

Revitalisation of the Symbolism of the Altar (Batu Dolu) in the Socio-Historical Local Wisdom of the Alor Tribal Community

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ABSTRACT

Batu Dolu is a stone altar that historically represented social identity, customary authority, and communal life among the Alor people. This study examines its symbolic significance and the challenges affecting its revitalisation in Alor Regency. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and thematic analysis. The findings show that Batu Dolu once marked centres of customary governance across Alor's mountainous and coastal kingdoms and continues to appear in the official emblem of the Alor Regency Government. However, its contemporary use is largely ceremonial and administrative, while its historical and cultural meanings are becoming less familiar to younger generations. Revitalisation is constrained by weak intergenerational transmission, limited participation by women and young people, declining customary institutions, and insufficient integration into education, heritage conservation, tourism, and digital media. The study concludes that Batu Dolu should be revitalised as a living cultural symbol rather than preserved merely as an official emblem. This requires community-based initiatives that combine local education, physical conservation, inclusive participation, and creative cultural representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian society continues to evolve as social change transforms it from a traditional into a modern society (Baharuddin, 2021). The demands of this transformation sometimes lead Indonesians to disregard their own local wisdom, even though such values play a vital role in social progress and in guiding cultural development (Nasiwan, 2012). Some policymakers also underestimate local wisdom, causing its values to become static and less familiar to the public (Nugroho & Dkk, 2018).

Stone artefacts are among the symbols of local wisdom inherited from the ancestors of the Indonesian people and serve as historical witnesses to civilisation and social life (Rahmat, 2017). Their preservation is important because it forms part of a strategic effort to revive Indonesian traditions and cultures that have been overlooked in research amid modern social life. Such efforts can renew public interest in this heritage, particularly among younger Indonesians in the era of globalisation (Suryatman et al., 2020).

In Alor Regency, the Dolu (Altar) artifact is one of the symbols of local wisdom values that are paired as one of the symbols of the Alor Regency regional government, where the symbol depicts the symbols of a traditional house, a banyan tree, a Dolu (altar) and a moko (Alor language), a Mesbah (Hebrew language), a Pulpit (Islam) or an Artifact/Temple (Javanese), which is one of the components that cannot be separated from the local wisdom values of the indigenous people in the Alor or Malua island area (Alor, 2023).

The name change of Dolu (Alor language) Doler (Adang language), Doel (Kabola language) and Masang (Abui language) (Saly, 2024), became Altar by the majority of the Alor community along with the arrival of Portuguese and Dutch missionaries in spreading Christianity on Alor-Pantar Island in 1908 (Badrun, 2008), the taking of the word Dolu to Altar was taken from Hebrew written in the Bible (Widasari, 2023), as a sacred place of worship for the Israelites descendants of Abraham from generation to generation starting from Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon (Salomon) and so on until Maseas which later by Christians this Altar was called the Temple (Udju, 2023), while for the Islamic community the word Dolu was then identified with the stone pulpit where the Head of the Tribe (Abai) and Imam/Khotib delivered messages. social, political and religious to the people or congregation within the scope of the Socio-political area (Nurman Kholis Puslitbang Lektur dan Khazanah Keagamaan Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2012). However, for the Alor Doler or Dolu tribe, its existence existed before the arrival of Islamic missionaries from the Ternate Sultanate in the early 15th century, Christian missionaries in the mid-16th century on the island of Alor (Yahya, 2020).

This is because before the arrival of the mubalik and missionaries on the doler or dolu as an important part of the local wisdom values of the local community, it was usually used as a seat for the Chieftain (Abai/Atabeng) in leading meetings, be it Religious meetings (Rituals), Social Meetings, Political Meetings of Traditional Alliances, and a place for the decision of legal cases for the community, as well as being a grave for rebels and perpetrators of crimes within the territory of the traditional Alor government alliance (Darajad & Wula, 2022), therefore the dolu or doler (Altar) is one of the local wisdom values that symbolizes the identity of the existence of tribes that grow and develop in the Alor Island region, especially the tribes in the Northwest Alor District, Alor Regency, including the Alor Tribe, Adang Tribe and Kabola Tribe (Beni, 2024).

