



Communication Strategy and Cultural Branding of Mangulosi in Batak Toba Intercultural Marriage

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the practice of mangulosi in Batak Toba intercultural marriages, focusing on how the ritual was adapted, interpreted, and communicated when full customary procedures were not performed. The research addressed the problem of how cultural identity and symbolic meaning were preserved within a hybrid wedding context. The objective was to analyze how communication strategies and cultural branding were enacted through the ulos symbol as part of mangulosi. A qualitative case study approach was employed. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with family members, elders, and the bridal couple, as well as documentation in the form of photographs and videos. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involved data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings showed that mangulosi retained its symbolic value as a blessing and identity marker despite its simplified performance. Selective adaptations such as shortened verbal expressions, the choice of generalized ulos, and explanatory commentary ensured that the ritual remained accessible to intercultural participants while preserving its core meaning. The ulos functioned as both a cultural emblem and a branding device that projected Batak identity beyond its traditional context. Emotional expressions such as tears, embraces, and gestures further reinforced the ritual's meaning and facilitated shared understanding.



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INTRODUCTION

Intercultural marriage families in Indonesia have positive attitudes toward heritage (Indarti & Manara, 2025). Among the Batak Toba community, marriage is traditionally embedded with rich symbolic rituals that reinforce cultural values and collective identity. Mangulosi is a significant ritual in Batak Toba weddings, symbolized by the gift of uros cloth, representing ritual sanctity and love between the couple (Siregar et al., 2024). The ulos symbolizes blessings, prayers, and affection from the family. However, in contemporary contexts, particularly among Batak Toba people living in diaspora, intercultural marriages are often conducted without the full observance of traditional rituals. This shift raises questions about how sacred symbols such as mangulosi are adapted, reinterpreted, and communicated in non-traditional settings. Culture is not static but continuously negotiated in response to social changes and intercultural encounters (Tri, 2024).

Ulos transcends its physical nature as a textile, serving as a symbolic object closely tied to Batak Toba cosmological beliefs (Hariati & Purwarno, 2024). It carries spiritual, emotional, and social meanings that extend from birth to death ceremonies. The ceremonial presentation occurs through mangulosi, a traditional practice involving complex conversational strategies and turn-taking patterns, though some community members now consider it time-consuming and costly (Purba et al.,

2023). It is no longer confined to ritual obligations but emerges as a cultural emblem of Batak identity preserved and communicated even in non-adat ceremonies. This practice demonstrates the community's effort to manage symbols strategically, ensuring that Batak cultural identity remains visible and relevant despite cultural hybridity (Mulyana, 2023).

From a communication studies perspective, the adaptation of cultural symbols such as ulos can be meaningfully analyzed through Symbolic Interaction Theory. This theory posits that meaning arises through social interaction, is interpreted by individuals, and is renegotiated within specific contexts (Efendi et al., 2024). In the case of intercultural marriages, families, couples, and guests serve as social actors who reproduce and reinterpret the meaning of mangulosi. A ritual that was once exclusively tied to traditional marriage is now selectively incorporated into non-adat ceremonies as a symbolic gesture of cultural respect. This adaptation illustrates how symbolic interaction enables cultural identity to be preserved while simultaneously accommodating intercultural dynamics (Piller, 2021).

Previous studies have largely focused on the symbolic meaning of ulos and mangulosi within the *ideal* traditional Batak Toba wedding context. These works valuably highlight ulos as a bearer of social and spiritual values that maintain cultural continuity. However, a critical research gap exists. Little scholarly attention has been paid to the practice of mangulosi in non-traditional or intercultural wedding contexts. Critically, existing research tends to treat these symbols as *static*, focusing on documenting their *heritage* meaning (what they mean) but failing to analyze the *process* of their negotiation and adaptation (how they are changed and managed). Specifically, no research has examined how mangulosi functions not only as a ritual but also as a strategic act of cultural branding whereby symbols are consciously managed and communicated to assert Batak identity in intercultural spaces (Holt & Cameron, 2021). This gap is pressing, as globalization and cultural hybridization increasingly compel ethnic groups to strategically adapt their traditions.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore how communication strategies and cultural branding management are enacted through the symbol of mangulosi in Batak Toba intercultural marriages. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: How are communication strategies used by actors (families, the couple) to negotiate and communicate the meaning of the mangulosi symbol in an intercultural wedding context?; How is the mangulosi practice managed as a form of cultural branding to assert and perform Batak Toba identity in a non-adat setting?. Employing Symbolic Interaction Theory, this research examines how cultural symbols are negotiated, redefined, and strategically communicated in non-traditional wedding settings. By doing so, the study contributes both theoretically enhancing intercultural communication scholarship and practically, offering insights into how traditions can be sustained and positioned as cultural identity markers through strategic communication and branding in an era of globalization.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the symbolic and communicative meanings of mangulosi in Batak Toba intercultural marriages. The case study method was chosen because it allows an in-depth exploration of unique cultural phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). Specifically, this study utilizes a single-case design. While a single case study is often perceived as limited in its generalizability, this selection is methodologically justified because the aim of this research is not statistical generalization, but rather analytical generalization (Yin, 2018). The focus is on generating a rich, in-depth, and holistic understanding of the *process* of meaning negotiation and cultural branding *strategies* which would be lost if the study superficially covered multiple cases. A single-case design is particularly appropriate for answering "how" research questions and can serve as a powerful illustrative case to uncover complex intercultural communication dynamics.

