

Umpasa as an Oral Tradition in Simalungun Society: From the Perspective of Communication Ethnography

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Abstract—The current study explores the performance of Umpasa as the oral tradition in Simalungun culture, categorizes its communicative functions, and explores philosophical values contained in the oral tradition. This study uses a qualitative research approach with a communication ethnography research design. The results reveal that the oral traditions are practiced by a few cultural leaders in traditional ceremonies; marriage, death, and thanksgiving although only by the leader of the traditional ceremony and the elderly group. The practical functions of marumpasa are classified based on the purpose and function of communication such as a tool for conveying advice or messages, expressions of congratulations, politeness and respect, restoration and strengthening, expressions of kinship and friendship, and efforts to preserve Simalungun traditions and cultural identity. The oral tradition also contains philosophical and moral values that strengthen Indonesian national identities such as religious values, mutual appreciation, personal traits, honesty, cooperation, tolerance, dignity, and respect.

Index Terms—ethnography, umpasa, oral tradition, Simalungun

I. INTRODUCTION

As an oral tradition in an Indonesian sub-ethnic group, umpasa, a traditional Simalungun poetry, represents people's identity and literature (Zulkifli & Ridwan, 2019). Being an oral tradition, it is typically passed down verbally from one generation to the next during routine activities, social events, or celebrations (oral tradition). In every traditional event, it is commonly used to express Simalungun moral values, offer guidance, provide amusement, or appraisal. Due to its oral form, it functions to perform arts, customary ceremonies, and everyday discussions (Sibarani, 2018c). Umpasa commonly uses figurative language and metaphors as a means of subliminal communication. As a result, it has great artistic value and meaning. It permits its speakers to be creative despite its structural limitations by allowing them to use a variety of themes and imaginative vocabulary. This demonstrates the adaptability and inventiveness of oral culture, which is vital to preserving culture and a powerful tool for message delivery in official and informal settings (Ocón, 2021).

Umpasa as a form of oral tradition consists of several elements, namely stanzas, lines, rhymes, or ending patterns and contents/ends (Sianturi et al., 2024; Ben-Amos, 2023). One umpasa usually consists of one stanza consisting of four lines. The umpasa rhyme pattern usually follows the a-b-a-b pattern at the end of each line. The first two lines of Umpasa are usually figurative or natural descriptions, which are not directly related to the content. Meanwhile, the contents are located in the last two lines, which are the contents of the umpasa (Napitu et al., 2023; Purba & Siahaan, n.d.; Sianturi et al., 2024).

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Along with the development of time and technology, this oral tradition, which is based on local wisdom values, has experienced degradation in quantity and quality. In terms of quantity, this oral tradition is only practiced by a small percentage of the Simalungun community, especially by older community groups (Ndona et al., 2021; Purba & Siahaan, n.d.; Sinaga & Damanik, 2020). The younger generation tends to ignore using it because they don't understand its use and meaning. In terms of quality, the umpasa delivered does not reflect the cultural values of Simalungun because it has been heavily influenced by other Batak sub-ethnic cultures, such as Toba, Karo, and Pakpak as a result of the cultural acculturation process (Zulkifli & Ridwan, 2019). It is feared that, gradually the oral tradition as a cultural treasure of Simalungun will become extinct in 10 years if this oral tradition is not recorded.



Figure 1. The Marumpasa Practice in Wedding Ceremony

According to the research team's initial observations of 100 students in Simalungun, only 5% can name and memorize one umpasa, 14% know and like it but cannot name even one, and the remaining 81% do not know it at all due to a lack of literature and socialization about the subject of this research (Ergashev & Farxodjonova, 2020). Study findings support this phenomenon and highlight the importance of revitalizing traditional Simalungun umpasa.



Figure 2. Simalungun Regency, North Sumatera, Indonesia

There are several reasons why this topic needs to be researched. First, the practice of marumpasa is an oral cultural heritage that needs to be preserved (Jones & Russell, 2012; Mahuika, 2012). Second, the moral values, local wisdom, and outlook on life of the Simalungun community can be explored through the umpasa used in the community (Anggraini, 2017; Sibarani, 2018c). Third, umpasa is a beautiful and meaningful form of language that can be used as teaching material for regional literature so that local Simalungun cultural values can be maintained (Purba et al., 2020).