The existence of the Dolu stone (Altar) is almost evenly distributed in every large tribal house in the Alor district as the center of the Tribal Government in the traditional alliance of the Alor community, starting from the central area of the Kolana Kingdom, Mataru Kingdom, Pureman Kingdom, Batulolong Kingdom, Kui Kingdom and Alor Kingdom which are geographically located in the Alor island region of Alor Regency, and in the North West Alor District, the dolu is a symbol of the social identity of the Alor tribe, where the existence of the dolu is usually placed in front of the main house which in the traditional language is called rambi uma or main house, which is in the social identity of the Alor tribe.

In the North West Alor District, there are several tribes in the North West Alor District that have Dolu Stone as an Artifact placed in front of the Tribe's house, including: Dolu Stone (Altar) of the Adang Tribe which is placed in front of the Lakatuil Traditional House in the Adang-Bampalola Tribe, and in the house of the Adang Oa-Aimoli Tribe, while in the Alor Tribe community, Dolu Stone (Altar) is placed in the Pelang Seran-Pusu-Rebong House of Alor Besar, Pelang Serang House of Alor Kecil, Ruma manglolong Alor Kecil and the House of Uma Tukang, Uma Kapitan and Uma Dopu in Dulolong Village.

The Dolu (Altar) symbol is traditionally believed by the Alor people to be a historical reality that in that region there was a center of traditional government power in the traditional alliance of the Alor Regency regional government. However, on the other hand, the existence of Dolu (Altar) as a symbol of local wisdom in the life of the Alor tribe, is increasingly eroded by the current of social change in the social life of the Alor tribe. Dolu has become a meaningless stone that seems to be a silent witness to the civilization of the Alor tribe with tribal kingdoms that once grew and developed in the social life of the Alor tribe in the 13th century - 19th century in Alor Regency. Therefore, this phenomenon is interesting to be studied scientifically to see how the dolu symbol in the local wisdom values of the Alor tribe, with the title: Revitalization of the Symbolization of the Dolu Stone (Altar) in the Social History of Local Wisdom of the Alor Tribe in Alor Regency (Phenomenological Study of the Alor Tribe in the North West Alor District, Alor Regency).

This scientific study is directed to see how the Altar Stone Symbol (Fato Dolu) in the Local Wisdom of the Social Life of the Alor Tribe in Alor Regency and the revitalization of dolu as a value of wisdom in the social life of the Alor Tribe in Alor Regency. The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the Altar Stone Symbol (Fato Dolu) in the

Local Wisdom of the Social Life of the Alor Tribe in Alor Regency and describe the revitalization of the Dolu stone symbol (Altar) in the local wisdom of the Alor Tribe in Alor Regency. The theories applied in this study include the theory of symbolic interaction and phenomenology, both of which focus on understanding the meaning that emerges in social life through subjective actions created by the Alor Tribe.

In addition, Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony is important for exploring how traditional values such as Batu Dolu can be suppressed by modern values regarded as more 'civilised' or 'advanced'. This hegemonic process operates not only through coercion but also through passive social consent, as society begins to view cultural heritage as obsolete. This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It examines a phenomenon evident in community life through the subjective experiences of informants who possess knowledge of the socio-historical revitalisation of the Altar Stone symbol (Fato Dolu) within the local wisdom and sociocultural order of the Alor tribal community. Data were collected through triangulation, including observation, interviews, and documentation, and were analysed qualitatively to support the study's conclusions.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen to analyse the subjective meanings attached to the Altar Stone (Batu Dolu) and the ways in which informants interpreted it as a reflection of the local wisdom of the Alor people. The research focused on analysing the experiences, social values, and historical context associated with this symbol within the traditions of the Indigenous people of Alor Regency.

Phenomenological research is a form of scientific inquiry that seeks to understand events or phenomena from the perspectives of the individuals or groups who experience them. According to Moleong (2019) and Abdul Nasi et al. (2023), this approach allows researchers to explore the deeper meanings of participants' lived experiences. Similarly, Creswell (2018) emphasises that qualitative research focuses on direct interactions with participants in natural settings, thus requiring adaptive and context-sensitive data-collection methods.

