



## Tradition and Modernity of Humanity (TMH)

Journal homepage: <https://talenta.usu.ac.id/tmh>



# The Function of *Gondang Sabangunan* in Ancestral Invocation Rituals

Kristina Samosir

Master of Arts Program, Faculty of Cultural Science, Universitas Sumatera Utara, 20155, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: [kristinasamosir46@gmail.com](mailto:kristinasamosir46@gmail.com)

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 September 2025

Revised 5 January 2026

Accepted 23 January 2026

Available online 26 January 2026

E-ISSN: 2962-1208

P-ISSN: 2807-3118

### How to cite:

Samosir K. The Function of *Gondang Sabangunan* in Ancestral Invocation Rituals. *Tradit Mod Humanit.* 2026;6(1):8–15.

## ABSTRACT

*Gondang Sabangunan* in Batak Toba society is understood as a ritual medium used to call and bring the presence of ancestors into the human social space. The sound of *gondang* is not only used to accompany ceremonies but also acts as a symbolic action that opens cosmological communication, asks for blessings, and strengthens the relationship between descendants and ancestors. This research aims to analyze the practice of *Gondang Sabangunan* in the Batak Ancestors Educational Tourism Festival 2025 organized by the Rumahela community in Simullop, Pangururan. The study focuses on the ritual function of calling ancestors, the musical structure that supports the process, and the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* relationships in organizing ritual participation. This research uses a qualitative method with a performance ethnography approach through participant observation, in depth interviews with musicians and cultural actors, and audiovisual documentation. The theoretical framework uses ritual music function theory from Alan P. Merriam, performance theory from Richard Schechner, and cultural behavior perspectives to understand sound as ritual action. The results show that stages such as requesting *gondang*, explaining ritual intentions, musical repetition patterns, and *tortor* participation form a symbolic process of calling ancestors that is still maintained in the festival context. The interaction of *taganing* as structural director, *sarune bolon* as symbolic vocal expression, and *ogung* as a marker of cosmological continuity creates a liminal condition that allows the experience of ancestor presence to be collectively felt. Although performed in a public space, the ritual practice does not fully lose its sacredness but transforms into a representational ritual that still contains spiritual meaning. Therefore, *Gondang Sabangunan* in the festival functions as a medium for spreading ritual knowledge and maintaining symbolic relationships between community and ancestors.

**Keywords:** *Gondang Sabangunan*, ancestor calling ritual, *Dalihan Na Tolu*

## ABSTRAK

Dalam masyarakat Batak Toba, *Gondang Sabangunan* dipahami sebagai sarana ritual untuk memanggil dan menghadirkan leluhur ke dalam ruang sosial manusia. Bunyi *gondang* tidak hanya berfungsi mengiringi upacara, tetapi juga merupakan tindakan simbolis yang membuka komunikasi kosmologis, memohon berkah, serta mempererat hubungan antara keturunan dan leluhur. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis praktik *Gondang Sabangunan* dalam Festival Wisata Edukasi Leluhur Batak 2025 yang diselenggarakan oleh komunitas Rumahela di Simullop, Pangururan. Studi ini berfokus pada fungsi ritual pemanggilan leluhur, struktur musik yang mendukung proses tersebut, serta peran relasi *Dalihan Na Tolu* dalam mengatur partisipasi ritual. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografi pertunjukan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan pemusik dan pelaku budaya, serta dokumentasi audiovisual. Kerangka teoretis yang digunakan mencakup teori fungsi musik ritual dari Alan P. Merriam, teori pertunjukan dari Richard Schechner, dan perspektif perilaku budaya untuk memahami bunyi sebagai tindakan ritual. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tahapan-tahapan seperti permohonan *gondang*, penyampaian maksud ritual, pola pengulangan musik, dan partisipasi *tortor* membentuk proses simbolis pemanggilan leluhur yang tetap terjaga dalam konteks festival. Interaksi antara *taganing* sebagai pengarah struktur, *sarune bolon* sebagai ekspresi vokal simbolis, dan *ogung* sebagai penanda kesinambungan kosmologis menciptakan kondisi liminal yang memungkinkan pengalaman kehadiran leluhur dirasakan



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<https://doi.org/10.32734/tmh.v6i1.26817>

secara kolektif. Meskipun ditampilkan di ruang publik, praktik ritual ini tidak sepenuhnya kehilangan kesakralannya, melainkan bertransformasi menjadi ritual representasional yang tetap mengandung makna spiritual. Oleh karena itu, *Gondang Sabangunan* dalam festival tersebut berfungsi sebagai sarana penyebaran pengetahuan ritual dan pemeliharaan hubungan simbolis antara masyarakat dan leluhur.

