



The Symbolic Meaning of Ulos in Batak Cultural Identity: A Weaving Tradition Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to uncover the symbolic meaning of ulos in the formation of Batak cultural identity through the perspective of the weaving tradition. Using a qualitative approach with text analysis, this study examines weavers' narratives, cultural documents, and representations of ulos motifs and structures as cultural texts containing a network of meanings. The analysis is conducted by interpreting the weavers' creative narratives and linking them to the social, aesthetic, and spiritual functions of ulos. The research findings indicate that ulos has layered meanings that reflect ancestral values, kinship relations, and customary legitimacy. It is produced through a creative process rich in personal experience and collective memory. The weaving tradition serves as an important space for the inheritance of cultural values, as weavers act as cultural agents, maintaining the continuity of ulos symbolism amidst social change. The study also found that the meaning of ulos is not only evident in its use in traditional ceremonies but is shaped throughout the process of motif creation through the weavers' reflection of cultural values. This demonstrates that Batak identity is dynamic and continuously negotiated through practices of cultural representation. The limitations of this study lie in the limited scope of informants and the lack of exploration of the meaning of ulos across all Batak sub-ethnicities. Further research is recommended to broaden the perspectives of users and examine the influence of globalization on motif transformation. This study provides theoretical and practical contributions to the preservation of Batak cultural heritage through a deeper understanding of the symbolism of ulos as a living cultural text.

Keywords: symbolic meaning, ulos, Batak, cultural identity, weaving tradition

Makna Simbolis Ulos dalam Identitas Budaya Batak: Perspektif Tradisi Tenun

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap makna simbolis ulos dalam pembentukan identitas budaya Batak melalui perspektif tradisi menenun. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis teks, penelitian ini mengkaji narasi penenun, dokumen budaya, dan representasi motif serta struktur ulos sebagai teks budaya yang mengandung jejaring makna. Analisis dilakukan dengan menafsirkan narasi kreatif penenun dan mengaitkannya dengan fungsi sosial, estetika, dan spiritual ulos. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ulos memiliki makna berlapis yang mencerminkan nilai-nilai leluhur, hubungan kekerabatan, dan legitimasi adat. Ulos dihasilkan melalui proses kreatif yang kaya akan pengalaman pribadi dan memori kolektif. Tradisi menenun berfungsi sebagai ruang penting bagi pewarisan nilai-nilai budaya, karena penenun berperan sebagai agen budaya, menjaga keberlangsungan simbolisme ulos di tengah perubahan sosial. Studi ini juga menemukan bahwa makna ulos tidak hanya terlihat dalam penggunaannya dalam upacara adat, tetapi juga dibentuk melalui proses penciptaan motif melalui refleksi nilai-nilai budaya oleh penenun. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa identitas Batak bersifat dinamis dan terus dinegosiasikan melalui praktik representasi budaya. Keterbatasan studi ini terletak pada terbatasnya cakupan informan dan kurangnya eksplorasi makna ulos di seluruh sub-etnis Batak. Penelitian lebih lanjut direkomendasikan untuk memperluas perspektif pengguna dan mengkaji pengaruh globalisasi terhadap transformasi motif. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dan praktis bagi pelestarian warisan budaya Batak melalui pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang simbolisme ulos sebagai teks budaya yang hidup.

Kata kunci: makna simbolis, ulos, identitas budaya Batak, tradisi tenun

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INTRODUCTION

Ulos, as one of the most prominent cultural heritages of the Batak people, has long been understood not simply as a woven cloth, but as a symbol of identity, genealogical relationships, and a structure of values that persists to this day (Simanjuntak, 2019; Sihombing, 2019; Hutagalung, 2020). In the context of modern socio-cultural development, as Batak society experiences global mobility and cross-ethnic cultural integration, ulos faces new challenges related to the interpretation and preservation of the weaving traditions that underpin its existence (Nasution et al., 2022). This situation demonstrates that ulos is not merely a material entity but also a symbolic field that is constantly being negotiated, especially as Batak society navigates the tensions between modernization and the demands of cultural preservation (Silaen, 2021). Thus, understanding the symbolic meaning of ulos through the perspective of weaving traditions is crucial for uncovering how Batak cultural identity persists and transforms within the currents of social change.

Changes in ulos consumption and production patterns over the past two decades have also attracted academic attention, particularly due to the increasing commodification of ulos in the tourism and creative industries sectors (Hutapea, 2020). This commodification often results in new interpretations that are not entirely in line with the traditional meanings born from the practice of weaving passed down through generations (Manik, 2022). When ulos is mass-produced using machines and marketed primarily as souvenirs, the symbolic values inherent in the weaving process—such as patience, prayer, and the spiritual connection between weaver, thread, and ancestors—are significantly diminished (Sitompul, 2018; Sibarani, 2020; Nababan, 2017). Studies in cultural anthropology further indicate that the shift from ritual-based to market-based production can weaken the sacred dimension of ulos, especially when traditional weaving rituals are simplified or removed (Nainggolan, 2017; Hutasoit, 2021). This

phenomenon raises critical questions about how Batak people today negotiate their cultural identity through ulos, particularly when tensions arise between symbolic and commercial functions.

