning, fundraising, expense monitoring and financial reporting.
Legal and Licensing Unit	Ensures all permits and legal requirements required for the festival are met. This includes coordinating with local authorities and obtaining necessary permits
Logistics and Infrastructure Unit	Handles logistics arrangements, such as venue arrangements, transportation, accommodation for participants and guests, as well as procurement of necessary equipment and supplies.
Security and Safety Unit	Responsible for ensuring the safety and security of attendees and attendees during the festival. This includes crowd control, emergency response planning, and coordination with law enforcement agencies.
Public Relations and Media Unit	Manages communications with the media, sponsors and the public. They handle press releases and media coverage as well as maintaining a good public image for the festival.
Volunteer and Community Engagement Unit	Coordinates volunteers who help with various aspects of the festival and engages the local community to involve them in the event.

Evaluation and Feedback Unit	After the festival, this unit collects feedback and evaluates the success of the event, identifying areas for improvement and future planning.

The organizing committee works closely together to ensure the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival runs smoothly and successfully. They work with a specified budget and schedule to carry out the event according to the established concept and theme. Coordination and communication between these units is critical to the overall effectiveness of the festival. The Rondang Bintang Folk Festival also displays various cultural arts of the Simalungun people, including "taur-taur", "ilah", and "tangis-tangis". Taur-taur is a Simalungun folk song usually sung by young men and women, often describing young love in the form of rhyme poetry. Ilah is a Simalungun regional song sung with body movements carried out by two or more people. The lyrics can convey advice on raising children or themes of teenage romance. Tangis-tangis is a lament song from the Simalungun people, the lyrics of which express sadness related to death, separation or disappointment. During the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival, traditional Simalungun games and sports such as "marjalekkat", "margalah", "mandihar", "marlittun", and "margul-gul" are also played. If organized by the kingdom, these activities are intended for the enjoyment of young people in the royal courtyard. However, when managed by the government and the Simalungun Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy Service, these cultural arts and traditional games are held as competitions for trophies and prizes from the regent, which are held alternately in 32 Simalungun districts.

Synthesizing these contemporary management practices, it becomes clear that the deployment of complex bureaucratic human resources—emphasized by John (2013) and Lee & Goldblatt (2020) as crucial for event execution and audience satisfaction—serves as a primary mechanism for cultural transformation. When the Department of Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy assembles its official organizing committee, the resulting modifications to the Rondang Bintang Festival are not directed at the traditional practitioners themselves. Rather, this top-down event management represents a strategic preservation effort. As noted by Yin (2018), cultural traditions are inherently dynamic and must evolve over time to survive. By recontextualizing organic performing arts and traditional games into a structured, managed event, the government ensures that these cultural expressions remain a vital component of contemporary social life (Puthumana & Puthumana, 2021). Consequently, the bureaucratic governance of the festival does not negate Simalungun identity. Instead, as suggested by Carlson (2018), such structural changes provide an “alternative identity position” through which ancestral heritage is actively replicated, negotiated, and preserved via state-supported modern performance platforms. This synthesis demonstrates that modern event management and cultural preservation are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are inextricably linked in the continued survival of Rondang Bintang.

3.3 Socio-Cultural Impact and Identity Representation: Participant Perspectives

To document the socio-cultural standing of the Rondang Bintang Festival in Simalungun, it is essential to first define "cultural festival" and contextualize its existence within the region's cultural inventory. In this study, a cultural festival is defined as an organized, public, and recurring event that systematically showcases performing arts, rituals, and traditional games to reinforce a community's heritage (Getz & Page, 2016). According to regional documentation from the Simalungun Regency Culture and Tourism Office and the national Intangible Cultural Heritage (WBTB) registry, Simalungun encompasses various local traditional celebrations—such as the Pesta Olob-olob, which carries religious-cultural undertones, and *Haroan Bolon*, an agrarian ritual rooted in communal cooperation. Therefore, the Rondang Bintang Festival should not be framed as the sole form of cultural expression in Simalungun; rather, it serves as a regency-level "flagship" festival, specifically curated by the state to consolidate participation across districts and promote traditional arts.