**Kata kunci:** : *Gondang Sabangunan*, ritual pemanggilan leluhur, *Dalihan Na Tolu*

## 1. Introduction

*Gondang Sabangunan* is a ritual music ensemble that has a central position in Batak Toba society. Its presence is closely related to traditional customs, belief systems, and worldview that place ancestors as active participants in social life. In this context, *gondang* is not only a musical expression but a symbolic medium that allows communication between humans and ancestral spirits. The sound of *gondang* is believed to open a meeting space between worlds, symbolically present ancestors, and serve as a way to ask for blessings, protection, and life balance.

The role of *Gondang Sabangunan* in ancestor calling rituals can be seen in the structure of customary practices that place music as the main action, not just a complement. The request for *gondang* (*mangido gondang*) marks the beginning of ritual communication. Through stating intentions, giving *gondang* in sequence, and participating in *tortor* dance, the process of calling ancestors is built collectively. Repetitive sounds, dynamic changes, and interaction between instruments create a special temporary condition that allows participants to enter a shared ritual experience.

The musical structure of *Gondang Sabangunan* plays an important role in supporting this process. *Taganing* directs the musical dramaturgy by signaling *gondang* changes and controlling ritual intensity. *Sarune bolon* brings an expressive dimension often associated with calling or conveying intentions to ancestors. Meanwhile, *ogung* creates temporal stability through repetitive patterns, producing a sense of cycle and continuity that is important in ritual cosmology. The interaction of these elements forms a musical experience that is not only heard but physically and emotionally felt by participants [1].

Besides the musical dimension, *Gondang Sabangunan* ritual practice is also organized by the social relationship system of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. The relationship between *hula-hula* (the wife's family **highly respected**), *dongan tubu* (**relatives of the same lineage**), and *boru* (he husband's family **the party that serves as the organizer**) determines who has the right to request *gondang*, who dances first, and how respect is given. Therefore, calling ancestors happens through social structure, not individual action. *Dalihan Na Tolu* functions as an ethical mechanism, role distribution system, and community solidarity reinforcement.

In contemporary contexts, *Gondang Sabangunan* is increasingly presented in cultural festivals and educational programs. This change raises important questions about ritual transformation. When sacred practices are presented in public spaces, negotiation occurs between preservation, representation, and cultural commodification. The Batak Ancestors Educational Tourism Festival 2025 is an important example because it positions *gondang* as a learning medium about Batak Toba relationships with ancestors.

The main reason for discussing *Gondang Sabangunan* in this research lies in its position as a meeting point between music, ritual, and cultural identity. *Gondang* remains one of the musical practices that strongly maintains ritual function despite social change. Analysis of *gondang* helps understand how sound shapes spiritual experience and social solidarity. Its presence in festivals also shows how tradition is reactivated in modern contexts without fully losing symbolic meaning [2].

Thus, discussing *Gondang Sabangunan* is important not only to understand traditional music practice but also to explain how communities maintain symbolic relationships with ancestors in changing social conditions. This research assumes that festivals are not merely performance spaces but meaning production spaces where ritual, musicality, and social structure interact. Focusing on ancestor calling rituals allows deeper analysis of how sacred experience is built, negotiated, and transmitted to the next generation [3].

## 2. Literatur Review

Studies of *Gondang Sabangunan* in ritual contexts are closely related to ethnomusicology ideas that view music as a cultural practice with social, symbolic, and spiritual functions. In this framework, music is not only sound but an action that operates within belief systems, social relationships, and collective experience.

This research focuses on ritual music function theory, performance studies, and local knowledge obtained through interviews with cultural elders [4].

The ritual music function approach is strongly influenced by Alan P. Merriam, who explains that music has three main dimensions: concepts about music, musical behavior, and musical sound itself. From this perspective, *Gondang Sabangunan* must be understood as a system of practice involving meaning, action, and experience. Merriam also states that one important function of music in traditional societies is ritual function, where music helps communication with the spiritual world, organizes collective emotions, and marks important life events [5].

In ancestor calling rituals, this theory explains that *gondang* sound acts as a symbolic medium that enables transition from everyday space to ritual space. Music organizes ritual timing, strengthens emotional intensity, and legitimizes customary actions. Therefore, *Gondang Sabangunan* has transformational capacity, changing social situations into ritual situations.