The research population consisted of Batak Toba families who conducted intercultural marriages without performing the complete set of traditional wedding rituals. From this population, one intercultural marriage case was purposively selected as the primary subject, involving a Batak Toba groom and a non-Batak bride. This case was chosen due to its high relevance to the research

questions, namely the visible presence of a clear mangulosi adaptation process. Additional key informants included family members, community elders, and cultural leaders who directly participated in or observed the mangulosi procession.

Data collection techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations focused on verbal and nonverbal communication during the mangulosi procession, while interviews were conducted with family members and elders to capture their interpretations of the ritual. Documentation such as photographs, video recordings, and family records complemented the primary data and provided contextual depth. This study employed interactive analysis, which emphasizes three interrelated stages: data reduction, data presentation, and the formulation and verification of conclusions (Miles et al., 2019). This iterative process allowed the researcher to identify emerging patterns, interpret symbolic meanings, and validate findings through triangulation. To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted with key informants, while data triangulation (across observation, interviews, and documentation) *within this single case* enhanced the validity of the findings.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal how mangulosi, a central ritual in Batak Toba traditional weddings, is adapted and performed in the context of an intercultural marriage where not all customary procedures are observed. The selected case involved a Batak Toba groom and a non-Batak bride. Data show that the mangulosi ritual was retained as a primary symbolic element, driven by the Batak family's desire to preserve their heritage while simultaneously asserting their cultural identity.

Communication Strategies and Meaning Negotiation in Mangulosi Adaptation

The first set of findings focuses on the communication strategies used by actors to negotiate and interpret the mangulosi ritual in an intercultural context. Unlike in a full traditional wedding, the mangulosi ritual in this case was performed in a simplified form. Observation showed the core procession the draping of the ulos by the parents was retained, but it was not followed by extended *umpasa* (customary poetic utterances) or ceremonial dances. Verbal communication was significantly condensed. Instead of complex *umpasa*, the groom's parents offered blessings using short, direct statements. For instance, one statement recorded during observation was: "May this ulos protect your household and bind you in harmony."

Unveiling Communication Strategies in Mangulosi Ritual



As verbal communication was shortened, nonverbal communication became crucial. The physical act of draping the ulos was the primary nonverbal symbol representing parental blessing. Observations also noted solemn expressions, clasped hands, and light embraces, which emphasized the ritual's emotional depth. Furthermore, the spatial arrangement where the couple sat side-by-side

facing the family as the ulos was draped nonverbally communicated unity and equality. On the receiving end, the non-Batak bride showed respect by slightly bowing and smiling as a sign of acceptance, indicating a mutual negotiation of meaning. Emotion also played a key role; observers noted that family members, especially the groom's mother, became emotional (shedding tears of joy) during the procession, which further reinforced the moment's sanctity.

Interviews revealed how the meaning of mangulosi was co-constructed by the primary actors. For the Batak Toba groom, the ritual was vital for identity: "I may not have all the Batak rituals in my wedding, but with ulos, at least I feel connected to my roots." Conversely, the non-Batak bride interpreted it as a sign of familial acceptance: "I don't fully understand the custom, but I know it means they accept me as part of the family, and that makes it important to me."