The assertion that the Rondang Bintang Festival functions as a vessel for a collective Simalungun identity must be realized through mechanisms of participant interaction, rather than merely through its physical recurrence over time. Based on field observations and archival records of the event program, this collective identity is strengthened through the systematic inclusion of various traditional performance categories. The festival ensures that youth delegations—representing the *garama* (kinship groups) and *anak boru* (affinal kin)—from all 32 districts participate in traditional arts, such as the *Manduda* harvest dance and Tortor performances, as well as traditional sports like *marjalekkat* and *margalah*.

As outlined in the institutional directives of Partuha Maujana Simalungun (PMS), the integration of these traditional forms ensures that the festival serves as an active space for intergenerational cultural learning. Rather than merely acting as passive spectators, young participants undergo months of local training in their

respective sub-districts before performing on the regency-level stage. This structured preparatory process facilitates the transmission of the Simalungun dialect, traditional attire (*hiou*), and customary etiquette to the younger generation. Consequently, the sustainability of the festival reflects a space of negotiation, wherein state-sponsored event management relies directly on grassroots cultural practices to preserve regional ethnic identity.

The structural transformation of the Rondang Bintang Festival highlights the dynamic interaction between state administration and the cultural expression of the community. Rather than viewing the historical continuity of this festival as an isolated phenomenon, these shifts reflect the broader mechanics of identity construction within structured power relations, where state actors reconfigure local cultural symbols to serve contemporary governance functions (Castells, 2010). In the context of Simalungun, this theoretical framework explains how the Regency Government leverages its administrative authority to institutionalize the festival, while the local community negotiates to preserve its authentic ancestral meanings (Damanik, 1974; Purba, 2010). Recognizing its uniqueness, the Simalungun Regency government took over the festival and established it as an annual fixture on the Simalungun Regency calendar to preserve ancestral traditions. In 2017, the then-Regent of Simalungun, J.R. Saragih, expressed his vision for the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival to become a cultural tourism destination in Simalungun. This was supported by a decision from the Regent and the Simalungun Office of Culture, Tourism, and Creative Economy to host the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival on the shores of Lake Toba in Parapat from 2017 to 2019 (Saragi, 2022).

The strategic decision by the Simalungun Regency Government—specifically through its Department of Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy—to relocate and reconfigure the Rondang Bintang Festival to prominent sites, such as the open-air stage in Parapat (Lake Toba), reflects an explicit administrative strategy rather than a verified economic outcome. Rather than presenting this relocation as a proven catalyst for regional economic growth, field documentation and policy plans indicate that these enhanced spaces and facilities represent development targets projected by the local government. Specifically, the government aims for this modernized event infrastructure to ultimately increase tourist arrivals, boost local hotel occupancy rates, and foster commercial partnerships with regional business operators. However, in the absence of comprehensive longitudinal statistics regarding post-event visitor metrics or hospitality sector revenue, these anticipated benefits should be understood analytically as policy aspirations and promotional objectives embedded within the regency's cultural tourism framework, rather than as empirically proven economic impacts.

The economic contribution of the Rondang Bintang Festival to local livelihoods is evidenced by reports from vendors within the event area. During field observations at the festival site, informal interviews were conducted with local food vendors, traditional artisans, and small-scale accommodation providers in the vicinity. These local business operators reported a temporary increase in daily customer numbers and direct cash transactions during the event—a trend observed, in particular, in the Lake Toba–Parapat area since 2017. Consequently, rather than signaling a permanent macroeconomic shift, the data indicate that the festival provides a localized, short-term economic boost that is highly valued by micro-level economic actors in Simalungun. Furthermore, the Simalungun Regency Government collaborates with micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in the region, informing them of the Rondang Bintang Folk Festival and inviting them to participate.