In this qualitative phenomenological study, data were collected through triangulation, including field observations, in-depth interviews with informants, and a review of supporting documents. These techniques enabled a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the role of Batu Dolu in the sociocultural structure of the Alor community. The data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through transcription, initial coding, theme development, and validation in discussions with key informants. The coded data were then verified through source triangulation to strengthen the reliability of the findings and analysed qualitatively to identify patterns of meaning and the dynamics of revitalisation (Zahroh et al., 2025).

This research highlights the importance of preserving local wisdom amid the pressures of modernisation. Batu Dolu, as a historical artefact, serves as a symbol of social identity and customary authority in various kingdoms on Alor Island, yet its revitalisation remains suboptimal. The findings indicate that, although Batu Dolu is still recognised as a symbol of social status under customary law, revitalisation efforts remain limited to the symbolic sphere of governance and have not been fully integrated into education, physical conservation, or tourism representation. A stronger strategy is therefore needed to ensure that the values embodied in Batu Dolu are understood and passed on to younger generations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The symbol of the altar stone (fato dolu) in the local wisdom of the social life of the Alor tribe in Alor Regency

Research studies show that the Nezbah Stone (Fato Dolu) is a type of stone artifact arranged in a circle with a height of approximately 2-3 meters in front of the courtyard of a tribal house or traditional government house in the Alor Regency area. Generally, this artifact is referred to by most Alor people as an altar. However, traditionally, the community knows it as Masang in the Abui language, while in the Alor tribe it is called Dolu in the Alor language, Doler in the Adang language, and Doel in the Kabola language, all of which refer to a collection of circular stones arranged around a banyan tree in the courtyard of the traditional government house with a height and width of 2-3 meters each, as a symbol of social identity for the position of the traditional government in the social life of the traditional community in Alor Regency.



Picture 1: Photo of the researcher in front of the Dolu stone.

Socio-historically, in the Alor Island and Pantar Island regions of Alor Regency, there were two traditional governments that grew and developed before the era of western colonialism (Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch). These two traditional governments were the Abui Kingdom in the mountainous region of Alor Island (Malua) and the Munaseli Kingdom in the coastal area of Alor-Pantar Island. However, due to conflicts and wars between the Abui and Munaseli Kingdoms, and the growing power of the descendants of these two kingdoms, the descendants of the Abui Kingdom established a social solidarity of five alliances: the alliance in the mountainous region, encompassing Kolana, the Mataru Batu Lolong, and Kabola. Meanwhile, the descendants of the Munaseli Kingdom also established a solidarity of five alliances, consisting of the kingdoms of Pandai, Baranusa, Balagar, Alor-Bunga Bali, and Malua-Kui. These solidarity values persist to this day.

Further research reveals that the symbols of the Altar Stone (Fato Dolu) and the banyan tree within this traditional government system were later established as the Regional Command Symbol of Alor Regency. These symbols include the tribal house, the Altar Stone (Fato Dolu), the banyan tree, and the moko, combined with the star symbol and the rice and cotton symbols. However, traditionally, the symbol of the Alor Regency regional government emerged from the values of local wisdom within the customary governments of the Alor Island region, namely the Kolana Customary Government, the Matataru Customary Government, the Pureman Customary Government, the Batulolong Customary Government, the Malua-Kui Customary Government, and the Alor-Bunga Bali Customary Government.

Further research has shown that within the Alor-Bunga Bali customary government, the Altar Stone (Fato Dolu) traditionally symbolizes the socio-religious standing of the traditional alliance of the Alor-Bunga Balinese people, consisting of the Alor 3 Village Community (Alurung Lafo Talo), the 7 Village Temple Community (Pura Lafo Pito), and the 10 Village Adang Community (Adang Lafo Karto). These communities are located in the Northwest Alor sub-district of Alor Regency. The villages within the Alor-Bunga customary government circle all have altars (Fato Dolu) located in front of the tribal or customary government houses, symbolizing the social standing of their respective customary government leaders. The altar stone (Fato Dolu) symbolizes the authority of the customary government, from the Kingdom, to the Captaincy, to the Chieftaincy, and finally to the Temukungan. Alor 3 villages (Alurung Lafo Tallo), in historical studies have three tribal houses, namely the Pelang Serang-Puse Rebong Bunga Bali House located in Alor Besar Village (Loffo Beng/Bang Mate), the Pelang Serang Baorae House in Alor Kecil Village (Loffo Kisu/Bang Tina), and the Pelang Serang Baorae Dulionong House in Dulolong Village (Dulionong/Anabang) whose descendants are thought to come from the same genetic lineage, namely the descendants of the marriage of Mau Pelang and Muriang Bali in Bunga Bali, resulting in three Dynasties, Maupelang-Baololong, Baololong-Tulimau (Tulimau Dynasty) in Alor Besar. The Saku Bala Duli Duli Dynasty- Kaing Saku, Kaing Saku-Naesaku, Naesaku-Dopunae, Dopu Nae- Nampira Bukang (Nampira Dynasty) in Dulolong. Because their descendants once became kings of the Alor Kingdom, members of the Regional Council, and leaders of the Alor Regency government during the Old Order, New Order, and Reform eras.

