



Article

Harmony with Nature: A Cultural Ecological Study of Mandailing Ethnic Philosophy on the Environment

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the profound philosophy of life held by the Mandailing ethnic group in maintaining the relationship between humans and the environment from a cultural ecological perspective. Employing an ethnohistorical approach, this research analyzes and synthesizes relevant ethnographic literature along with field research data. The focus of this study is on the philosophies "*Poda Na Lima*" and "*Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*" as locally inherited wisdom passed down through generations by the Mandailing ethnic group to foster a harmonious relationship with nature. Key figures such as village chiefs, traditional leaders, religious figures, and community elders from Mandailing Natal Regency serve as research subjects and informants. The research findings conclude that "*Poda Na Lima*" and "*Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*" impart local wisdom values such as compassion, cleanliness, and health in maintaining the harmonization of the relationship between humans and nature. These philosophies continue to be inherited and practiced in the daily lives of the Mandailing community, particularly among agrarian populations in rural areas. In practice, nature is positioned as a source of wisdom, not an object of exploitation, and is internalized to preserve ecological balance.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are considered an inseparable part of their environment. Various narratives and belief systems assert that humans were created by a divine entity and coexist with other beings on this planet (Indrawardana, 2013). From an evolutionary standpoint, despite facing considerable opposition in its development, it is posited that human life has evolved to ensure generational continuity through adaptive responses, involving either survival tactics or confrontations for existence. Humans have, in essence, competed with other creatures, successfully persevering against those that are larger, stronger, more dangerous, and more numerous (Monica, 2022).

In the anthropological perspective, humans have demonstrated the capacity to evolve and adapt to their environment since the dawn of their existence, owing to their cognitive abilities and instincts that enable them to comprehend natural phenomena and react adaptively. This has given rise to "culture" as an "adaptive system" created by humans to maintain their relationship with the natural environment surrounding them (Daeng, 2008). Consequently, the concept emerges that the relationship among humans, nature, and culture forms a triangular and interconnected dynamic (Mailili et al., 2023). This implies that human's fashion their

culture in response to the conditions of their natural environment, while conversely, the natural environment also shapes the culture of the humans residing within it.

The culture that has grown from the presence and needs of humans in confronting their environment has evolved from preliterate times to the advent of literacy, marked by human abilities in creating and employing writing. The resultant culture stemming from human existence plays a role in overcoming challenges posed by the natural and environmental conditions, ultimately aiming to sustain human life as a distinctive entity on this planet (Carnawi et al., 2022).

According to Malinowski, all human activities or cultural elements aim to fulfil a series of instinctual needs associated with various aspects of their lives (Amri, 1997). This implies that every human society situated in different natural environments will adapt their activities to the conditions of their surroundings. They create various activities to meet life's needs, thereby forming genuine human culture as an adaptation to the conditions of the natural and environmental surroundings (Indrawardana, 2013).

These conditions lead to the development of culture influenced by geographical environments, such as tropical cultures (emerging in tropical regions), sub-tropical cultures (developing in sub-tropical regions), and polar cultures. Similarly, based on geological characteristics surrounding human life, we recognize mountain cultures (emerging in mountainous regions), coastal cultures (developing in coastal areas), and continental cultures (formed in continental plate regions). Besides being influenced by natural conditions, cultural existence is also shaped by livelihood activities associated with the environment, such as agrarian culture, fishing culture, hunting culture, and so forth (Indrawardana, 2013).



Figure 1. Area of the Mandailing Tribe
Source: https://www.wikiwand.com/ms/Mandailing_Natal

The Mandailing ethnicity, as part of the Batak sub-ethnic group, carries a social structure heritage passed down by their ancestors. They habitually use the Mandailing language and dialect in their daily communication, making it their mother tongue (Dharmawati & Dwi Widayati, 2021). The Mandailing identity is also reflected in the use of family names (marga), including Nasution, Lubis, Rangkuti, Pulungan, Lintang, Mardia, Borotan, and others, which constitute part of their cultural identity. In general, the Mandailing ethnic group tends to reside in mountainous areas, although there is a possibility of them living in coastal regions such as Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra.