Management of Mangulosi as Cultural Branding and Identity Assertion

The second set of findings relates to how mangulosi was strategically managed as a form of cultural branding to perform Batak Toba identity for a diverse audience. Interviews with key informants indicated that the decision to retain mangulosi was a deliberate act. One elder explained, "Without ulos, it feels incomplete. Even if the full adat is not followed, ulos carries our blessing and identity." Another elder added, "When we do this in a mixed marriage, we show others that Batak culture still lives. Even without the full adat, the ulos remains memorable."

The management of this ritual was also visible in pragmatic adaptations. Traditionally, different types of ulos are used depending on kinship roles. In this case, however, the family strategically selected one type of ulos with a general meaning. One informant noted, "We chose ulos ragidup because it means long life and prosperity. It is easier for everyone to understand, including those who don't know the rules." This pragmatic adjustment demonstrates a negotiation between maintaining tradition and making it accessible to intercultural participants.

During the wedding reception, many non-Batak guests were present. Observation and documentation (video) showed that the mangulosi moment was intentionally highlighted in the program, with the emcee providing a brief explanation of the ritual's meaning to the audience. This drew the guests' attention, and some later asked further about its meaning. For the Batak family, this interaction became an opportunity to share and explain their culture. Thus, mangulosi functioned not only as an internal ritual but was also managed as a communicative "bridge" to transmit cultural values beyond the Batak community.

DISCUSSION

Symbolic Interaction in the Practice of Mangulosi

This discussion analyzes how Symbolic Interaction (SI) Theory explains the *process* of mangulosi adaptation. The key finding that the ritual was structurally simplified yet interpersonally enriched directly challenges a static view of ritual. Rather than merely repeating the findings, we argue that SI demonstrates how meaning is not rigidly inherent in the symbol (the ulos itself) but is actively negotiated and *reconstructed* through social interaction (West et al., 2018). In the analyzed case, the interaction between the family (givers) and the couple (receivers) transformed mangulosi from a rigid customary obligation into a flexible symbolic act. The simplification of *umpasa* (customary poetic utterances) was not evidence of *lost* meaning, but rather evidence of a *shift* in the focus of meaning. Meaning was transferred from procedural adherence to a concentrated emotional exchange, where brief verbal blessings and nonverbal communication (such as solemnity and emotional tears) became the primary vehicles for the message.

This negotiation of meaning is evident in the dual yet complementary interpretations of the actors. For the groom, mangulosi functioned as an affirmation of identity (a connection to cultural roots). Conversely, for the non-Batak bride, it was interpreted as a symbol of acceptance (integration into the family). This is a classic example of the SI principle that a single symbol can be *polysemous* carrying multiple meanings yet still function as a shared frame of reference that unites the interaction (Mulyana, 2023). The presence of community elders further provided collective validation for this

newly negotiated meaning. Their statements that the marriage “feels incomplete” without ulos served as a social endorsement, lending cultural legitimacy to the adapted form of the ritual and showing that symbolic interaction is validated by community norms.

However, stronger theoretical engagement demands that we consider alternative interpretations of this finding. While our data suggest a harmonious adaptation, a more critical perspective might question whether this simplification constitutes a form of cultural “tokenism.” Was the ritual’s essence (tied to complex Batak cosmology and kinship structures) sacrificed for a surface-level gesture, making it more easily “consumed” in an intercultural context? It is possible that the bride’s perceived “acceptance” was not a true *shared meaning* but a form of *polite deference* to her partner’s family traditions. Symbolic Interaction Theory does not only explain success; it also accounts for the potential for communicative *failure*. If adaptation goes too far, a ritual risks losing its deep cultural meaning, becoming only an empty “performance” of identity.

Despite this risk, the case illustrates mangulosi as a performative communication that crosses cultural boundaries, serving as an “identity anchor” for the family. Nonverbal emotional communication solemnity, gestures, emotional tears is often universally understood (Piller, 2021). This allowed non-Batak guests to grasp the “seriousness” of the moment, even without understanding its linguistic intricacies. Furthermore, this symbolic interaction did not end at the ritual moment. As documentation data (photographs and videos) showed, by being captured and shared (Aston, 2021), this adapted mangulosi is reinforced and disseminated. Its meaning extends beyond the physical space into mediated spaces, further re-inscribing identity in a digital era.

In summary, the lens of Symbolic Interaction is crucial for understanding mangulosi not as a static relic, but as a living, dynamic communicative practice. It endures precisely because of its capacity to be renegotiated, allowing it to function simultaneously as a sacred blessing, an identity marker, and an intercultural bridge in contemporary marriage.

