

# Form, Meaning, and Functions of the Nundang Padi Tradition: A Qualitative Study in Selali Village, South Bengkulu, Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study investigates the cultural significance of the Nundang Padi tradition practiced in Selali Village, Pino Raya District, South Bengkulu, Indonesia. The research aimed to explore both the meaning and the social functions of this agrarian ritual, which has been maintained across generations as a form of oral tradition. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews with cultural leaders and community members, and documentation of ritual practices. The findings reveal that the Nundang Padi tradition embodies two layers of meaning: denotative, reflecting gratitude for the harvest and preparation of seeds for the next planting cycle, and connotative, representing emotional and symbolic attachments to ancestral heritage and harmony with nature. In terms of function, the ritual serves recreational and aesthetic purposes through performances and dances, conveys moral and didactic values by transmitting cultural norms to younger generations, and fulfills religious functions by expressing collective prayers for safety and prosperity. These findings highlight the importance of Nundang Padi as an intangible cultural heritage that sustains social cohesion and reinforces community identity in an era of modernization. The study contributes to broader discussions on cultural resilience and underscores the need to preserve oral traditions as vital elements of sustainable cultural development.

Keywords: **Cultural Heritage; Function; Meaning; Nundang Padi; Oral Tradition; South Bengkulu**

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural traditions are integral components of collective identity and social continuity, serving as symbolic systems through which communities transmit values, beliefs, and practices across generations. In many societies, rituals and oral traditions are not only artistic expressions but also fundamental mechanisms for social cohesion and cultural resilience (Munandar et al., 2024; Wardekker et al., 2023). As intangible heritage, oral traditions encompass stories, songs, and ceremonial practices that provide meaning and structure to communal life. They persist despite rapid social transformation, reflecting the dynamic relationship between cultural memory and contemporary adaptation (Fiorentino & Chinni, 2023; Kennedy & Silverstein, 2023). Within this context, the study of ritual traditions such as Nundang Padi in Indonesia offers valuable insights into the ways local communities sustain and negotiate their cultural identity.

Indonesia, as one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, possesses a vast range of traditional practices, many of which are transmitted orally. These traditions play a crucial role in shaping local worldviews, moral orientations, and socio-religious values (Hasanah & Andari, 2020; Satria et al., 2022; Zohdi et al., 2023). However, they are increasingly threatened by globalization, urbanization, and the influence of digital culture, which often marginalize rural customs in favor of more homogenized global practices (Junaedi et al., 2023). In this regard, oral traditions such as the Nundang Padi ceremony not only preserve collective memory but also embody strategies of cultural resilience in the face of external pressures (Rahman et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2021).

The Nundang Padi tradition, observed in Selali Village, South Bengkulu, represents an agrarian ritual that combines spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions. As a form of oral tradition, it reflects the community's gratitude for the harvest, the symbolic rebirth of seeds for the next planting season, and the reinforcement of social solidarity (Affandi & Kosasih, 2019; Kurnia, 2015; Manan et al., 2022). The

ritual typically involves dance, music, costumes, and symbolic offerings, which together create a performance that is at once aesthetic, didactic, and religious. Such rituals have been shown to contribute to social integration by fostering intergenerational participation and reinforcing shared values within the community (Nurdiyana & Najamudin, 2022; Primamona, 2020). Moreover, rituals such as Nundang Padi exemplify how agricultural communities articulate their relationship with nature, ancestors, and the divine, linking material subsistence with spiritual significance (Huang, 2019; Pandanari, 2023; Sumarwati, 2022).