In the context of cultural research, ulos has been studied from various perspectives, particularly within the frameworks of anthropology, folklore, and ethnography. However, limited research highlights the construction of ulos' symbolic meaning through the tradition of weaving as a textual and symbolic practice (Sinaga, 2020). Most previous research has focused on the social function of ulos in traditional ceremonies such as marriage, death, and kinship rites (Siregar, 2017). Other research has highlighted aesthetic aspects, motifs, and the transmission of values through oral narratives without prioritizing the weaving process as the primary unit of analysis (Hutagalung, 2016). Furthermore, changes in the lifestyles of younger Batak people and a decline in interest in weaving have placed this tradition under increasing threat, giving rise to a discourse on its revitalization, often focusing more on the final product than the process (Tambunan, 2021). This limited analytical focus opens up space for more in-depth and textual research into weaving practices as a primary source of meaning. A research gap emerging from the review of previous research lies in the lack of studies that position the weaving tradition not merely as a production activity, but as a cultural text containing symbols, narratives, and values of Batak identity (Pardede, 2023). The weaving tradition actually contains symbolic codes, such as color selection, motif configuration, and thread structure, which weavers interpret based on their cultural experiences (Ginting, 2019). However, there is little research that combines a textual analysis approach with qualitative methods to interpret this practice as a form of symbolic communication that plays a role in shaping and maintaining Batak collective identity. In other words, previous research has not fully explored ulos as a living cultural text,



interpreted in the process, not just in the final product.

The main problem in this research stems from the question of how the symbolic meaning of ulos is constructed, inherited, and interpreted through the weaving tradition amidst the currents of modernization and cultural commodification (Nainggolan, 2018). The research questions raised are: first, how the weaving tradition shapes the symbolic meaning of ulos in Batak society; second, how weavers, as cultural actors, reinterpret ulos symbols in a contemporary context; and third, how the dynamics of these meanings influence the construction of Batak cultural identity in the modern era (Hutauruk, 2022). This research question is formulated based on observations of changes in cultural practices, particularly when symbolic and economic values converge and form a new dialectic regarding ulos as a symbol of identity.

Based on this research question, the purpose of this research is to uncover the symbolic meaning of ulos as formed through the weaving tradition, explain how weavers understand and reproduce ulos symbols in the current socio-cultural context, and analyze how these meanings contribute to the formation of Batak cultural identity (Marbun, 2020). Using a qualitative approach and textual analysis, this research aims to uncover the symbolic layers embedded not only in ulos motifs but also reflected in the actions, narratives, and experiences of weavers as cultural subjects (Lumbantobing, 2021). This goal is expected to provide a more holistic understanding of ulos as a rich and complex cultural phenomenon.

Qualitative methods with text analysis are highly relevant because this study seeks to interpret weaving practices as a form of cultural discourse rich in meaning (Pasaribu, 2022). Textual analysis in this context focuses not only on the text in the form of ulos motifs, but also on verbal narratives, ritual practices, and symbols that emerge during the weaving process. Viewing the weaving process as a cultural text, every knot of thread, every color

change, and every motif structure is understood as a representation of values passed down through generations (Situmorang, 2019). This approach positions weavers as subjects of knowledge who interpret, create, and formulate identities through their work, making the meaning of ulos inseparable from the weavers' lived experiences.

Within the framework of contemporary issues, globalization and the development of the creative industry have eroded the traditional space of ulos weaving, while simultaneously opening up opportunities for new reinterpretations of ulos symbolism (Saragih, 2021). Many weavers now find themselves in an ambivalent position: maintaining traditional values while adapting to the needs of the modern market. This ambivalence creates an interesting dialectic between preservation and innovation, which directly impacts the form and meaning of the resulting ulos (Manurung, 2022). This is where research into the symbolic meaning of weaving traditions becomes relevant, as these dynamics can only be understood through an approach sensitive to the cultural and symbolic processes taking place in the field.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to enriching the study of ulos through a perspective that emphasizes the symbolic production process, not just the end result (Napitu, 2018). Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of Batak cultural studies through a textual analysis approach to material traditions, a relatively rare approach. Practically, this research can serve as a reference for cultural preservation programs, particularly in formulating strategies that focus not only on ulos products but also on honoring the weaving tradition as a primary source of cultural value (Harahap, 2020). Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the symbolic meaning of ulos can help the younger generation of Batak people re-appreciate their cultural heritage amidst changing times, thus maintaining their cultural identity and relevance.

Finally, this research is expected to fill a gap in the academic literature on ulos by revealing its

symbolic meanings born from the weaving tradition, an aspect often overlooked in previous research (Tampubolon, 2021). Through an in-depth examination of weaving practices, this study confirms that ulos is a living cultural text, continually written, read, and interpreted by the Batak people from generation to generation (Samosir, 2019). Thus, this study not only provides new insights into ulos but also enriches the discourse on how cultural identity is maintained, negotiated, and reproduced through symbols rooted in tradition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on ulos as a symbol of Batak culture have developed across various disciplines, but most still rely on classical anthropological perspectives that position ulos as part of social rituals, rather than as a cultural text lived through weaving practices (Siregar, 2016). From a symbolic anthropological perspective, ulos is often understood as a tool for cultural communication that encapsulates cosmological values, kinship structures, and social relations between clans (Sianipar, 2017). However, most of this research pays little attention to the process of cultural text production that occurs within the weaving tradition as a symbolic act. However, as explained in textual cultural studies, meaning is not only embedded in objects but also created through processes (Geertz, 1973; Hutapea, 2020). Therefore, recent studies emphasize the importance of viewing the weaving tradition as an interpretive space that serves as a primary source for constructing ulos meaning.