Cultural Branding and the Negotiation of Mangulosi in Intercultural Contexts

The study’s findings can be explained not only through interpersonal interaction (Symbolic Interaction) but also through the lens of cultural branding management. The key finding that the ritual was selectively adapted and pragmatically simplified indicates a conscious, strategic action. This was not a passive adaptation but an active curation of identity. The Batak Toba family deliberately chose which elements to retain (the symbolic core of the ulos) and which to discard (lengthy *umpasa*, complex kinship rules) to fit the intercultural context.

This process aligns strongly with the principles of cultural branding, which involves the distillation of complex traditions into potent, recognizable, and easily communicable core symbols (Holt & Cameron, 2021). In this case, mangulosi was positioned as the primary “brand” of Batak identity. By focusing on the *ulos ragidup* (with its general meaning of “prosperity”), the family made the tradition accessible to a non-Batak audience. The informant’s statement that the ulos was “easier for everyone to understand” is clear evidence of an audience-oriented branding strategy. The goal was to balance authenticity (maintaining core meaning) with comprehensibility (being understood by outsiders), which is central to effective intercultural communication (Grigoryev & Berry, 2022).

Intercultural negotiation is the mechanism through which this branding is implemented. Our findings show this negotiation occurred at multiple levels. *First*, at the performative level, where the emcee explicitly “translated” the ritual’s meaning to the guests, turning the ritual from an internal practice into a pedagogical moment for an external audience. *Second*, at the receptive level, where the non-Batak bride’s respectful gestures and the guests’ curiosity signaled mutual adjustment (Kim, 2021). The ritual became a communicative “bridge,” not a cultural “wall.”

However, herein lies the theoretical tension raised by the findings a point often overlooked. Critics might argue such adaptation is not equal negotiation but rather cultural assimilation or commodification. By “packaging” mangulosi for easy consumption, the Batak family may be unwittingly participating in the “paradox of cultural branding” (Holt & Cameron, 2021). On one hand, branding increases the visibility and relevance of mangulosi in intercultural spaces. On the other hand, as the elders feared (“if we cut too much... our children may not know the real meaning”), this

branding risks superficializing the ritual's meaning. It risks reducing a rich, cosmological tradition to a merely "memorable" visual identity marker.

Therefore, this finding must be interpreted critically. While this pragmatic adaptation succeeds as a short-term communication strategy in a diasporic context (where full *adat* practice is often not feasible), it raises significant questions about the long-term sustainability of the tradition's depth. This study suggests that cultural branding is a double-edged sword: it ensures the survival of the symbol in a hybrid context, but perhaps at the cost of its original semantic integrity.

Cultural Branding Through the Ulos Symbol

The adaptation of mangulosi transcends symbolic interaction; it functions as a deliberate strategy of cultural branding. This discussion moves beyond the *how* of negotiation (Symbolic Interaction) to the *why* of the strategic adaptation. Cultural branding theory posits that identity is projected through resonant cultural symbols to engage audiences beyond the original community (Holt & Cameron, 2021). Our analysis argues that the mangulosi ritual was strategically reconfigured as a branding device. The family effectively distilled the complex Batak culture into its single most recognizable and communicable element the ulos to maintain cultural visibility in a setting dominated by non-Batak norms. This act of "distillation" is a core branding tactic, turning the ulos into the "visual and symbolic anchor" of the Batak identity for all attendees.

The branding dimension is further reinforced by the ritual's mediation. The circulation of the event's images and videos on social media is not merely documentation; it is an *amplification* of the brand. This act detaches the ulos from a singular, physical event and transforms it into a mobile, "branded cultural icon." This mobility allows the symbol to travel across digital spaces, reinforcing identity while engaging new audiences, which is the ultimate goal of a successful brand. The conscious intent behind this strategy to position the ulos as a cultural "logo" that condenses identity into a memorable form is a clear example of strategic identity management.

Furthermore, the ulos operates as a relational brand. Its function is twofold: it is projected *externally* to non-Batak guests as a marker of identity, and it is directed *internally* to the non-Batak bride as a symbol of integration. This aligns with scholarship on intercultural communication where symbols function as "relational bridges" to foster inclusion and belonging (Chen & Starosta, 2024). For the bride, receiving the ulos is a tangible entry point into her new family's identity, demonstrating the symbol's power to build relational, not just cultural, meaning.