Studies on oral traditions in Indonesia and beyond emphasize that rituals are multi-functional: they entertain, educate, preserve moral codes, and express religious devotion. Recreational and aesthetic functions are evident in the music and dances that accompany ceremonies, while moral and didactic elements are transmitted through stories, symbols, and collective participation (Ridwan & Wahdian, 2017; RWD et al., 2018). Religious dimensions are reflected in prayers, offerings, and invocations of divine blessing, which integrate belief systems with everyday practices of subsistence and survival (Putra et al., 2023; Rostiyati et al., 2024; Sumiaty et al., 2023). These dimensions reveal that rituals function not merely as cultural residues of the past but as living practices that respond to the present needs of the community (Flannery et al., 2022).

Despite the importance of ritual traditions, scholarly attention has often been limited to descriptive accounts, focusing either on symbolic interpretation or on the preservation of cultural performances. While such studies are valuable, they frequently lack systematic analysis of how meaning is constructed at both denotative and connotative levels and how functions are enacted in specific socio-cultural contexts. Prior works on ritual studies in Indonesia have concentrated on widely recognized traditions such as slametan in Java or ngaben in Bali, while lesser-known traditions such as Nundang Padi remain underexplored (Flannery et al., 2022; Sumiaty et al., 2023). Furthermore, comparative literature suggests that most research tends to privilege either religious or aesthetic aspects, with insufficient attention to the interplay between recreational, moral, and religious functions in rural agrarian settings (Huang, 2019; Rostiyati et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

This research addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the meaning and functions of the Nundang Padi tradition in Selali Village, Pino Raya District, South Bengkulu, Indonesia. Specifically, it explores how the ritual is understood denotatively as gratitude for harvest and preparation for planting and connotatively as an expression of emotional attachment to ancestral heritage and natural harmony. It also investigates the multiple functions of the tradition, encompassing recreational, moral, and religious dimensions that sustain social cohesion and cultural continuity. By situating Nundang Padi within broader discussions on oral literature, intangible cultural heritage, and cultural resilience, this study aims to contribute to the global discourse on safeguarding local traditions as vital components of sustainable cultural development.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, which is widely recognized as an appropriate approach for exploring cultural meanings and functions embedded in traditional practices (Juwariyah et al., 2023; Suyitno et al., 2023). The research was conducted in Selali Village, Pino Raya District, South Bengkulu, Indonesia, where the Nundang Padi tradition has been preserved and practiced across generations. The participants of the study included local cultural leaders, elders, and community members directly involved in the performance of the tradition, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that information-rich cases were prioritized (Guest et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2015). This strategy enabled the researcher to capture diverse perspectives from individuals with profound knowledge and lived experiences of the ritual.

Data collection relied on multiple techniques to achieve triangulation and enhance the credibility of findings. First, non-participant observation was conducted during the ritual performances to document the sequence of events, symbolic gestures, costumes, and collective participation. Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with elders, cultural leaders, and community members to elicit narratives about the meanings and functions of the Nundang Padi tradition. Third, documentation of archival sources, photographs, and community records was reviewed to complement and cross-check primary data. These combined techniques align with recommendations in qualitative research that

emphasize the use of multiple data sources to ensure comprehensive and trustworthy insights (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Carter et al., 2014)

The researcher acted as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, a defining characteristic of qualitative inquiry. Field notes were recorded systematically, and interviews were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Data analysis was conducted thematically, following the iterative process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting patterns. The analysis focused on identifying denotative and connotative meanings as conceptualized in linguistic and cultural theories, alongside the functions of oral traditions as described in literary and anthropological frameworks. To enhance the reliability of the interpretations, peer debriefing and member checking were employed, allowing participants and academic peers to review and validate the interpretations. This procedure is consistent with qualitative research standards for ensuring trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Carter et al., 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Prior informed consent was obtained from participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect the identities of informants. The research protocol respected cultural sensitivities by adhering to local norms and engaging community leaders before and during fieldwork. This ethical stance reflects the recognition that cultural research requires not only methodological rigor but also respect for community values and heritage (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Pelzang & Hutchinson, 2018).