Research on ulos in the context of cultural identity shows that ulos plays a fundamental role in articulating Batak social relations and values, particularly through the practice of giving ulos (Simbolon, 2018). Early studies described ulos as a religious symbol that serves to connect humans with ancestors, protect life, and mark ritual transitions (Harahap, 2015). However, this research focused more on ritual functions and therefore failed to explore in depth how symbolic knowledge is embodied in the motifs, colors, and

structures of the weave. However, textual research shows that every visual pattern can be understood as a “sign” that conveys a broader cultural message (Barthes, 1981; Pardede, 2022). Therefore, understanding ulos needs to be expanded through textual analysis that reads motifs as a sign system. In the context of traditional textile studies, several studies have shown that the weaving tradition is a creative process steeped in spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic values, not only for the Batak but also for other Indonesian communities such as the Toraja and Flores (Wulandari, 2019). This research indicates that the weaving process contains ritualistic dimensions, such as the use of prayers, certain taboos, and the timing of weaving, all of which influence the symbolic meaning of the woven product (Tamalene, 2020). In the Batak context, research on weaving rituals remains limited and has not been widely examined from a textual analysis perspective. Research conducted by Sitompul (2019), for example, focuses more on social changes within the weaving community, without examining how the practice generates structures of meaning that later become part of Batak cultural identity.

Several other studies highlight changes in the form and function of ulos as a result of modernization and globalization. The commodification of ulos in the fashion and tourism industries has created new interpretations that are not entirely consistent with traditional meanings (Manik, 2021). Through a cultural economics approach, ulos is understood as a cultural asset that can be repackaged to meet market needs. However, this perspective often overlooks the symbolic meaning inherent in its production process. Meanwhile, a more critical qualitative approach, such as research by Sitanggang (2020), emphasizes the risk of losing the sacred value of ulos when mass production replaces traditional weaving. However, this research has not yet explored how weavers understand and renegotiate ulos symbolism in the context of the modern market.

Studies on cultural identity also make important contributions to understanding the role



of ulos in Batak society. In cultural identity theory, material symbols such as traditional cloth are understood as a means of maintaining collective memory and identity differentiation (Hall, 1997; Sinaga, 2021). Research on Batak society shows that ulos is often used as a marker of ethnic identity, both in traditional activities and in diaspora life (Marbun, 2020). However, these studies generally use a macro-level approach to identity without examining how that identity is constructed through micro-cultural practices such as weaving. However, from a textual analysis perspective, everyday practices such as weaving constitute a form of cultural knowledge that can be read as a “narrative” (Foucault, 1972; Gultom, 2022). Thus, the weaving tradition plays a key role in producing narratives of Batak identity, a role that has not been widely explored in previous literature.

Textual studies on ulos are still relatively rare, but some studies are beginning to point in new directions. Research by Lumbanbatu (2022), for example, uses semiotic analysis to interpret the ulos Ragidup and Bintang Maratur motifs as representations of Batak cosmology reflecting the relationship between humans and nature and ancestors. However, this research focuses solely on the visual text in the form of motifs, without considering the act of weaving as part of the sign system itself. From the perspective of cultural practice theory, action is part of the “text” that must also be read because it produces and reproduces structures of meaning (Bourdieu, 1977; Hutagalung, 2023). Therefore, this research seeks to broaden the analysis by incorporating weaving practices as both a unit of analysis and a cultural text.

In qualitative research, text analysis is a crucial approach for discerning the symbolic meanings hidden within forms of material culture (Fairclough, 1992; Pasaribu, 2021). Text analysis in the context of ulos means reading ulos as a visual and ritual text, with rules, structures, and social contexts that shape its interpretation. Previous studies have employed partial text analysis, for

example, in reading historical narratives of ulos or specific motifs, but have not comprehensively positioned the weaving tradition as a meaningful “textual process.” This demonstrates that there is still ample theoretical scope for developing textual analysis methodology in the study of ulos and Batak cultural identity.

On the other hand, research on weavers as cultural subjects is also receiving increasing attention. Ethnographic studies have shown that female weavers in many Southeast Asian cultures play a crucial role as keepers of cultural memory (Arifin, 2018). In the Batak context, weavers are often viewed as agents transmitting ancestral values through their work (Samosir, 2020). However, most of this research focuses on the social aspects, rather than on how symbolic knowledge is embodied in the act of weaving and how that act can be read as a cultural text. A textual analysis perspective allows this research to interpret the weavers’ experiences, weaving techniques, and oral narratives as integral parts of the construction of ulos meaning.

Several contemporary studies emphasize the importance of understanding ulos within the context of generational change. Younger Batak people are showing a declining interest in weaving, potentially disrupting the symbolic knowledge embedded in this tradition (Tambunan, 2021). However, these studies generally focus on socioeconomic or educational aspects, rather than the symbolic and textual dimensions lost when weaving practices decline. From a cultural analysis perspective, the loss of practice means the loss of part of the cultural text that shapes identity (Storey, 2018; Simanjuntak, 2022). This suggests that the study of ulos is not only relevant for understanding cultural heritage but also crucial for mapping the transformation of Batak identity.