The Mandailing ethnic group, especially those in the Mandailing Julu region, is known for appreciating life in the mountains (Nuraini & Suprayitno, 2021). They prefer to dwell in mountainous areas and utilize the land for farming and livestock activities. Additionally, their proximity to mountains is reflected in their traditional arts, such as *gondang tano*, which often explores themes related to mountain life. This resonates with the agrarian lifestyle that holds significant historical importance for their ancestors. The characteristics of farming communities remain prevalent and easily identifiable in several "customary communities" in mountainous regions, in this context, the administrative area of Mandailing Natal.

This article aims to investigate the significance of the philosophies "*Poda Na Lima*" dan "*Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*" originating from the Mandailing ethnicity. These life philosophies represent principles inherited to maintain the relationship between humans and the environment, embodying local wisdom of the Mandailing ethnicity. The research also aims to expand the study of cultural ecology within the framework of ethnohistory.

This research employs an ethnohistorical approach to analyse and synthesise relevant ethnographic literature alongside field research data. The focal point of this study is the philosophy "*Poda Na Lima*" dan "*Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*" as a locally inherited wisdom by the Mandailing ethnic group, aimed at maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature. Several key figures, acting as representatives of the Mandailing community from six villages in Mandailing Natal Regency, are positioned as research subjects and informants. The informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques, with the objective of obtaining insights from individuals possessing a profound understanding of Mandailing environmental care culture. This includes representatives of village chiefs (Hendri Lubis, Chief of Laru Village), customary leaders (Burhanuddin Rajo Sati, a customary figure from Muarasipongi), religious representatives (Marwansyah Lubis, a religious figure from Tambangan Village), Mandailing elders or *hatobangon* (Opung Pahlewi from Kotanopan and Opung Matondang from Hutangodang Village), and representatives of noble lineage or *hatobangon* (Raja Iro from Kotanopan and Raja Nasution from Maga Village).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Philosophy of *Poda Na Lima* dan *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*

Etymologically, the term "*poda*" in Mandailing denotes teachings, counsel, or guidance, while "*na lima*" translates to 'the five' (K. Nasution et al., 2023). In terminological terms, *Poda Na Lima* is a philosophy embraced by the Mandailing community. Inherited from their ancestors, this philosophy forms the basis for a life that prioritizes cleanliness, physical and spiritual health (Harahap, 2019). According to relevant Mandailing ethnographic literature, the values embedded in the philosophy of *Poda Na Lima* encompass: (1) "*Paias Rohamu*" (cleanse your heart); (2) "*Paias Patangmu*" (cleanse your body); (3) "*Paias Parabitoimu*" (cleanse your clothing); (4) "*Paias Bagasmu*" (cleanse your house); and (5) "*Paias Pakaranganmu*" (cleanse the yard of your house) (Sibarani et al., 2021).

On the other hand, "*Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*" is a philosophy encapsulating the customary concept that compassion is the foundation of tradition, suggesting that love brings closeness, and closeness brings shared goodness (Effendi et al., 2018). The compassion emphasized by Mandailing ancestors is not merely an expression or words; it must be reflected in the daily behaviour of the people. To manifest a sense of compassion (*holong*) among the Mandailing, a social value system is required to play a role in

enacting compassion in communal life. This social system is rooted in family ties formed through blood and marriage relationships. Compassion extends not only to social interactions among individuals but also towards all living beings, particularly nature, which provides the land for the Mandailing people to lead their lives.

In a simple sense, *Poda Na Lima* and *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian* are understood as principles of cleansing the heart and soul, subsequently practised in the protection of the environment. In practical terms, this can be exemplified by activities such as opening land around forests or water sources (interview with Raja Iro, November 2023).