Overall, the qualitative descriptive approach adopted in this study enabled an in-depth exploration of the symbolic meanings and social functions of the Nundang Padi tradition. By combining observation, interviews, and documentation with systematic thematic analysis and rigorous ethical procedures, the study ensured both cultural sensitivity and academic reliability, thus providing robust findings that contribute meaningfully to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Detonotative and Connotative Meanings of the Nundang Padi Tradition

The findings reveal that the Nundang Padi tradition embodies two distinct but interrelated layers of meaning: denotative and connotative. At the denotative level, the ritual represents a literal expression of gratitude for agricultural abundance and a collective preparation for the next planting season, symbolized through the ritualized distribution of rice seeds to community members. This direct meaning resonates with the agrarian lifestyle of Selali villagers, for whom rice cultivation is not merely an economic activity but the foundation of communal survival. The denotative meaning thus captures the material and pragmatic aspects of the ritual, grounding it in everyday subsistence and the cyclical nature of agricultural production.

At the connotative level, however, the Nundang Padi tradition carries more profound symbolic and emotional attachments. Beyond the act of harvest celebration, the ritual reflects reverence for ancestral heritage, recognition of the spiritual interconnectedness between humans and nature, and an invocation of divine blessings for continued prosperity and protection. Community members interpret the tradition not only as a functional practice but also as an affirmation of identity and belonging, strengthening their sense of cultural continuity. The connotative meanings thus elevate the ritual into a domain of collective memory and symbolic resilience, ensuring that the values encoded within the tradition remain relevant across generations.

These dual layers of meaning align with linguistic and cultural theories of meaning that distinguish between the literal (denotative) and affective-symbolic (connotative) dimensions of communication (Noor Kamila, 2022; Siregar, 2022). In this case, Nundang Padi demonstrates how rituals operate as semiotic systems that simultaneously convey concrete agricultural practices and abstract cultural values. Similar patterns have been documented in other Indonesian rituals. Geertz (1973) observed that Javanese *slametan* encapsulates both pragmatic functions of communal meals and symbolic meanings of spiritual balance. Huang, (2019) emphasized how Balinese ceremonies articulate multiple layers of meaning, from economic mobilization to religious devotion. More recently, Yannas & Tzeranis (2021) showed that the Tedak Siten ritual, while denotatively marking a child's developmental milestone, connotes spiritual protection and familial solidarity.

Beyond Indonesia, studies in other cultural contexts also highlight the dual structure of ritual

meanings. Turner et al. (2017) argued that rituals often operate as both “social dramas” and “symbolic processes,” providing concrete actions while simultaneously expressing deeper cosmological principles. Foley (2012) similarly emphasized that oral traditions and rituals embed multilayered significances that bind communities through both performance and shared symbolic repertoires. In African agrarian rituals, Vansina (1985) documented how harvest ceremonies not only function to distribute resources but also symbolize fertility, continuity, and divine grace. These cross-cultural parallels reinforce the notion that the Nundang Padi tradition exemplifies a universal characteristic of rituals as sites of dual meaning, yet with unique local articulations tied to the ecology and history of South Bengkulu.

What distinguishes Nundang Padi from other rituals, however, is the explicit integration of ecological, spiritual, and communal values into a single ceremonial framework. The denotative dimension ensures agricultural continuity by preparing seeds for future planting, while the connotative dimension reinforces emotional bonds with the land and ancestors, thereby sustaining ecological stewardship and cultural resilience. This integrative function suggests that the ritual not only preserves cultural memory but also acts as a socio-ecological mechanism for maintaining harmony between humans and their environment. Such findings extend the literature on ritual meaning by showing that in agrarian societies, rituals are not merely symbolic performances but also strategies for ecological adaptation and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

In sum, the dual meanings of the Nundang Padi tradition confirm that rituals serve as both pragmatic and symbolic systems of communication. By uniting denotative functions of survival with connotative expressions of identity, spirituality, and heritage, the ritual sustains cultural resilience in a rapidly modernizing context. The findings therefore highlight the enduring relevance of rituals as living traditions, capable of negotiating between material necessity and symbolic meaning, while affirming community identity and cohesion in South Bengkulu.