Based on the literature reviewed above, it is clear that research on ulos encompasses various aspects such as ritual, ethnic identity, commodification, aesthetics, and social change. However, there remains a gap in the literature that

combines symbolic analysis of ulos with the perspective of weaving tradition as a textual process. Few studies position the weaver as the subject of symbolic knowledge and view the weaving process as a symbolic act that generates meaning. Thus, this study has a clear theoretical position in filling this gap by using qualitative methods and textual analysis. This approach allows ulos to be read as both a visual text and a ritual, while the weaving process is understood as a performative act that constructs Batak cultural identity (Sinaga, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand the symbolic meaning of ulos as a cultural construct born from the Batak weaving tradition. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study seeks to explore the experiences, meanings, and interpretations of cultural actors, which cannot be explained through numbers, but through narratives, symbols, and sociocultural contexts (Creswell, 2018; Flick, 2014; Patton, 2015). From a cultural research perspective, a qualitative approach allows researchers to enter the space of meaning that develops within cultural actions to capture the patterns, values, and symbols ingrained in the ulos weaving process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Thus, this study positions ulos not merely as a material object but as a living cultural text that is continuously shaped through everyday practice.

This research design is descriptive-qualitative, focusing on textual analysis of the processes, motifs, visual structures, and narratives that accompany the ulos weaving tradition. A descriptive-qualitative design is considered appropriate because the research not only describes the phenomenon but also analyzes the meaning structures and symbolic relationships embedded in the practice of weaving (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moleong, 2019). In the context of cultural studies, such a design helps researchers capture the symbolic dynamics that emerge from the

relationship between weavers, threads, motifs, and traditions, so that the resulting meanings can be understood as living social constructions (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1967; Hall, 1997). In other words, this research design places the weaving process as the main focus of analysis to uncover the symbolism that shapes Batak cultural identity.

The primary method in this research is text analysis, a method used to interpret signs, symbols, and narratives as forms of cultural communication (Fairclough, 1992). Text analysis in this study was applied not only to ulos products but also to their production processes, such as color selection, weaving techniques, the sequence of motif creation, and the oral narratives conveyed by the weavers. This approach aligns with semiotic theory, which views culture as a collection of signs that can be analyzed through their visual, material, and narrative structures (Barthes, 1981). Thus, text analysis allows researchers to read ulos as a visual and ritual text, while weaving practices are viewed as symbolic acts that performatively create and transmit cultural meaning.

Research data were collected through observation and documentation. Observations were conducted to capture weaving activities as symbolic actions occurring within specific social spaces, as recommended in qualitative research, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the context of cultural behavior (Spradley, 1980). Through participant observation, researchers can directly observe how the weaving process is carried out, how weavers interpret the motifs they create, and how social interactions among weavers influence the production of meaning. In cultural research, this type of observation is considered crucial because symbols often only become apparent in practice (Sahlins, 1985).

In-depth interviews were conducted with weavers and Batak people knowledgeable about ulos. In-depth interviews allowed researchers to obtain personal narratives and subjective interpretations of the symbolic meaning of ulos in their cultural life, as described in the



phenomenological method in qualitative studies (Van Manen, 1990). Through interviews, researchers were able to explore weavers' understanding of the colors, motifs, and spiritual meanings that accompany the ulos-making process, thereby enriching textual analysis of weaving products and practices.

Documentation was used to complement data collection in the form of photographs of the weaving process, field notes, and recordings of weavers' narratives. Documentation is a crucial element because textual analysis requires visual data that can be read as signs, as outlined in the methodology of cultural symbol analysis (Rose, 2016). This documentation also helps strengthen researchers' interpretations of ulos symbolism and provides a visual archive that can be analyzed in depth to understand motif structure and representation of meaning.

Data analysis was conducted through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). However, text analysis was applied throughout these stages to interpret the symbols and narratives emerging in the data. In the analysis process, researchers identified motifs, colors, weaving techniques, and weavers' narratives as units of sign that can be interpreted as representations of Batak cultural values. This interpretation was conducted hermeneutically, namely by reading the text through its social and historical context, as recommended by Ricoeur (1981). Thus, data analysis produced not only descriptions but also in-depth interpretations of the structure of ulos meaning.

Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods. Triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation to ensure consistency of interpretation, as recommended in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Interpretive validity was also emphasized in text analysis, as symbolic

meanings must be tested through their compatibility with the cultural narrative and social context of the Batak community. Thus, the triangulation process helps ensure that the researcher's interpretations are aligned with the reality on the ground and the understandings of cultural actors.

Through a qualitative approach and text analysis, this research method uncovers the symbolism of ulos as a cultural construct born from the weaving tradition. This approach not only provides a descriptive overview of ulos but also opens up space for in-depth interpretation of the act of weaving as a process of meaning production that shapes Batak cultural identity. Therefore, this research method places the weaving tradition at the center of analysis, crucial for understanding the symbolic meaning of ulos in the context of contemporary Batak culture.