Several previous studies have explored using umpasa in Simalungun traditional ceremonies (Hasugian, 2017; Medan & Artikel, 2021; Sianturi et al., 2024; Sibarani, 2018a). Most use descriptive research methods about the nature of umpasa, types of umpasa, and the meaning of umpasa practice using secondary data sources in the form of written documents and video recordings of umpasa practice (Panjaitan & Sundawa, 2016; Rambey et al., 2021; Sibarani, 2018b). However, no research has been found that explores the oral tradition's performance, its categories in terms of functions, and its philosophical values (Amponsah, 2023; Saragih, 2012). This research uses an ethnographic research design that uses primary data by setting the topic of this study by stressing the three features.

This study aims to scientifically describe the Simalungun oral tradition, allowing younger generations to gain a comprehensive understanding (Ní Chasaide et al., 2015; Sakti & Nakamura, 2013; Siregar, 2022) and practice it in various oral communications to preserve the values contained in umpasa.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Communication Ethnography

Studies on language and communication actions rooted in specific cultural and social contexts are known as ethnography of communication (Dennis & Huf, 2020; Gist-Mackey & Dougherty, 2021; Walford, 2020). It was created in the 1960s by linguist Dell Hymes and explores how people use language in everyday encounters by combining linguistic analysis with ethnography, the study of cultures and social behaviors. Key components of the ethnography of communication include speech communities, communicative competence, speech events, communicative acts, and contextual factors (Dingley & Catterall, 2020; Schmitt, 2016).

As a speech community, Simalungun people are groups of individuals who have agreed upon norms about using and interpreting speech, dialects, and other forms of communication (Damanik, 2021; Fitri et al., n.d.; Sinaga et al., 2018). The capacity to use language appropriately in various social and cultural contexts such as using Umpasa is known as "communicative competence". The oral tradition is used in particular Simalungun speech events such as wedding ceremonies, traditional thanksgiving ceremonies, death ceremonies, and other speech events. The communication components inside a speech event, such as a sentence or a gesture are called communicative acts (Saragih et al., 2020). Contextual factors encompass the various elements of the communication context, such as the location, people involved, goals, and the social norms that guide the exchange.

B. Marumpasa as Oral Tradition in Simalungun Culture

As a form of Simalungun ethnic oral tradition, umpasa is the transmission of cultural information, stories, beliefs, practices, and history from one generation to the next (Jones & Russell, 2012; Mahuika, 2012). It is essential for maintaining and passing down a society's history, customs, and values—especially in communities where written records have not always been available or common.

Umpasa can also function as verbal practices that are part of religious, cultural, or social rituals, often passed down through generations (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). It may take the form of proverbs and sayings: Short, memorable expressions that capture shared wisdom or beliefs. It may also function as Genealogies, the recounting of family lineages and histories, often to establish social structure or kinship connections within a community (Ndona et al., 2021; Rodgers, 2013).

Like in many Indigenous, preliterate, or marginalized civilizations, umpasa, an oral tradition in Simalungun society, is essential for preserving cultural continuity and identity (Dingley & Catterall, 2020; Panjaitan & Sundawa, 2016). Moreover, it holds significance in literate societies. Bridges are important for connecting the past and present, even if they can evolve and alter throughout time.

C. Simalungun Traditional Ceremonies

Simalungun traditional ceremonies are a series of traditional rituals that have important meanings in the lives of the Simalungun people, one of the large tribes in North Sumatra (Girsang & Sukmayadi, 2019; Nurhasanah Purba, 2020). These ceremonies are usually related to various aspects of life such as birth, marriage, death, and other traditional events. Some important traditional ceremonies in Simalungun culture include birth ceremonies, naming, marriage, death, and thanksgiving. Simalungun traditional ceremonies not only function as ceremonial rituals, but also as a means to maintain family relationships, strengthen cultural identity, and preserve traditional values (Havinga et al., 2020; Premsrirat, 2014; Sunarti & Fadel, 2021).