### **Social and Cultural Functions of the Tradition**

The Nundang Padi tradition fulfills multiple interrelated functions that extend beyond the immediate context of ritual performance. First, it serves recreational and aesthetic functions through the incorporation of music, dance, costumes, and communal celebrations. The performance of *Tari Andun*, accompanied by traditional instruments and elaborate attire, provides not only entertainment but also a sense of beauty and collective pride. Such artistic elements reinforce the emotional attachment of the community to the ritual, ensuring its continuity across generations. As noted by Wan et al. (2017), aesthetic performances in Sasak oral traditions serve as both entertainment and cultural preservation, while Finnegan (2012) emphasized that performance artistry is central to the sustainability of oral traditions. Similarly, Foley (2012) argued that aesthetic enjoyment contributes to the vitality of oral performances, ensuring that cultural practices remain relevant and engaging in contemporary contexts.

Second, the ritual embodies moral and didactic functions by transmitting communal values such as solidarity, cooperation, and respect for elders. These values are reinforced through the collective labor involved in organizing and performing the ritual, where intergenerational participation plays a critical role. Moral and didactic elements are embedded in both the symbolic acts and the communal narratives shared during the ceremony. This aligns with Bauman (1975) perspective that oral traditions function as vehicles of moral instruction, as well as Foley (2012) claim that oral performances sustain normative frameworks within communities. In the Indonesian context, RWD et al. (2018) highlighted that cultural narratives in contemporary literature continue to carry didactic elements, illustrating the resilience of moral transmission across both oral and written forms.

Third, the ritual fulfills religious functions, particularly through prayers, symbolic offerings, and seed blessings. These acts connect the community with the divine, reinforcing the spiritual worldview that agricultural success is intertwined with divine favor and ancestral blessings. Such practices are consistent with Geertz (1973) interpretation of Javanese rituals as mechanisms for maintaining cosmic harmony and with Wan et al. (2017) analysis of Balinese rituals as expressions of devotional integration. Frisby (2020) also emphasized the religious symbolism in the Tedak Siten ritual, where spiritual protection is sought alongside practical developmental milestones. The



religious dimension of Nundang Padi highlights its dual role in providing both metaphysical reassurance and practical affirmation of agricultural prosperity. Table 1 summarizes these functions and illustrates their specific manifestations in the Nundang Padi tradition.

Table 1. Functions of the Nundang Padi Tradition

Function Type	Description	Manifestation in the Ritual
Recreational & Aesthetic	Provides entertainment and fosters appreciation of cultural artistry	Tari Andun dance, music, costumes, and communal celebrations
Moral & Didactic	Educates participants on values of solidarity, cooperation, and respect	Intergenerational involvement, collective organization, respect for elders
Religious	Expresses collective spirituality and invokes divine blessing	Ritual prayers, symbolic blood offerings, blessing and distribution of seeds

What distinguishes the Nundang Padi tradition is the integration of these three functions within a single cultural performance, resulting in a holistic ritual that simultaneously entertains, educates, and spiritualizes. While many rituals tend to emphasize one dominant dimension such as the primarily religious focus of Javanese *slametan* Geertz (1973) or the aesthetic orientation of certain Balinese performances Vansina (1985) Nundang Padi harmonizes recreational, moral, and religious functions in an equally significant manner. This integrative quality enhances its role as a unifying cultural expression, strengthening both social cohesion and cultural resilience within the community.