The concept of "*Paias Rohamu*" encourages individuals to cleanse their hearts from negative traits that conflict with moral and spiritual values. Similarly, the restrictions on land clearing applied in ancestral lands reflect values of environmental preservation and the harmony between humans and their surroundings, aligning with *Poda Na Lima*'s emphasis on cleanliness, health, and harmony with nature. Therefore, *Poda Na Lima* and practices such as the prohibition of land clearing are closely intertwined efforts to maintain inner cleanliness and preserve the harmony between humans and nature (interview with Opung Matondang, November 2023).

The Mandailing ethnic ancestors taught that nature should not be dominated but respected, protected, and nurtured. Mandailing people believe that humans should prioritize adaptability and respect for nature (interview with Opung Pahlewi, November 2023). In *Poda Na Lima* and *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*, there are also instructions or teachings from ancestors that emphasize the importance of compassion, paving the way for cleanliness and etiquette towards the environment. This serves as evidence that, for the Mandailing ethnicity, compassion and unity in caring for nature and the environment are paramount elements (Y. Nasution, [2023](#)).

Poda Na Lima and *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian* paint a picture of values and norms reflected in Mandailing culture, teaching how to maintain a balance between humans and the environment. The rules within *Poda Na Lima* and *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian* carry profound meanings closely related to daily life and the community's perspective on nature (interview with Raja Nasution, November 2023).

The regulations within these teachings are not only moral guidelines but also depict the Mandailing community's deep understanding of nature and life. This may encompass views on the natural cycle, unity with the surrounding environment, and the responsibility towards future generations to maintain environmental balance (interview with Raja Iro, November 2023).

The significance of this philosophy lies not only in its existence as a doctrine but also in how its values are reflected in the everyday behaviours and actions of the Mandailing community, showcasing their respect and concern for nature and the surrounding environment (interview with Hendri Lubis, November 2023).

The concepts of *Poda Na Lima* and *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian* reflect the policies held by the Mandailing community in preserving nature and its harmony with humanity. These rules are not only guidelines in daily life but also mirror the ethics, spirituality, and responsibility towards nature within Mandailing culture (interview with Marwansyah Lubis, November 2023). This reflects a profound awareness of the importance of maintaining ecological balance and harmony between humans and the environment.

The connection of the Mandailing community with their surrounding environment sometimes gives the impression that they are "submissive" to nature, yet in reality, the Mandailing community, particularly those engaged in agriculture, must adapt to nature (interview with Opung Pahlewi, November 2023). This implies that nature indirectly shapes the mentality of the Mandailing people, especially their ancestors in the past.

The harmony between the Mandailing people and their surroundings shapes a character or mentality that aligns with their environment, revealed through folk tales, proverbs, or analogies rich in life guidance and the use of names and terms inspired by nature (interview with Hendri Lubis, November 2023). For the Mandailing community, nature is not merely viewed from an economic standpoint to meet life's needs, but also as a symbol of human life, ethics, and aesthetics in literature (interview with Raja Nasution, November 2023).

For the Mandailing community, nature is not only understood from a material or economic perspective. They perceive nature as an entity containing ethical values, human life, and beauty reflected in their literature. The aesthetics of nature are mirrored in poetry, stories, and other literary works, demonstrating how deeply nature influences their lives and culture.

Nature is often used as a metaphor or analogy for human nature and behaviour, reflected in figurative expressions or metaphors in language, as well as the philosophies of *Poda Na Lima* and *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian*, which ultimately guide the Mandailing community in their efforts to preserve and care for nature (interview with Raja Iro, November 2023). With this philosophy, we can understand the diversity of plants and animals in the Mandailing community's natural environment, as we are aware that the Mandailing community in Mandailing Natal Regency is surrounded by the Bukit Barisan and Batang Gadis National Park (Latifah & Zahrah, [2021](#)).