D. Simalungun Society

Before the entry of major religions, the Simalungun people currently number 1,022,570 adhered to the belief of *parhabonaron*, which respected the spirits of ancestors and the forces of nature. Today, the majority of Simalungun people adhere to Christianity (Protestant and Catholic), with a small percentage adhering to Islam and traditional beliefs (Sinaga & Damanik, 2020).

The Simalungun people are an ethnic group that mostly lives in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. This tribe is rich in traditions and cultural values and has made a major contribution to Indonesia's diversity. With modernization, Simalungun culture faces challenges, such as the decreasing use of the Simalungun language among the younger generation (Saragih et al., 2019). However, the Simalungun people continue to strive to preserve their customs and culture through arts, education, and traditional ceremonies. The people of Simalungun use the Simalungun language in their daily lives, even though the younger generation now uses a lot of Indonesian.

III. METHOD

This research was conducted in three main cities in North Sumatra, Indonesia, where the community still consistently uses umpasa in various traditional ceremonies; Medan City, Pematangsiantar City, and Pematang Raya City. This study was conducted for six months, namely from April 2024 to September 2024. To achieve the goal of this study, the research team used an ethnographic research design (Carli et al., 2003; Satrianegara et al., 2021). The respondents of this study consisted of ten Sitatang Atur Horja (leaders of Simalungun traditional ceremonies), five Simalungun

tradition experts, and five leaders of Simalungun Community organizations who were selected using inclusion criteria, namely those who always use umpasa in Simalungun traditional ceremonies. The demographics of the research respondents by age were as follows: 51-60 respondents, 61-70 years old 14 respondents, and 71-80 years old 3 respondents. Each respondent was first offered informed consent, which is a sheet of their willingness to be a respondent to this study.

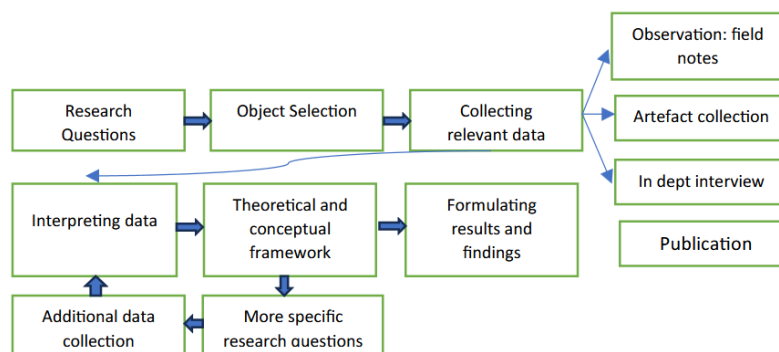


Figure 3. The Research Procedure

The data was gathered by field observations, field notes, and recordings of oral tradition occurrences in 20 traditional marriage and death rites. This study also uses secondary data, including recorded performance recordings from *YouTube*. In addition, to determine the meaning, categories, and philosophical values of Umpasa, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with traditional ceremony leaders, Simalungun traditional experts, and Simalungun ethnic organization leaders in three research locations: Medan City, Pematangsiantar City, and Pematang Raya. The instruments focused on the marumpasa's performance, purpose, categorization, and the philosophical worth of umpasa. The study employs ethnographic data analysis methodologies as the foundation of qualitative research, allowing researchers to extract deep insights from rich, contextual data (Gist-Mackey & Dougherty, 2021). These methodologies go beyond surface-level observations to investigate the cultural intricacies and social dynamics that influence human Simalungun societal behaviors.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

(a). Umpasa Performance

Umpasa is always performed on various Simalungun traditional occasions, including weddings, death ceremonies, thanksgiving ceremonies (multiple family thanksgiving rituals), and official Simalungun meetings. Umpasa is delivered to the bride and groom as a prayer, advice, and blessing at a wedding ceremony by the leader of the traditional ceremony, the bride and groom's parents, and guests to ensure that the marriage works smoothly and that the family grows happily. In this traditional occasion, umpasa is typically found at the beginning and end of advice and messages from parents, guests, or invitees. Umpasa is delivered in greater numbers at this event than at any other Simalungun traditional ceremony, with 25 to 30 umpasa. The following is an extract of the umpasa delivered during this customary event:

*Tubuh ma bonani arirang
Dohor hu pamispisan
Na ulang ma nassiam marsirang
Anggo lang sinirangni hamateian*

This umpasa contains advice given by parents to the bride and groom so that they avoid divorce in their marriage. Only death can separate them, but not divorce. During a funeral service, people present umpasa to the family who has lost a loved one. The umpasa delivered at a single burial service ranges from 10-15 umpasa, and they are dominated by words of comfort, messages, and counsel to help the grieving family remain patient and resolute in the face of loss or the death of a loved one. This umpasa is presented at the beginning and end of the discourse, much as it would be at a wedding. This is an extract from the umpasa at this customary event.:

*Uttei ni par Silimakuta
Dob banggal baru isuan
Ai aha pe horu na masa hubanta
Sai tong mangindo gogoh humbani Tuhan*

The above umpasa contains advice content. The sampan contains about how to plant oranges in Silimakuta, a sub-district in Simalungun regency. The content of the umpasa reminds the bereaved family to keep praying and asking for strength from God in the state of grief. Umpasa is delivered during various Thanksgiving events in Simalungun Culture

when the family gives a congratulatory speech. However, umpasa are provided in restricted numbers for each communication event in this ceremony, typically two or three. This could be owing to the restricted time provided for parties to offer congratulatory speeches. This umpasa's communication goal is primarily counsel, hope, and sentiments of happiness. The following is an excerpt from Umpasa in this communication event:

Boras sabur-saburan
Ibabouni pinggan pasu
Horasma nassiam ganupan
Sehat janah jumpahan pasu pasu

The first two lines of this umpasa are *sampiran*, which means a handful of rice sprinkled on the guests as a symbol of blessing and prosperity. The third and fourth lines are the content and communication functions of the umpasa. This umpasa means the hope that the host who holds the event will be healthy and receive abundant blessings from God. At the official traditional meetings of Simalungun culture, umpasa is delivered by the event host and parties who want to convey a certain message. The portion of umpasa in this communication activity is usually in the range of seven to ten umpasa. Generally, the umpasa delivered at this event is formal because the purpose of communication is not to individuals but to all meeting participants. The following is an excerpt of umpasa delivered at this meeting event:

Dalan hu Bintang mariah
Bahat Hasohor pakon lampuyang
Anggo domma sahata Sariah
Singkop ma ganup lang dong be na hurang

The first and second lines of this umpasa are *sampiran*. This *sampiran* is themed on the types of plants that are usually used as spices in typical Simalungun cuisine. The content of *this* umpasa contains messages and hopes about how important discussion is to reach an agreement in a meeting to avoid conflict and to achieve a goal peacefully.

(b). *Functions of Umpasa*

The functions of Umpasa as an oral tradition in Simalungun society are described in the following table.

TABLE I
THE FUNCTIONS OF UMPASA

No	Functions	Ceremonies
1	A means of conveying advice and guidance	Simalungun wedding
2	Expressions of Congratulations, Honor and Politeness	Simalungun Thanksgiving
3	Expressions of Restoration and Strengthening	Funeral
4	Symbol of greetings and togetherness	Family Thanksgiving
5	Preservation of Tradition and Cultural Identity	official traditional meetings of Simalungun culture

In traditional ceremonies, Umpasa conveys advice or wisdom related to life, ethics, and morals. Elders or traditional leaders often deliver them. It is used as a form of respect for guests or respected parties. In the context of marriage, for example, umpasa is used as a form of greeting or welcoming between the bride and groom's families. In several traditional ceremonies, they are used as entertainment, by inserting elements of humor to lighten the atmosphere or add to the joy of the event. Through Umpasa, the relationship between the community or groups present at the traditional ceremony is strengthened. Umpasa becomes a communication tool that strengthens the relationship between individuals and groups. Umpasa in traditional ceremonies functions as a means of preserving culture and oral traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. The use of Umpasa maintains cultural identity so that it remains alive in the community.