However, this branding strategy is inherently paradoxical, creating the central theoretical tension of this study. While simplifying the ritual into an "iconic symbol" (the ulos) succeeded in making Batak culture accessible and visible, it simultaneously risks reductionism. This concern, voiced by community elders, resonates directly, caution on cultural branding: emphasizing a single, powerful symbol for its communicability may "narrow the perception" of the culture, overshadowing the complex kinship structures and cosmological beliefs that give the ritual its traditional richness (Holt & Cameron, 2021). The findings thus reveal the ambivalent nature of cultural branding: it is a necessary strategy for cultural survival and relevance in intercultural settings, but it may simultaneously dilute the very tradition it seeks to preserve.

We can further analyze the *ulos* itself as the perfect "brand asset." Its efficacy as a symbol stems from its potent combination of tangibility, visual distinctiveness, and narrative power. Unlike the *umpasa* (poetic utterances), which are ephemeral and linguistically exclusive, the ulos is a physical, tactile object that can be seen, touched, and kept. This materiality allows it to function as a lasting souvenir of the cultural exchange. Its visual appeal makes it highly "shareable" in a media context (as noted), while the *act* of draping it provides a powerful, emotional "brand story" one of parental love and blessing that is universally legible, even if the specific cultural codes are not.

This branding is not accidental; it is a clear act of strategic curation managed by the family's senior members. In this context, the parents and community elders function as "brand managers" or cultural "gatekeepers." Their decision-making process consciously prioritizing the visually accessible ulos while simplifying the complex linguistic elements demonstrates a high degree of *audience awareness*. They understand that to communicate in an intercultural space, the "brand message" must

be clear and concise. This reframes the adaptation from a passive dilution of culture to an active, agentic choice to ensure the brand's survival and intelligibility in a "foreign market."

This branding strategy, however, carries a significant risk related to audience reception. While the goal is to make the ulos a "memorable" symbol of identity, this very memorability can lead to aestheticization where the non-Batak audience interprets the ulos merely as a beautiful or "exotic" textile, divorced from its sacred, spiritual, and kinship-based meanings. This is the core danger of reductionism: the symbol becomes a *commodity* (a cultural artifact) rather than an *icon* (a sacred symbol). This process makes the cultural marker highly visible but also uniquely vulnerable to forms of cultural *misappropriation*, where the "brand" is adopted without any of its underlying "brand values" (the Batak cosmology).

The Emotional and Affective Dimensions of Communication

This study's findings reveal that the communicative power of *mangulosi* is not limited to cognitive symbolism but is profoundly driven by its emotional and affective dimensions. Rather than being a mere byproduct of the ritual, affect functions as a primary communication channel. Emotions are not just internal states but are influenced by external social objects, aligning with the idea that they are social signals guiding interpretation (Abrutyn & Lizardo, 2020). In this case, the affective displays tears, solemnity, and embraces were not just reactions; they were purposeful communicative acts. They functioned to convey the sincerity of the blessing, bridging the intercultural gap where simplified language failed. For the non-Batak bride, who was unfamiliar with the ritual codes, these emotional expressions became the *lingua franca*, allowing her to interpret the act as one of genuine welcome and acceptance.

This affective power extended beyond the couple, creating a sense of "communitas" that bound the diverse audience in a shared emotional experience. The collective focus and hushed reverence of the non-Batak guests underscore this point. This shared feeling is also a critical component of cultural branding; a brand resonates not just through its message but through its *emotional appeal*. The affective intensity of the *mangulosi* is what makes the "ulos brand" memorable and charges it with relational value. The subsequent circulation of photographs capturing these emotions serves to amplify this affective meaning, transforming the ritual from a private moment into a public, emotional asset.

However, a stronger theoretical engagement must consider an alternative interpretation. The analysis thus far assumes a universal and harmonious reading of these affective displays. This perspective overlooks the fact that the expression and interpretation of emotion are deeply culturally coded (Kim, 2021). While this case suggests successful communication, a critical interpretation must acknowledge the high *risk* of affective misinterpretation in an intercultural setting. For instance, an open display of weeping, interpreted as "sincerity" by the Batak family, could potentially be interpreted as "excessive" or "uncomfortable" by a family with different emotional norms. The bride's "respectful bow" might not signify a true shared understanding, but rather a form of polite deference to an emotional performance she did not fully comprehend.