This research also uses performativity perspective influenced by Richard Schechner, who views ritual and performance as part of the same spectrum. Performativity does not only represent tradition but creates social reality through repeated actions, bodies, space, and interaction. This idea helps explain *Gondang Sabangunan* in festivals as a practice that is recontextualized rather than losing ritual meaning.

From this perspective, ancestor calling is understood as a collective process involving *mangido gondang*, stating intentions, *tortor* dance, and musical responses. Sound, movement, and social relations work together as ritual dramaturgy. Even when performed in festivals, these actions can still symbolically create the feeling of ancestor presence [6].

Local knowledge from cultural elders is also important. Interviews show that *gondang* is seen as a “language” used to communicate intentions to ancestors. Elders emphasize that ritual structure must remain connected to *Dalihan Na Tolu* because ritual authority depends on social order. This local perspective strengthens theory by showing that ritual music is not only symbolic but also normative, meaning there are rules about who can request *gondang*, when it is played, and how responses are given.

Combining Merriam’s theory, Schechner’s performativity, and local knowledge allows this research to understand *Gondang Sabangunan* as a practice located between sound, action, and cultural knowledge. Thus, *Gondang Sabangunan* in festivals is not simply ritual reduction but a performative process that maintains symbolic function through contextual adaptation.

### 3. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with performance ethnography method to understand *Gondang Sabangunan* as a ritual practice involving sound, social action, and spiritual experience. This approach allows direct observation of ritual processes, performer interaction, and musical dynamics that cannot be fully explained through text alone. The research was conducted through the author’s direct involvement in the Batak Ancestors Educational Tourism Festival for seven days. This duration allowed observation of ritual continuity, musical atmosphere changes, and variations in social participation throughout the festival [7].

Data sources include primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through participant observation and interviews. Observation focused on ritual structure, *gondang* sequence, instrument interaction, *tortor* participation, and the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* relationships. The researcher also documented musical dynamics, ritual peak moments, and educational narration delivered to audiences [8].

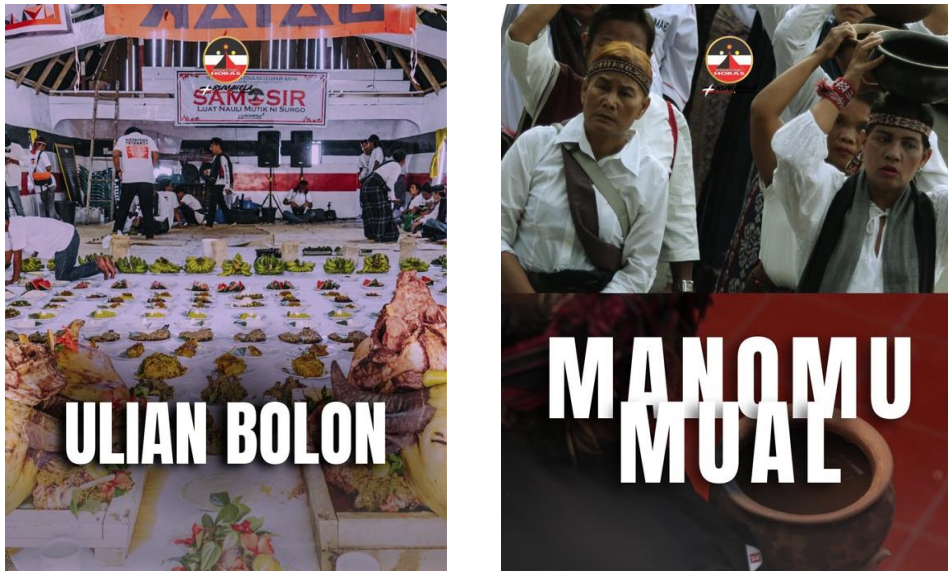
Interviews were conducted with artists, organizers, and individuals knowledgeable about *Gondang Sabangunan*. Key informants include who explained cultural education functions and community involvement, and who provided perspectives on Batak music revitalization and maintaining ritual values in contemporary presentation. Semi structured interviews allowed informants to explain meanings deeply. Topics included *gondang* as communication with ancestors, musical structure in creating sacred atmosphere, and how *Dalihan Na Tolu* operates in public performance. Informal conversations during the festival were also recorded as contextual data.

Secondary data came from audiovisual documentation, program archives, and media records. These materials supported detailed musical analysis such as repetition patterns, *taganing* signals, and relationships between music and *tortor* movement. Data analysis was conducted in stages: data reduction and thematic grouping, musical analysis focusing on instrument roles, and interpretative analysis connecting field findings

with theory [9]. The researcher's reflexive participation was important to understand bodily and emotional experience while maintaining validity through interviews and documentation [10].