The structure of Umpasa includes *sampiran* in the first two lines and content in the third and fourth lines. *Sampiran* is the first and second lines. The third and fourth lines are the main content or message of Umpasa in that their meanings are not associated with the first and two lines. In *Sampiran*, what is needed is the similarity of sound with the content of the umpasa, which is found in the third and fourth lines.

(c). *Classification of Umpasa*

Umpasa is divided into six groups based on the outcomes of the focus group discussions with Simalungun traditional leaders and organizations. The umpasa of prayer and benediction comes first. This type of umpasa is intended to offer blessings, hope, and blessings to someone, particularly on holy occasions. Umpasa consolation is the second category. During funeral ceremonies, for example, this umpasa is used to reassure or uplift those who are grieving. Advice falls under the third group. This umpasa category serves to offer guidance or recommendations for everyday situations or significant occasions, like counseling brides or students. The symbolic umpasa is the fourth category. This metaphor has profound philosophical or symbolic significance. The sixth type of umpasa is kinship and unity umpasa. This kind of umpasa helps the Simalungun community or community group feel more united, kinship-like, and cooperative. The aforementioned classification demonstrates the wide range of functions that umpasa serves in the life of the Simalungun people, encompassing everything from daily culture to social and spiritual dimensions.

(d). *Moral and Philosophical Values of Umpasa*

Based on data gathered from respondents, moral values in Simalungun society are rules or standards that govern how a person should act or behave in social life. They help a person determine what is right or wrong, good or bad, and appropriate or inappropriate in interactions with others. They also provide guidelines for a person in making decisions and acting according to the principles they adhere to. In addition, moral values can also shape a person's identity and help others understand and predict how a person will act in different situations. Moral values can also form the basis for legal systems and public policies because they reflect principles that are considered important by society. Moral values can also help individuals or communities in dealing with problems they face. For example, moral values can help individuals or communities in determining the right choice in uncertain or difficult situations, such as in dealing with conflict or social problems. Overall, moral values have a very important role in the lives of individuals or communities, because moral values provide direction become a reference for actions taken, and help individuals or communities in maintaining harmony and social justice.

This study reveals that umpasa contains moral and philosophical values rooted in the original Simalungun culture. The distribution of values is described in the following table:

TABLE 2
PHILOSOPHICAL AND MORAL VALUES OF UMPASA/N=216

No	Moral Values	Quantity	%	Dominant occurrence Ceremonies
1	Religious	51	23.6	Simalungun wedding
2	Mutual Appreciation	32	14.8	Simalungun Thanksgiving
3	Family Traits	31	14.3	Simalungun Thanksgiving
4	Honesty	26	12.0	Simalungun wedding
5	Cooperation	14	6.5	official traditional meetings of Simalungun culture
6	Tolerance	42	19.4	Funeral
7	Dignity	20	9.3	official traditional meetings of Simalungun culture
	Total	216	100	

Table 2 above shows that the four dominant moral and philosophical values in Umpasa are religious (23.6%), tolerance values (19.4%), appreciation values (14.8%), and family values (14.3%). Meanwhile, honesty values (12%), dignity values (9.3%), and cooperation values (6.5%) each occupy the fourth, fifth, and sixth positions of the 216 total Umpasa data collected in this study. Related to the occurrence of moral and philosophical values of Umpasa, almost all of these values are discovered in every traditional ceremony. However, the more dominant values are displayed in the Table 2.

B. Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, umpasa, as an oral tradition for the Simalungun community, is an important communication component in Simalungun traditional ceremonies (Napitu et al., 2023), such as wedding ceremonies, death ceremonies, thanksgiving ceremonies (various family thanksgiving rituals), and Simalungun official traditional meetings. Each umpasa includes a moral and philosophical communication message reflecting Simalungun identity (Carli et al., 2003; Dingley & Catterall, 2020).