RESULTS

The results of this study were obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, and text analysis of the motifs, colors, weaving techniques, and cultural narratives accompanying ulos. These findings illustrate that the weaving process is not merely a material production activity, but rather a symbolic process that generates and preserves Batak cultural identity, as emphasized by the theory of the production of cultural meaning (Hall, 1997). Through the weaver's interaction with materials, tools, and inherited narratives, ulos is produced as a cultural text containing a layered symbolic structure. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the weaving tradition functions as a cultural mechanism that maintains the continuity of Batak values, as understood in the concept of cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Gultom, 2022).

The following table presents an initial summary of the research findings to facilitate understanding before the in-depth narrative description.

Table 1
 Summary of Main Research Findings on Ulos Motif Aspects

Motif Aspects	Key Findings	Cultural Implication
Structural Motif	Ulos motifs are arranged in hierarchical visual patterns reflecting Batak cosmology	Reinforces worldview related to balance, order, and spiritual hierarchy.
Genealogical Motifs	Certain motifs symbolize lineage, kinship ties, and inter-clan relationships	Strengthens identity, clan affiliation, and social integration.
Ritual Motifs	Motifs used in ceremonial ulos carry symbolic messages for blessings, protection, and life transitions.	Supports ritual legitimacy and expresses communal values.
Symbolic Geometric Motifs	Repeated geometric forms represent philosophical concepts such as harmony, endurance, and continuity.	Contributes to continuity of cultural philosophy across generations.

Table 2
 Summary of Main Research Findings on Ulos Colour Aspects

Colour Aspects	Key Findings	Cultural Implication
Red	Represents life-force, vitality, protection, and ancestral strength	Signifies spiritual power, blessings, and authority in rituals.
Black	Symbolizes the realm of ancestors, endurance, and stability.	Functions as a grounding identity marker connecting individuals to lineage and tradition.
White	Represents purity, sincerity, and sacredness in ceremonial contexts.	Used in rituals of birth, marriage, and purification, strengthening moral and spiritual values.
Yellow/Gold	Indicates prosperity, dignity, and elevated social position	Marks social status and ceremonial honor within Batak cultural hierarchy.
Combination	Each combination follows cultural rules and carries layered meanings tied to ritual purposes.	Reinforces social order, gender roles, and symbolic continuity in Batak society

Table 3
 Summary of Main Research Findings on Weaving Process Aspects

Weaving Process Aspects	Key Findings	Cultural Implication
Ritual Preparation	Weaving often begins with symbolic intentions, prayers, or adherence to taboos	Reinforces spiritual connection between weaver, ancestors, and cultural values.
Weaver's Technique	Techniques are inherited through generations and follow customary rules and rhythm.	Preserves traditional knowledge, ensuring continuity of Batak weaving heritage.



Stages of Weaving	Each stage (setting threads, dyeing, weaving, finishing) carries symbolic meaning.	Embeds cultural narratives into the cloth, strengthening identity through practice.
Time and Labour	The process requires patience, discipline, and emotional focus	Reflects core Batak values such as endurance, commitment, and communal responsibility.
Spiritual-Symbolic Engagement	Weaving is seen as a dialogue among weaver, thread, and ancestral presence.	Maintains cosmological balance and expresses living cultural identity.

Table 4
 Summary of Main Research Findings on Weaving Narrative Aspects

Weaving Narrative Aspects	Key Findings	Cultural Implication
Personal Stories of Weavers	Weavers often describe weaving as an inherited calling shaped by family lineage and early-life experiences.	Strengthens intergenerational cultural continuity and identity transmission.
Narratives of Meaning-making	Weavers articulate symbolic interpretations of motifs, colours, and rituals based on lived experience.	Creates a community-based cultural knowledge system that enriches collective identity.
Challenges in Modern Context	Weavers narrate difficulties such as declining interest among youth, market pressures, and machine-made products.	Highlights threats to cultural sustainability and the need for preservation strategies
Emotional and Spiritual Connections	Many weavers express that weaving involves emotional dedication, prayer, and ancestral presence	Reinforces weaving as a spiritual-cultural practice rather than mere economic activity.
Role of Women Weavers	Narratives emphasize women's central role in safeguarding weaving knowledge and cultural values.	Affirms women as cultural bearers and key agents of Batak identity preservation.

Table 5
 Summary of Main Research Findings on Change of Meaning Aspects

Change of Meaning Aspects	Key Findings	Cultural Implication
From Sacred to Commercial	Ulos that were once produced for ritual and ancestral purposes are increasingly made for tourism and market demand.	Causes reduction of sacred values and shifts ulos from spiritual artefact to commercial commodity.
Shift in Production Methods	Traditional handwoven ulos is gradually replaced by machine-made textiles.	Weakens symbolic depth embedded in the weaving process and challenges cultural authenticity.
Transformation of Social Meaning	Ulos is now used more widely as fashion or decorative craft outside ritual contexts	Expands cultural visibility but reduces ritual specificity and genealogical meaning.

Generational Interpretation Changes	Younger generations interpret ulos more as identity markers than sacred cultural obligations.	Leads to selective preservation, where symbolic values persist but ritual meanings decline.
Market-driven Colour & Motif Variations	New designs are created to match consumer tastes rather than cultural rules.	Risks detaching motifs and colours from their original cosmological and genealogical significance.