The Mandailing community, still adhering firmly to its traditional customs, tends to be highly connected to the natural environment around their residences. In particular, the traditional Mandailing community has a structured belief system, forming a connection between the real and non-real worlds, linked to their existence in the natural environment (interview with Opung Matondang, November 2023).

In general, the environment in the Mandailing community's residential areas has empirical divisions, including: (1) *Lubuk Larangan*, where the Mandailing community safeguards rivers and native fish habitats; (2) Customary Land or *Ulayat*, which can be utilised but not for residential purposes; (3) Residential areas that permit house construction (interview with Opung Pahlewi, November 2023). Regarding forests, a similar situation occurs in several regions, especially in the Mandailing Julu traditional community area (interview with Burhanuddin Rajo Sati, November 2023).

The differing understanding and division of this environment reflect a deep awareness of the importance of conserving and using natural resources wisely and preserving the ecosystem. This approach indicates that the Mandailing community not only uses natural resources for their needs but also has strong rules and understanding of how to maintain ecological balance and ensure sustainable use of natural resources for future generations. This reflects a holistic and responsible mindset towards the environment that encompasses their lives.

Caring for the Environment

The continuous repercussions of environmental degradation pose a serious threat to human safety, manifesting in natural disasters such as landslides, floods, decreased water flow, and various other impacts. Besides affecting humans, this damage also reverberates across other ecosystems, leading to a reduction in biodiversity, loss of wildlife habitats, soil degradation, disruption of hydrological cycles, and contributions to global warming (Niman, [2019](#)). These signs of abnormality are acknowledged environmental issues within the Mandailing community, who actively engage in preserving their cultural heritage by addressing environmental concerns.

The Mandailing people's belief in respecting nature and ancestors has always been an integral part of their lives. This belief fosters prosperity and well-being through traditional agricultural customs, including the application of the *bintora* method. *Bintora* represents the traditional way of clearing land in the past, demonstrating the unity between humans and nature (interview with Opung Matondang, November 2023).

This practice reflects a harmony where humans act without causing harm to their surrounding environment. Although rarely encountered today, knowledge of *bintora* remains valuable in raising awareness of environmental impacts during land clearing (interview with Opung Pahlewi, November 2023). Using metaphorical sentences as advice is an effort to preserve Mandailing culture and build a sense of community. This understanding brings valuable values in preserving and developing Mandailing culture in line with the changing times (interview with Hendri Lubis, November 2023).

The awareness and perspective of the Mandailing community towards nature originate from the understanding that humans possess natural elements such as water, wind, fire, earth, and light, which are fundamentally similar to the natural elements in their surroundings (interview with Opung Pahlewi, November 2023). These beliefs and awareness drive them to align with nature, showcasing an attitude and character wherein the Mandailing community does not view nature merely as a source of exploitation.

Those adhering to Mandailing culture have a responsibility to maintain the balance between humans and nature as part of religious practices (interview with Marwansyah Lubis, November 2023). In the context of Mandailing culture, this encompasses the obligation to care for and manage the environment and foster good relationships among fellow humans and the surroundings.

CONCLUSION

The philosophy of *Poda Na Lima* and *Holong do Maroban Domu, Domu Maroban Parsaulian* serves as the cornerstone for the Mandailing community in maintaining harmony with nature. This philosophy imparts crucial values such as compassion, cleanliness, and health, establishing a connection between humans and their environment. Mandailing culture emphasizes the significance of nurturing and respecting nature with deep affection, creating happiness for humans and sustainability for the environment. By applying local wisdom and preserving these traditions, the harmonious relationship between humans and nature can be strengthened, achieving better balance for environmental sustainability. The Mandailing ethnic group integrates this principle into their daily lives, including their agricultural practices. They also uphold a value system rooted in familial relationships and a genuine concern for the environment as an integral part of their existence. Nature is regarded as a source of wisdom to

be revered and cared for, rather than merely exploited. The impacts of environmental degradation have alerted them to the importance of maintaining ecological balance, addressing environmental issues, and preserving the ancestral values in caring for nature.

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