While earlier research focused more on the description of umpasa content (umpasa content), diction in umpasa content (diction in oral tradition), and the essence of umpasa in several Simalungun ceremonies (culture ceremonies) using secondary data, the results of this study discuss the performance of marumpasa as a whole, describe the function and classification of umpasa based on the traditional ceremonies carried out and explore the moral values and philosophical values contained in each umpasa (Appiah-Thompson, 2020; Mason, 2007; Ndonga et al., 2021). The structure of umpasa typically consists of four lines, although certain variations may extend to six or eight lines in verse form (Hasim, 2017). This type of umpasa is usually delivered by a traditional ceremony leader who is very expert and has extensive experience in Simalungun customs and traditions.

The following are some of the traits of the substance of moral values in Simalungun umpasa. Simalungun people use the values to judge what is right or wrong, good or bad, and acceptable or inappropriate in their interactions with others. These values also provide directions for a person to make decisions and act according to the essential principles of Simalungun culture (Hanan et al., 2015; Rambey et al., 2021; Sitompul et al., 2022). Moral principles can also shape a person's identity, allowing others to understand and predict how they will behave in certain situations. Furthermore, moral standards can serve as the foundation for the legal system and public policy because they represent societally essential ideals (Dyah Nugrahaningsih et al., 2020; Ye, 2019).

Furthermore, moral principles can be of assistance to individuals or communities in addressing the challenges that they are confronted with (Kecskes, 2010; Panjaitan & Sundawa, 2016; Sibarani, 2018b; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Khafaga, 2022; Walton & Truong, 2023). These values help individuals or communities make the right choices in uncertain or difficult situations, such as dealing with conflicts or social problems (Le Dantec, 2010; Watts, 2019). Overall, moral values have a very important role in the lives of individuals or communities because they provide direction, become a reference for actions taken, and help individuals or communities maintain harmony.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the extension of the literature on Simalungun umpasa. This is because the role of umpasa in many Simalungun rites has been thoroughly documented. Similarly, umpasa are classified, as are the moral and intellectual ideals they contain. These findings can also be utilized to inform government strategies aimed at revitalizing umpasa as a Simalungun cultural heritage. The amount and quality of use have both decreased during the last two decades. To foster the Simalungun generation's interest and desire to study and understand the essence of this umpasa, cultural stakeholders must consider efforts to preserve this oral tradition so that it does not become extinct, such as documenting the performance, types, and varieties of umpasa, and moral values in umpasa in digital form so that the younger Simalungun generation can easily access and study it (Haidir et al., 2023). Previous researchers have done similar work to revitalize oral traditions in various countries.

Although the primary components of mariposa performance were investigated in this study, the research team is aware of various limitations linked to the study's duration, which should be extended. Similarly, the study is limited to three areas: Medan City, Pematangsiantar City, and Pematangraya City. However, this study might at least present a comprehensive image of umpasa performance in Simalungun culture as a communication medium rich in moral and philosophical qualities.

V. CONCLUSION

Umpasa, a sort of oral tradition employed in Simalungun traditional rites, is crucial for imparting moral and philosophical themes in Simalungun society. The findings of this study provide light on how umpasa is employed in Simalungun traditional ceremonies, outlining its forms and categories as an oral tradition, as well as the moral and philosophical ideals embedded in its content. These findings undoubtedly strengthen the community's comprehension of the importance of umpasa, particularly among the younger generation of the Simalungun tribe. Furthermore, the community's willingness to practice umpasa in various Simalungun traditional rites will expand in tandem with its improved understanding of marumpasa practice. The findings of this study can be useful to relevant stakeholders who have a vision and mission to preserve Simalungun culture, particularly oral traditions, by digitizing umpasa content so that it is easily accessible to the Simalungun community, particularly the younger generation. The study's findings are still limited in terms of the quantity of respondents, the research methodologies used, and the amount of umpasa data collected. Future research is likely to supplement the conclusions of this study by employing multiple approaches, surveying a greater number of respondents, and collecting more sample data.

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