This table illustrates that the research findings place the weaving tradition as central to the formation of meaning, directly influencing Batak cultural identity, as explained in the study of material culture (Hodder, 2012).

1. Symbolic Meaning of Ulos Motifs as Cosmological Texts

The textual analysis of ulos motifs shows that each motif is not merely an aesthetic form, but a cosmological representation depicting the relationship between humans and nature and their ancestors. The Ragidup motif, for example, is interpreted as a symbol of longevity and spiritual protection, as explained by weavers and reinforced in literature on Batak symbolism (Lumbanbatu, 2022). The vertical and horizontal structures within ulos motifs are interpreted as representations of the upper, middle, and lower worlds, consistent with the cosmological structure described in Batak ethnographic studies (Sianipar, 2017). Thus, ulos motifs can be understood as visual texts that embodied the cosmological values of the Batak people.

Interviews with weavers revealed that they understand motifs not simply as patterns to be followed, but as ancestral messages containing moral values. One weaver stated that certain motifs should only be woven when the heart is “clean and calm,” because they convey a message of life (Sitompul, 2022). This statement demonstrates that weavers not only reproduce motifs but also reinterpret ancestral messages in the weaving process. This aligns with the theory of symbol interpretation, which asserts that cultural action is an ongoing process of reading meaning (Ricoeur, 1981). Thus, ulos motifs function as living texts

and are continually reproduced in changing social contexts.

2. Color Selection as a Representation of Spirituality and Social Structure

The analysis shows that the colors in ulos hold significant symbolic meaning in shaping Batak cultural identity. Red is understood as a symbol of life and courage, black as spiritual protection, and white as purity, as mentioned in interviews and supported by ethnographic studies of traditional textiles (Wulandari, 2019). Weavers stated that color combinations must follow certain rules passed down from previous generations, as deviations are considered to “change the message of the ulos” (Manurung, 2020). This suggests that color selection is not an aesthetic desire, but a product of cultural value structures.

Textual analysis of the use of color in various types of ulos reveals that color not only marks the ulos’ function in traditional rituals but also signifies social identity, particularly in gender relations and generational roles. For example, certain colors in ulos for weddings signify hopes for fertility and prosperity, while the dominant red in ulos Mangulosi for girls signifies blessings from parents (Harahap, 2015). Thus, color functions as a structural social sign, as emphasized in the theory of color semiotics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). The research results show that Batak identity is manifested through color codes that are passed down from generation to generation.

3. Ritual Meaning in the Weaving Process

Observations of weavers reveal that the weaving process is carried out like a ritual, not



simply a production task. Weavers begin the activity with a short prayer, cleaning their equipment, and observing auspicious days based on the Batak traditional calendar, as also described in research on textile rituals in Southeast Asia (Arifin, 2018). These actions contain spiritual values, demonstrating that the weaving process is understood as a medium of communication between the weaver and their ancestors. Many weavers describe “hearing” specific messages while weaving intricate motifs, a narrative that reflects a strong spiritual connection (Samosir, 2020).

In textual analysis, the weavers’ hand movements, the rhythm of the weaving, and the rules of the weaving process are read as part of a “cultural grammar,” a term defined by Geertz (1973) when discussing action as text. This process demonstrates that the meaning of ulos lies not only in the motifs or colors, but also in the practice of weaving. Through the rhythm of the weaving, weavers produce not only cloth but also a collective memory that connects them to their ancestors. This shows that the weaving tradition plays an important role in shaping Batak cultural identity through symbolic practices that occur daily.

4. Oral Narratives as a Mechanism for Passing on Meaning

In-depth interviews revealed that weavers maintain oral narratives regarding the origins of ulos, ancestral myths, spiritual values, and unwritten rules that accompany certain motifs. These narratives form an interpretive framework that reinforces the visual meaning of ulos, as explained in the theory of cultural narratology (Bal, 2009). These narratives are integral to the symbolic production process because weavers understand ulos through stories that give meaning to their actions (Nainggolan, 2018). These narratives also serve as a mechanism for intergenerational cultural education.

Textual analysis of the stories told by weavers shows that the oral narratives contain moral and

philosophical structures consistent with the motifs and colors of ulos. For example, stories about the Bintang Maratur motif are always associated with the hope for harmony in domestic life, a message that aligns with the motif’s visual form (Lumbantobing, 2021). These results reinforce the view that the meaning of ulos cannot be separated from the narrative that accompanies it, as emphasized in the theory of cultural hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1981). Thus, narrative is an important pillar in the inheritance of Batak cultural identity.

5. Negotiating Meaning in the Context of Modernization

Research findings indicate that the modernization and commodification of ulos have created significant changes in its symbolic meaning. Many weavers acknowledge that market demands often force them to adapt colors and motifs to suit modern aesthetics, potentially obscuring the sacred meaning of ulos (Manik, 2021). This aligns with the concept of popular culture, which often urges the reinterpretation of traditional meanings (Storey, 2018). Textual analysis of commercial ulos reveals that some symbolic elements have been simplified, while their spiritual meanings are not always incorporated.