### Ritual as a Medium of Social Cohesion and Cultural Resilience

The Nundang Padi tradition also functions as a powerful medium for reinforcing social cohesion within and across communities. By gathering villagers from different hamlets, the ritual becomes more than a local celebration; it serves as an inter-village platform for fostering solidarity, renewing kinship ties, and facilitating the exchange of ideas and cultural practices. This collective participation reaffirms a shared identity, while simultaneously enabling individuals to position themselves as part of a broader cultural community. Turner et al (2017) conceptualized such phenomena as “communitas,” where ritual suspends social hierarchies and cultivates unity among participants. This study supports Turner’s perspective by showing that the Nundang Padi tradition temporarily dissolves boundaries between age groups, genders, and village affiliations, promoting a sense of egalitarian fellowship.

Beyond reinforcing social unity, the ritual contributes significantly to cultural resilience by preserving ancestral values and adapting them to contemporary realities. Hafstein (2018) argued that intangible cultural heritage provides communities with symbolic resources for navigating change, ensuring continuity in the face of globalization. Similarly, Smith (2006) emphasized that heritage is not merely a relic of the past but an ongoing social process of negotiation and meaning-making. The Nundang Padi tradition exemplifies this adaptability: while maintaining core symbolic elements such as prayers, seed blessings, and *Tari Andun*, it also accommodates modern influences such as digital documentation and broader community participation.

Comparative studies further underscore the resilience of rituals in rural contexts. Siregar (2022) showed that Javanese traditions such as *rasulan* persist by incorporating modern organizational forms while retaining their unifying functions. Nasution (2017) reported similar findings for Batak ceremonies, where ritual adaptations allow cultural continuity amidst urban migration. Globally, Vansina (1985) documented African agrarian festivals that continue to thrive by integrating contemporary needs with ancestral symbolism. These studies confirm that resilience in rituals emerges not from rigid preservation but from dynamic adaptation, a pattern also evident in the Nundang Padi tradition.

An additional feature that distinguishes Nundang Padi is its temporal rhythm: the ritual is performed only once every five years, a rarity among communal ceremonies that are often annual. This infrequency may enhance its symbolic power, as the anticipation of the event amplifies its social impact. Communities invest considerable effort in preparation, ensuring wide participation and heightened collective emotion. As argued by Csikszentmihalyi (1996), rituals derive much of their strength from the buildup of emotional energy, which can be sustained across long intervals if the

event is perceived as uniquely significant. In this case, the rare cycle of Nundang Padi creates a sense of sacred time that elevates its status as both a cultural and spiritual milestone.

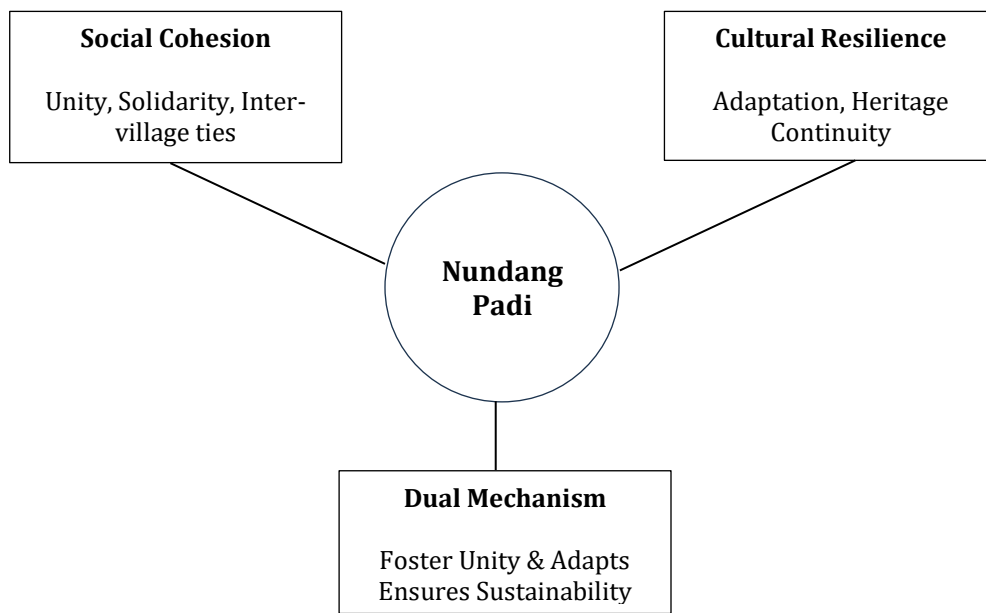


Figure 1. Nundang Padi as a Dual Mechanism: Social Cohesion and Cultural Resilience