The findings also show that these emotional displays are not spontaneous but are socially constructed performances consistent with SI theory. The *variation* in affect such as the elders' prescribed solemnity versus the family's more open joy demonstrates that participants perform emotions according to their cultural roles and the situational context. Therefore, the affective dimension is a holistic communicative act that combines cognitive symbolism with culturally regulated emotional resonance. The endurance of *mangulosi* in intercultural contexts depends critically on this affective power, which makes the ritual meaningful, memorable, and relationally significant even after its formal structure has been simplified.

This socially constructed nature of affect can be analyzed more deeply through the sociological lens of "emotional labor." We can argue that the Batak Toba family, particularly the senior members like the groom's mother, are not just *feeling* emotion but are actively *performing* it as a necessary strategy for intercultural bridging. This emotional labor the conscious and unconscious effort to manage and display certain feelings to achieve a desired social outcome is what makes the

ritual "work" in this context. The tears and solemnity are communicative resources, intentionally or intuitively deployed to *produce* an authentic-feeling state of sincerity and acceptance. This performance becomes the primary evidence of the ritual's legitimacy for the non-Batak bride, who lacks the cultural framework to judge the ritual by its procedural *adat* correctness.

Furthermore, this reliance on emotion signifies a fundamental shift in the ritual's communicative logic. The traditional *mangulosi* ceremony, with its complex *umpasa*, relies heavily on cognitive and prescriptive communication. The *umpasa* are not just blessings; they are codified, collective wisdom, legal pronouncements, and historical narratives passed down. By simplifying the ritual and omitting these linguistic components, the family has effectively shifted the communicative burden from the cognitive domain (the transmission of *adat* knowledge) to the affective domain (the performance of *familial sincerity*). The authority of the ritual no longer rests on the collective, ancestral wisdom of the *umpasa*, but on the immediate, personal, and visible emotional authority of the parents. This is a profound change: the ritual is de-collectivized and re-personalized to meet the demands of an intercultural, individualized context.

This shift from the cognitive to the affective is precisely what makes *mangulosi* an effective cultural brand. A diverse, non-Batak audience cannot be expected to understand the complex linguistic and cosmological codes of the *adat*. However, they can instantly recognize and connect with the *affective* display of parental love, solemnity, and joy. The emotion itself becomes the "brand story" a simple, universal, and powerful narrative that bypasses the need for complex cultural translation. This emotion creates an "affective anchor," which is what makes the symbol of the *ulos* "memorable" and "meaningful" to outsiders. The guests do not remember the rules of the ritual, but they remember the *feeling* of the moment, and that feeling becomes indelibly associated with the *ulos* symbol.

However, this reliance on affect as a *lingua franca* is fraught with peril and demands a more critical alternative interpretation. The analysis thus far has assumed a harmonious and successful emotional transfer. We must question the asymmetrical power dynamic inherent in this emotional exchange. The non-Batak bride, in particular, is in a low-power, receiving position. We must consider the possibility that her "polite deference" is not a sign of "co-constructed meaning" but a coping mechanism in the face of an overwhelming, and perhaps *coercive*, emotional display. When an entire family engages in a deeply emotional, public ritual directed at an outsider, that individual may feel immense pressure to reciprocate respectfully, regardless of their true internal state. What we interpret as "successful" communication could, from a more critical standpoint, be interpreted as a form of emotional coercion, where acceptance is performed under duress because refusal would constitute an unimaginable social rupture.

Therefore, the affective dimension is far more than just a component of the communication; it is the primary engine of the adaptation itself. It is the "glue" that allows the simplified, symbolic "brand" (the *ulos*) to carry the full weight of the complex, traditional "product" (the *adat* blessing). The emotion is what validates the ritual's simplified form, bridges the knowledge gap for the non-Batak participants, and makes the event memorable for all. It is simultaneously the ritual's greatest adaptive asset in an intercultural world and its most significant point of theoretical vulnerability, masking potential power imbalances and communicative failures beneath a veneer of shared harmony.

Continuity and Change in Batak Cultural Identity

This study's findings on *mangulosi* in an intercultural context present a dynamic interplay between cultural continuity and change. The analysis reveals that continuity is not achieved *despite* change, but *through* it. The *ulos* cloth is a core symbol of Batak identity, preserved through local wisdom and traditional practices, reflecting spirituality and cultural values (AN, 2024). This finding challenges earlier ethnographic work that emphasized the sacred, holistic, and indivisible nature of the full *adat* wedding. Our study argues that in contemporary intercultural contexts, continuity does not require rigid replication; rather, it is sustained through the strategic retention and elevation of core symbols, while the peripheral ritual structures are allowed to adapt.