The younger generation of Batak who consume modern ulos interpret ulos more as a visual identity than a spiritual symbol, as revealed in interviews (Simanjuntak, 2022). However, this process of negotiating meaning does not completely erase old values but rather creates a new, more flexible form of identity. As Hall (1997) explains, cultural identity is always in the process of being reshaped. These findings demonstrate that ulos now serves as a space for dialogue between tradition and modernity.

6. Overall Meaning of the Findings

Overall, the research results indicate that ulos, as part of Batak cultural identity, cannot be understood solely as a visual artifact, but as a living

cultural text that continues to be produced through the weaving tradition. The motifs, colors, weaving process, and weavers' narratives function as a system of signs that collectively form the structure of ulos' meaning, as emphasized in the theory of cultural semiotics (Barthes, 1981). These findings demonstrate that the weaving tradition is a crucial mechanism in the reproduction of Batak identity, while also serving as an arena for negotiating meaning amidst modernization.

This research demonstrates that ulos possesses complex and dynamic symbolic power. The weaving tradition serves as a foundation that reinforces the continuity of identity, while social change creates space for reinterpretation that keeps identity relevant in the contemporary context. Thus, ulos is not simply a text of the past, but one that is continually rewritten by the Batak people through the weaving tradition and their daily cultural practices.

DISCUSSION

This research discussion attempts to situate findings regarding the symbolic meaning of ulos within Batak cultural identity as a result of textual interpretations of the narrative of the weaving tradition. Through a qualitative approach and textual analysis, this research demonstrates that ulos is not simply a cultural product, but also a living sign within the meaning system of Batak society. The research findings demonstrate that the symbolic dimension of ulos continues to expand in meaning along with social change and cultural dynamics, as emphasized by Barthes (1972; Turner, 1967) that symbols in culture are always polysemic, meaning they possess multiple layers of meaning. In this context, ulos is understood as a cultural text that is never final because its interpretation process continues in Batak social practices. In this context, ulos is understood as a cultural text that is never final because its interpretation process continues within Batak social practices (Siahaan, 2019; Simanjuntak, 2020; Hutagalung, 2021), who all highlight how

the meaning of ulos shifts following changes in ritual usage, modernization, and communal identity negotiations.

The main findings indicate that the weaving tradition plays a significant role in maintaining the symbolic meaning of ulos, as the ulos production process contains sacred and historical values that are passed down from generation to generation. This aligns with Geertz's (1973) view of culture as a web of meaning spun by humans themselves, making the practice of weaving not only a production technique but also an activity of affirming identity. This research found that weavers interpret ulos as the "spirit of Batak culture," as each motif is considered to have a specific social function and kinship value. This understanding explains why ulos has been preserved despite the introduction of various modern technologies and the influence of the community's cultural consumption patterns.

In relation to previous research, the results of this study reveal several significant similarities and differences. Silalahi's (2018) study emphasized that ulos symbolizes the connection between humans and their ancestors, while Hutapea (2020) highlighted the social function of ulos in traditional ceremonies. The findings of this study corroborate both opinions but provide a new nuance by viewing ulos not merely as a symbol of tradition but as a text that is continually reinterpreted in the context of contemporary culture. The novelty of this research lies in its textual analysis approach to the weavers' narratives, which demonstrates that the meaning of ulos emerges not only during use or traditional ceremonies but is deeply structured within the process of its creation. Through interpretation of weavers' conversations, diaries, and interviews, this study found that the construction of ulos' meaning begins when the thread is strung, not just when the ulos is worn.

During the interpretation process, it was discovered that ulos possesses interconnected layers of aesthetic, spiritual, and functional meaning. These aesthetic layers emerge from the structure of the



motifs, colors, and woven patterns, which are created based on a specific philosophy. The spiritual aspect is evident in the belief that ulos carries ancient energy—blessings from ancestors—which strengthens relationships between family members, as described by Sianipar (2019) regarding spirituality in Batak tradition. Meanwhile, the functional layer is present in the various uses of ulos at life stages such as birth, marriage, and death. These findings indicate that ulos functions as a multi-sited symbol relevant in various life contexts.

The weavers' interpretations of ulos also demonstrate the dynamic nature of cultural identity, which is not static. In Batak tradition, identity is not understood as a fixed category, but as a social construct that is continually negotiated through cultural symbols. This aligns with Hall's (1996) argument that cultural identity is fluid and shaped through practices of representation. The weavers revealed that each ulos has a "story"—either ancestral tales or personal experiences projected into the weave. This story is what gives ulos its unique value and distinguishes it from other textile products. This finding demonstrates that ulos is not merely a cultural object but also a narrative medium that carries the collective memory of the Batak people.

A discussion of the position of this research finding indicates that ulos functions as a stable yet adaptive identity marker. On the one hand, ulos remains a symbol of tradition, closely guarded through customary rules and inherited motif structures. On the other hand, ulos has undergone adaptations in modern contexts, such as use in everyday clothing, art performances, and cultural festivals. In accordance with Hobsbawm's (1983) opinion on invented tradition, adapting tradition does not mean losing authenticity, but rather a creative process to maintain cultural relevance. The findings of this study indicate that ulos has survived precisely because the Batak people have allowed room for innovation, particularly in coloring and motif variations that reflect the needs of the times.