Through these socio-cultural and spatial dynamics, it becomes evident that the strategic evolution of the Rondang Bintang Festival aligns with broader theories of cultural tourism governance. As observed by Pratt (2019) and Nusraningrum & Pratama (2019), cultural festivals are increasingly integrated into destination strategies to showcase tangible and intangible heritage—such as ethnic dances, traditional attire, and folk arts—while simultaneously creating opportunities for the local economy. In the context of Simalungun, the government's decision to relocate and reconfigure the event to prominent sites, such as the shores of Lake Toba in Parapat, exemplifies what Yeoman et al. (2012) and Gerosa (2022) describe as the strategic management of a spatial event portfolio. By aligning the destination's natural aesthetics with the festival's traditional performances, state organizers aim to cultivate a cultural atmosphere that is appealing to visitors (Laing, 2018; Mair & Weber, 2019). However, rather than viewing these commercial and spatial interventions as an empirically proven economic boom, this study analytically frames them as policy aspirations and perceived economic opportunities. As emphasized by Wijaya & Pranoto (2023), the integration of the local commercial sector with corporate stakeholders is crucial for sustaining an ecosystem for public events. In Simalungun, although formal corporate sponsorship and the integration of local businesses are still in the nascent stages, both regional officials and small-scale vendors view the festival as a valuable platform for stimulating short-term economic activity. Ultimately, the management of these public spaces requires ongoing negotiation among government institutions, traditional leaders, and local business operators. This ensures that, even as the festival adapts to the demands of modern cultural tourism, its primary function remains rooted in

the representation and preservation of Simalungun's social and cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

This study analyzes the structural transformation of the Rondang Bintang Festival in Simalungun Regency, examining its evolution from a community-led agrarian tradition into a state-managed cultural tourism asset. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks concerning heritage practices, cultural governance, and cultural resilience, this research explicitly addresses three primary objectives. First, regarding the transition of historical authority, the festival shifted from a localized, cosmological celebration—governed by royal advisors (baggal *guru*) and village elders during the monarchical era—into a modern administrative event. Following the collapse of the Simalungun monarchy during the 1946 East Sumatra Social Revolution, the tradition was sustained organically by the grassroots community for nearly two decades. Formal institutional intervention began in 1964, when the Regent of Simalungun, Rajamin Purba, officially designated the Partuha Maujana Simalungun (PMS) as the custodian of the culture. A decisive shift occurred in 1981 when, acting on a proposal from the Governor of North Sumatra, the Simalungun Regency Government formally incorporated the event into its administrative agenda, delegating operational management to the local Department of Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy.

Second, regarding management and the roles of stakeholders, contemporary governance reflects a clear division of responsibilities: the Regent acts as the authorizing body, the relevant government department serves as the operational organizer managing logistics and the structure of the competitions while the PMS retains its mandate as the guardian of cultural authenticity. The transition from communal harvest-based contributions to state-budget (APBD) funding and inter-district competitions has successfully preserved the physical forms of traditional arts. However, this shift has also reconfigured grassroots autonomy into a standardized, top-down bureaucratic framework. Third, concerning socio-cultural impact and the representation of identity, the festival serves as an active platform for the intergenerational transmission of Simalungun heritage, rather than merely functioning as an empty administrative mandate. Although it is not the only cultural event in Simalungun—existing alongside local celebrations such as Pesta Olob-olob, Rondang Bintang serves as the primary, flagship festival at the regency level, mobilizing youth delegations (*garama* and *anak boru*) from 32 districts and strengthening a collective sense of ethnic pride.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study demonstrates that state-led cultural governance and bottom-up cultural resilience are not mutually exclusive. Rather, living heritage persists through an ongoing negotiation between bureaucratic institutionalization and community participation. This study acknowledges certain methodological limitations; specifically, because empirical quantitative metrics—such as longitudinal visitor statistics or revenue figures for micro-enterprises—were not collected during the fieldwork, the spatial reconfiguration of the festival to locations like Parapat cannot be presented as a verified economic catalyst. Instead, these tourism benefits represent local policy aspirations and the potential economic opportunities as perceived by regional officials and local merchants. Future research should employ quantitative, longitudinal economic tracking to measure the tangible commercial impact of state-managed cultural festivals on host communities.

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6. Conflict of Interest

This research article does not contain any conflict of interest. If a conflict arises in the future, the author will be responsible according to applicable sanctions.

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