The *change* observed the omission of *umpasa*, the use of a generalized ulos, and the simplification of gestures is not a sign of cultural erosion but a pragmatic strategy of adaptation. This is a clear form of identity negotiation, where practices are reshaped to balance the need for "authenticity" with the demands of "inclusivity" and "comprehensibility" for an intercultural audience (Kim, 2021). This adaptation extends to the ritual's mediation; the curation of the event through photography and social media, which often centers the simplified, emotional moment of the draping, is itself a change in how Batak identity is performed. Identity is no longer just enacted in the ritual but is also branded and circulated on digital platforms, further shifting the practice from a holistic, private rite to a public, symbolic statement.

This balance between continuity (the symbol) and change (the practice) is not harmonious; it is the central tension of this study. The anxiety voiced by community elders that younger generations might reduce Batak culture *solely* to the ulos, neglecting the complex customary network is the empirical manifestation of this dilemma. This finding directly supports the "paradox of cultural branding" (Holt & Cameron, 2021), which posits that while elevating a single iconic symbol increases visibility and "brand" recognition, it simultaneously risks oversimplifying the complex tradition it represents. The ulos secures identity continuity but, in doing so, exposes the culture to reductionist interpretations.

Ultimately, the practice of *mangulosi* in this context exemplifies the fluid negotiation of modern cultural identity. The ulos persists as the non-negotiable anchor of continuity, while the ritual adaptations reflect the necessary, strategic changes required for effective intercultural communication. This demonstrates that Batak cultural identity is resilient not because it is rigid, but precisely because it is flexible. It is capable of preserving its core values while adapting its form to navigate the shifting landscapes of a multicultural, mediated world, even as it confronts the inherent risks of that adaptation.

The role of the intercultural audience particularly the non-Batak spouse is more than just a passive catalyst for change. Their presence *actively compels* the Batak Toba family toward self-articulation: to define and prioritize what constitutes the "non-negotiable core" of their identity (the ulos) versus the "adaptable periphery" of the ritual (the procedures). This is a key characteristic of a "diasporic identity," which is often formed and fortified in its contrast to a dominant or "Other" culture. The Batak Toba identity, in this context, becomes more self-conscious and strategically curated precisely because it must be *explained* to outsiders, transforming an implicit understanding into an explicit performance.

Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize the agency of the actors in this process. This finding rejects a pessimistic narrative of "cultural loss" or "traditional erosion" that often dominates globalization studies. Instead, the Batak Toba family emerges as empowered agents who are actively reinventing their cultural practice. *Mangulosi* is not merely *preserved*; it is *reconfigured* to serve a new function transforming from an internal community ritual into an intercultural communication tool. This research thus contributes to the wider academic debate by demonstrating that tradition and modernity are not opposing binary forces. Rather, tradition can be a flexible resource that is strategically mobilized to negotiate identity in a hybrid, modern world.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings of this study offer several key implications. Theoretically, this research contributes to intercultural communication scholarship by demonstrating how Symbolic Interaction (SI) theory and cultural branding theory intersect. We extend the application of SI, arguing that in contemporary intercultural contexts, the "negotiation of meaning" (SI) is often a "strategic curation of meaning" (branding). The theoretical implication is that these two processes exist in *tension*: while SI explains the successful co-creation of meaning (e.g., the bride's "acceptance"), cultural branding highlights the *risk* of this co-creation being based on a strategically *simplified* or "tokenized" symbol (as discussed in the alternative interpretations).

Practically, this study moves beyond a simple recommendation for "flexibility." The key implication for intercultural families and Batak community leaders is the necessity of managing the

paradox of adaptation. For families, this suggests the need for explicit dialogue about *which* elements of a tradition are core and *why*, to avoid adaptation becoming unintentional reductionism. For cultural organizations, this research highlights that while branding cultural markers (like ulos) is a vital strategy for visibility and survival in a diaspora, it must be paired with pedagogical efforts to preserve the deeper, complex knowledge (the *adat* structures, the cosmological meanings) that the brand itself cannot contain (Holt & Cameron, 2021).

This study is bound by specific limitations. As a single-case study, its findings are rich in depth but cannot be statistically generalized. The dynamics observed in this specific Batak Toba–non-Batak pairing may differ significantly from those in other contexts (e.g., different ethnic combinations, urban versus rural settings, or families in the Batak homeland). Furthermore, the temporal scope of this research is limited to the wedding event itself. We have captured the *process* of negotiation, but not its long-term *consequences*.