One of the unique findings of this study is the central role of the weavers' narratives in shaping the meaning of ulos. Previous research has focused more on ulos within the context of traditional ceremonies or social functions within society, while this study focuses on the cultural producers—namely the weavers—as the subjects who create meaning. Methodologically, the textual analysis approach to the weavers' narratives opens up new interpretive space, demonstrating that symbols are understood not only from the perspective of the user but also from the creative process of the maker. Clifford (1988) emphasized that cultural meaning cannot be separated from the perspective of the cultural actors themselves, thus providing a theoretical basis for rereading ulos.

The table shows that this study's contribution lies in demonstrating that ulos possesses a creative dimension that has been understudied in previous research. By examining ulos from the perspective of the weavers, this study offers a more holistic approach to understanding cultural symbols. This approach not only reveals the meanings apparent in traditional practices but also reveals the internal processes underlying their creation.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the preservation of Batak culture through a deeper understanding of ulos symbolism. By highlighting the weavers' narratives as a key component of the research, the results provide a more comprehensive picture of how cultural identity is constructed and maintained through creative practices. In the context of cultural globalization, this research is important because it demonstrates that traditional symbols can survive if their meanings are continuously nurtured and dynamically interpreted, echoing Appadurai's (1996) argument regarding the importance of meaning production in maintaining local cultural identity.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the study of symbolic anthropology and cultural studies by demonstrating that textual analysis can be effectively used to interpret cultural symbols in the context of traditional production. Practically,

this research provides new understanding for cultural actors, local governments, and cultural preservation institutions regarding the importance of supporting the sustainability of the weaving tradition as the core of the meaning of ulos and Batak identity.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to uncover the symbolic meaning of ulos in the formation of Batak cultural identity through the perspective of weaving traditions, using a qualitative approach based on text analysis of weavers' narratives, cultural documents, and the representational structures inherent in ulos. This research is structured on the assumption that ulos is not simply a textile artifact, but a meaningful cultural text constructed through creative practices and passed down through generations. In accordance with Geertz's (1973) view of culture as a network of meanings, this study attempts to interpret ulos as a symbol that continues to undergo a process of interpretation in the social life of the Batak people.

The results show that ulos has multi-layered meanings, encompassing aesthetic, spiritual, and social dimensions. The aesthetic dimension is evident in the structure of the motifs, colors, and composition of the weaving, which is based on ancestral philosophy deeply understood by the weavers. The spiritual dimension is reflected in the belief that ulos carries the energy of the elderly or blessings, thus its use is believed to connect humans with ancestors, as underscored by Sianipar (2019) regarding spirituality in cultural symbols. Meanwhile, the social dimension is present in the function of ulos as a marker of kinship relations, life stages, and customary legitimacy as has often been described in previous studies such as Silalahi (2018) and Hutapea (2020).

The findings of this study demonstrate an important novelty, namely that the symbolic meaning of ulos does not only emerge in the context of traditional ceremonies or its use in society, but is actually strongly shaped in the production process by the weavers. Through text

analysis of the weavers' narratives, it is known that each ulos is not only an aesthetic work, but also contains personal experiences, collective memories, and cultural values that the weavers reflect in each motif. This is in line with Barthes (1972), who emphasized that cultural symbols are always polysemic and formed through a continuous process of representation. Thus, ulos can be understood as a narrative medium that reflects the dynamics of Batak identity that is not static, but continues to develop according to social needs and the context of the times.

The research findings also indicate that the weaving tradition plays a strategic role in maintaining the sustainability of Batak cultural identity. The weaving process is not merely an economic or aesthetic activity, but also a cultural practice that strengthens intergenerational ties. Weavers function as cultural agents, ensuring that each ulos (traditional cloth) retains ancestral values despite modernization. This supports Hall's (1996) argument that cultural identity is constantly negotiated through practices of representation, including creative practices such as ulos weaving. Despite its numerous contributions, this study has limitations that require attention and further investigation. The first limitation is its focus on textual analysis through weavers' narratives and cultural documents, thus precluding in-depth observation of the full context of ulos use in Batak social life. As Clifford (1988) noted, cultural interpretation requires a cross-situational understanding, further research should incorporate the perspectives of ulos users in traditional ceremonies and modern contexts. The second limitation is the limited scope of informants to weavers from a particular region, so that the variations in the meaning of ulos in various Batak sub-ethnic groups (Toba, Karo, Pakpak, Mandailing, Angkola, and Simalungun) have not been comprehensively mapped. The third limitation concerns the lack of more specific exploration of the influence of globalization on the transformation of motifs and techniques for making ulos, even though Appadurai (1996) shows that



global cultural flows can significantly change local meanings.

Thus, further research is recommended to broaden the scope of informants, include the perspectives of ulos users in various traditional and modern contexts, and conduct comparative analyses across Batak subcultures to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Furthermore, deeper research into the interaction between weaving traditions and contemporary creative industries is also crucial to understanding ulos's place within global cultural dynamics.

Overall, this study concludes that ulos is a meaningful symbol of Batak identity that continues to be produced through the weaving tradition. This meaning is alive and well due to the close relationship between the weavers' creative narratives, ancestral values, and the Batak people's social need to affirm their identity amidst changing times. By reading ulos as a cultural text, this research makes significant theoretical and practical contributions to efforts to preserve and reinterpret Batak cultural heritage.

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