This conceptual diagram illustrates how the Nundang Padi tradition operates simultaneously as a mechanism of social cohesion and cultural resilience. On the one hand, it fosters unity, solidarity, and inter-village ties by gathering diverse groups into a collective ritual space. On the other hand, it sustains cultural resilience by preserving ancestral heritage while adapting to contemporary contexts, thereby ensuring continuity across generations. The integration of these two dimensions highlights the dual function of the tradition, confirming that rituals in agrarian societies are not static remnants of the past but dynamic processes that balance communal identity with adaptive (Hafstein, 2018; Turner et al., 2017).

### Contribution, Implications, and Limitations

This study makes several significant contributions to the literature on intangible cultural heritage. Unlike previous research that has largely emphasized well-documented rituals such as the Javanese *slametan* or Balinese *ngaben* (Geertz, 1973; Nasution, 2017), the present work provides a systematic analysis of the Nundang Padi tradition in South Bengkulu, a ritual that has received limited scholarly attention. By employing a dual analytical framework of denotative and connotative meanings alongside multifunctional categorization, the research offers a more holistic understanding of ritual practices in agrarian contexts. This novelty highlights the role of lesser-known traditions in enriching anthropological and literary scholarship.

The findings carry important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they extend ritual studies by demonstrating how symbolic meanings and pragmatic functions coexist and reinforce one another in sustaining cultural continuity. This supports the argument that rituals cannot be reduced to mere symbolic artifacts but must be recognized as adaptive social practices that ensure resilience in local communities (Hafstein, 2018; Turner et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2021). Practically, the research emphasizes the urgency of preserving local traditions as community assets that promote intergenerational learning, social cohesion, and cultural sustainability. Policy makers and cultural stakeholders could integrate Nundang Padi into educational curricula, cultural tourism, and heritage conservation programs, thereby enhancing both local identity and broader cultural awareness.

Nevertheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single village context, restricting its generalizability to other cultural settings. The reliance on oral testimonies introduces subjectivity, as collective memory may shape narratives differently across individuals. Furthermore, the five-year cycle of the ritual limited opportunities for longitudinal

observation. Future studies could address these limitations by conducting comparative research across multiple regions, employing digital ethnography, and examining intergenerational perspectives to capture the evolving meanings and functions of the tradition.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Nundang Padi tradition in Selali Village, South Bengkulu, is a living manifestation of intangible cultural heritage that integrates pragmatic and symbolic dimensions to sustain community life. The ritual conveys denotative meanings of gratitude for harvests and preparation for future planting cycles, while also carrying connotative meanings that express reverence for ancestors, harmony with nature, and collective spirituality. Its functions extend across recreational and aesthetic enjoyment, moral and didactic instruction, and religious devotion, thereby ensuring that cultural values are transmitted across generations while fostering social solidarity. Moreover, the ritual operates as a dual mechanism of social cohesion and cultural resilience, uniting multiple villages in shared participation while adapting ancestral practices to contemporary contexts. The findings highlight the novelty of examining lesser-known agrarian rituals within Indonesia, extending the discourse on ritual studies beyond major ceremonies such as slametan or ngaben, and demonstrating the importance of localized practices in shaping communal identity. In practical terms, the research underscores the need for safeguarding initiatives and policy support that recognize the role of rural traditions in promoting cultural sustainability, intergenerational learning, and ecological stewardship in an era of rapid modernization.

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