These limitations point to clear directions for future research. First, comparative studies are needed to examine how other Indonesian ethnic groups (or other global cultures) negotiate ritual adaptation in intercultural marriages. Second, longitudinal research would be highly valuable, tracking these intercultural families over time to understand how the meaning of *mangulosi* evolves and how this "branded" cultural identity is transmitted (or not) to the next generation. Finally, mixed-methods studies could complement ethnographic depth with quantitative surveys to assess how widespread these attitudes toward adaptation are within the broader Batak Toba diaspora, providing a more comprehensive picture of this evolving cultural practice.

A further practical implication extends to national cultural policy and education, particularly in pluralistic societies like Indonesia. Often, cultural preservation efforts focus on a "top-down" model of static documentation (archiving the *adat*). This study champions a "bottom-up" perspective, highlighting the agency of communities in ensuring their traditions *live* and *evolve*. The implication for policymakers is that sustainable cultural policy must support this flexibility, creating platforms for intercultural dialogue rather than simply subsidizing static performances. For educators, this research suggests a shift from teaching traditions as fixed historical facts to teaching them as dynamic, communicated practices, fostering intercultural competence by showing *how* traditions are negotiated in real life.

A further methodological limitation relates to the potential for social desirability bias in the interview data. An intercultural marriage, by its nature, involves significant negotiation, which can often be fraught with conflict. The participants in this study may, consciously or unconsciously, present a "harmonized" narrative of the *mangulosi* adaptation, emphasizing the successful integration and downplaying the disagreements or cultural frictions that may have preceded it. The findings, therefore, likely represent the *post-negotiated outcome* the successful public performance of unity and may not fully capture the difficult process of compromise or the unresolved tensions that might persist within the family dynamic.

Building on the theme of cultural branding, a critical avenue for future research is the digital ethnography of *mangulosi*. This study noted the role of social media in circulating the ritual's image, but future work could specifically analyze *how* platforms like Instagram or TikTok shape the ritual's performance and meaning. Does mediated circulation create a standardized, "Instagrammable" version of *mangulosi* that accelerates the reductionism feared by elders? Furthermore, this branding intersects with economics. Future research should also explore the commodification of the *ulos* in these contexts. When a sacred symbol is successfully "branded" to an intercultural audience, it inevitably creates a new market, raising questions about authenticity, economic exploitation, and the changing relationship between the sacred and the commercial.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the adaptation of *mangulosi* in Batak Toba intercultural marriages, moving beyond a simple narrative of cultural continuity to analyze it as a site of profound theoretical and practical tension. We conclude that the contemporary practice of *mangulosi* is not merely an

adapted ritual, but a strategic communicative act where the demands of interpersonal meaning-making (Symbolic Interaction) and public identity projection (Cultural Branding) intersect and are actively negotiated. This research demonstrates that the ritual endures not *despite* this tension, but *because* of its participants' ability to successfully manage it.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is its synthesis of these two complementary, yet paradoxical, frameworks. On one hand, Symbolic Interaction theory explains the *process* of adaptation how meaning is fluidly co-constructed by actors, shifting from complex *adat* procedure to personalized, affective exchanges of blessing and acceptance. On the other hand, Cultural Branding theory explains the *strategy* why the ritual is deliberately simplified into a potent, accessible, and "memorable" symbol (the *ulos*) to communicate Batak identity to an external audience. The synthesis reveals the central paradox of modern cultural survival: the very simplification that makes the *ulos* an effective "brand" for intercultural communication simultaneously risks "tokenizing" it, potentially detaching the symbol from the deep, cosmological meanings that Symbolic Interactionists argue are its foundation.

This tension has critical practical implications. This study redefines "cultural preservation" not as the rigid replication of static forms, but as the conscious stewardship of this paradox. For the Batak community and other cultural groups navigating globalization, the challenge is twofold: they must strategically leverage their key symbols to remain visible and relevant (the branding), while simultaneously fostering the rich, internal, and affective interactions that ensure these symbols remain meaningful (the interaction). This research ultimately concludes that the resilience of Batak Toba identity lies not in its resistance to change, but in its communicative agency its capacity to strategically negotiate and re-brand its essence to bridge a complex past with a hybrid, intercultural future.

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