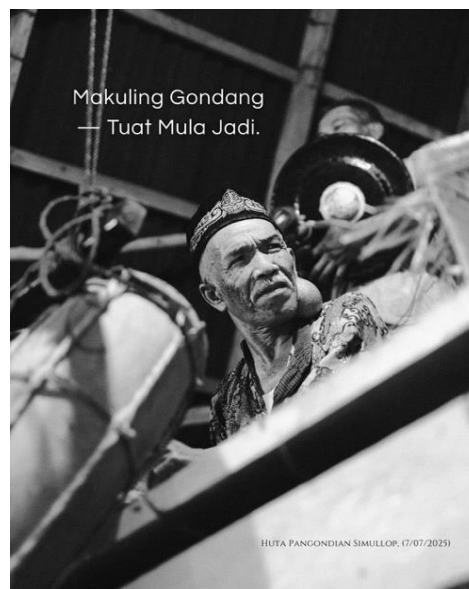
#### 4. Result and Discussion

The discussion positions *Gondang Sabangunan* as a ritual practice mediating relationships between humans, ancestors, and social structure. The focus is on ancestor calling processes, musical structure, and the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Ancestor calling begins with *ulian bolon* (offerings) as a sign of inviting ancestors to attend *Gondang Bolon* (a ritual to call the ancestors). Traditional Batak Toba foods are prepared from midnight and presented at noon. This is followed by *Manomu Mual* ritual, collecting sacred water from many places believed to be connected to ancestors. Sacred water in this festival was taken from 136 locations worldwide.



Picture 1. Documentation of the Ancestor Calling Ritual

In this process, calling the ancestors is not understood as an instant action but as a gradual process. After performing the *ulian bolon* and *manomu mual* rituals, the main event, *Gondang Bolon*, is then carried out. In this event, *Gondang Sabangunan* plays an important role in inviting the ancestors. Each *gondang* performed has a specific function: opening the ritual space, introducing the intention, strengthening the intensity, and eventually reaching the peak of the collective experience. *Tortor* serves as a bodily response to sound, allowing ritual communication to occur through a combination of sound, movement, and social relationships. The presence of the ancestors is understood symbolically through changes in atmosphere, increased participation, and the sense of togetherness that emerges during the performance [11].



Picture 2. One of the main *Gondang Sabangunan* musicians called a Pargossi

The festival context does not eliminate this process but modifies it. The ritual stages remain visible, although with a shorter duration and narrative explanations provided to the audience. This shows that ancestor calling can take place in a representational form without completely losing its meaning. Adaptation occurs in the way it is presented, while the core ritual principles are still maintained [12].

The musical structure plays an important role in shaping the conditions that allow ancestor calling to occur. *Gondang Sabangunan* works through repetition, dynamic changes, and interaction between instruments that create a particular temporal experience. Rhythmic repetition produces a sense of continuity and cycle, which cosmologically relates to the concept of an ongoing relationship between the living generations and the ancestors. Changes in tempo and intensity mark transitions between ritual stages, allowing the music to function as a marker of ritual dramaturgy [13].

*Taganing* functions as the central director of the musical structure. The *taganing* striking patterns signal changes in the *gondang*, determine when the intensity increases, and regulate ensemble coordination. In the context of ancestor calling, this function is important because it organizes the overall flow of the ritual. *Taganing* can be understood as a mechanism for organizing ritual time, ensuring that each stage takes place in sequence.



Source: google.com

*Sarune bolon* brings an expressive dimension that is often associated with conveying intention. Its flexible and improvisational melodies allow emotional nuances to emerge, strengthening the ritual experience. *Sarune* functions as a “voice” that expresses collective feelings, so the calling of the ancestors is not only structural but also affective [14].



Source: google.com

*Ogung* functions as a marker of stability. Its sound patterns create a constant temporal framework, giving a sense of order and continuity. In the process of calling the ancestors, this stability is important because it conveys the impression of ongoing relationships between generations. The combination of *sarune*’s expression, *taganing*’s control, and *ogung*’s stability produces musical conditions that allow participants to experience gradual changes in atmosphere.



Source: google.com

Interaction between the instruments also shapes a participatory experience. Musical peaks often coincide with increased *tortor* participation, showing a close relationship between sound and movement. Thus, the musical structure not only supports the ritual but becomes the main mechanism for creating the experience of ancestral presence [15].

Besides the musical dimension, *Dalihan Na Tolu* functions as a social framework that determines ritual legitimacy. The relationships between *hula-hula*, *dongan tubu*, and *boru* regulate the distribution of roles, the order of participation, and the way respect is expressed. In the process of calling the ancestors, this structure ensures that ritual communication takes place according to customary norms. Without this relational order, musical actions are not fully recognized as ritual [16].

*Dalihan Na Tolu* also functions as a mechanism of social coordination. Who requests the *gondang*, who dances first, and how responses are given are all part of organizing relationships. This shows that calling the ancestors is a collective action that depends on social structure rather than individual experience. Music becomes the space where these relationships are performed and made visible.

In the festival context, *Dalihan Na Tolu* continues to operate even though the audience is more diverse. Adaptation can be seen in the way explanations are given to spectators and in the involvement of non-family participants, yet the symbolic order is still maintained. This shows that the social structure has the flexibility to adapt without losing its normative function [17].

The role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* is also related to spiritual legitimacy. The calling of the ancestors is considered valid when carried out through proper relationships. Thus, social and musical structures work together as two mechanisms of ritual legitimacy. Music provides the experience, while relationships ensure its meaning [18].

This discussion shows that the ancestor-calling ritual in *Gondang Sabangunan* is a multidimensional process. Music, the body, and social relationships form a network of practices that enable symbolic communication with the ancestors. The festival does not eliminate this process but creates a new space for the ritual to be represented and transmitted [19].

The research findings show that ritual sustainability does not depend only on preserving musical forms, but on the practice's ability to maintain the relationship between sound, social structure, and spiritual meaning. *Gondang Sabangunan* continues to function as a medium for calling the ancestors because these three aspects are continuously activated simultaneously. Therefore, ritual is not understood as a static tradition but as a performative practice that is constantly renewed through collective experience.

## 5. Conclusion

This research confirms that the practice of *Gondang Sabangunan* cannot be understood merely as a musical expression, but as a ritual system that functions as a medium of communication between humans and ancestors within Batak Toba cosmology. The relationship between *Gondang Sabangunan* and the ancestors is both structural and symbolic: sound, repertoire sequence, and accompanying performative actions create a liminal space where ancestral presence is invited, acknowledged, and negotiated. Thus, music acts as a ritual agent that connects social, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions.

The analysis shows that the function of calling the ancestors is realized through three main layers. First, the ritual layer, where *gondang* serves as a means of requesting blessings, establishing customary legitimacy, and maintaining genealogical continuity. Second, the performative layer, where musical practice not only represents meaning but also produces ritual reality through bodily actions, *tortor* movements, and participant

interaction. Third, the social layer, which emphasizes that ritual always takes place within the relational framework of Batak Toba society.

The musical structure of *Gondang Sabangunan* has been shown to support the process of calling the ancestors through patterns of repetition, gradual dynamics, and dialogue between instruments. This layered sound formation creates transformative conditions for ritual participants, allowing a shift in awareness from everyday space to sacred space. In this context, music does not function merely as a background, but as a mechanism that regulates ritual intensity, participation rhythm, and the symbolic legitimacy of customary actions.

The role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* becomes a social framework that determines how the ritual is carried out, who has the right to initiate the request, and how kinship relationships shape the musical and performative flow. This kinship structure ensures that the calling of the ancestors takes place in an orderly, ethical, and collectively meaningful way. Thus, *Gondang Sabangunan* demonstrates that ritual music is always closely connected to the social structure that supports it.

Theoretically, this research strengthens the view of ritual music function as formulated by Alan P. Merriam, which states that music plays a role in organizing social behavior and reinforcing belief systems. The performativity approach of Richard Schechner is also relevant in explaining how musical actions produce sacred experiences rather than merely representing them. Field data, including interviews with cultural practitioner Nurhayati Situmorang and musicians such as Viky Sianipar, show that the practice of *Gondang Sabangunan* continues to transform without losing its ritual function.

The findings of this research emphasize that the sustainability of *Gondang Sabangunan* depends on a balance between preserving ritual meaning and contextual adaptation. Modernization does not always eliminate the sacred dimension, instead, it can expand the space of cultural representation as long as relational principles, musical structure, and the *Dalihan Na Tolu* framework are maintained.

Thus, *Gondang Sabangunan* can be understood as a musical ritual practice that maintains the continuity of ancestral memory, strengthens collective identity, and negotiates the relationship between tradition and change. This research opens possibilities for further studies on the transformation of Batak ritual music in the contexts of tourism, contemporary performance, and diaspora community practices, thereby enriching ethnomusicological discourse on music as a social and spiritual action.

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