Further research also shows that, from the perspective of local wisdom, the three villages of the Alor people were the center of the Alor Bunga Bali kingdom, ruled by three dynasties: the Bunga Bara, Maupelang (1500-1600), the Baololong Dynasty (1600-1800), the Kawiha-Tulimau Dynasty (1800-1900), and the Nampira Dynasty (1900- until the emergence of the Swatantra government system in 1964). The customary government's territory encompassed three villages, seven temples, and ten villages during the Bololong and Tulimau dynasties. During the Nampira Dynasty, the territory expanded into the Alor-Pantar Kingdom, encompassing the Northwest Alor region and Kalabahi City.

Revitalization of Batu Dolu Symbol in Local Wisdom of Alor Tribal Community in Alor Regency

Beyond the lack of integration into the local curriculum, the revitalisation of Batu Dolu faces a broader structural obstacle: the effects of modernisation and globalisation. Shifts in social values, particularly among younger people, towards the modern economy and contemporary lifestyles often diminish appreciation of traditional cultural heritage (Baharuddin, 2021). In this context, Batu Dolu, which is rich in traditional socio-religious values, risks being deemed irrelevant to the practical needs of modern life. In their study of the Osing Indigenous community, Arifah and Saputra (2023) found that, without effective adaptation strategies, local wisdom is increasingly marginalised by more powerful and visually appealing global cultural narratives. This is evident in Alor, where the city park in Kalabahi adopts Javanese-Balinese architectural designs, thereby indirectly overlooking local symbols such as Batu Dolu and accelerating the erosion of Indigenous cultural identity.

A further problem arises from changing values within Alor society. Modernisation brings individualistic and materialistic values that often conflict with the communal and spiritual values embodied in Batu Dolu. Nasiwan (2012) shows that the transition from traditional to modern society often erodes cultural practices considered incompatible with the demands of a market economy. Younger people in Alor are more interested in employment opportunities in formal and modern sectors than in preserving cultural artefacts, creating a knowledge gap between older generations who understand the meaning of Batu Dolu and younger generations who are increasingly detached from their ancestral heritage.

At the institutional level, customary institutions have experienced a decline in their role under globalisation. Institutions that should safeguard local wisdom have instead lost influence to modern bodies such as local governments and markets. Beni (2024) shows that, in Alor society, the positions of tribal chiefs (Abai/Atabeng) and customary councils are increasingly constrained by a more bureaucratic village-government system. This decline has weakened the coordination of Batu Dolu revitalisation efforts, both in terms of physical maintenance and the transmission of its values to future generations.

Despite the revitalization narrative often dominated by male figures and the government, women in Alor society are the indirect backbone of preserving the collective memory of Batu Dolu. Women, through their daily activities and participation in traditional rituals, often serve as guardians of small narratives, family stories, and symbolic meanings not recorded in official documents. However, their voices and contributions to decision-making processes regarding revitalization are often marginalized. This neglect of women's roles has the potential to disrupt the chain of transmission of Dolu values, which live on in domestic and community spaces managed by women.

In terms of communication and media, globalisation has created an information environment saturated with homogeneous popular culture. The limited representation of Batu Dolu in mainstream media and on digital platforms further complicates efforts to introduce this symbol to a wider audience, particularly younger people. As Suryatman et al. (2020) state, cultural artefacts need to be presented through engaging and accessible narratives to prevent them from being lost within global culture. The lack of creative content highlighting Batu Dolu through films, documentaries, or social media has further distanced this symbol from the everyday lives of contemporary society.

Development policies that focus primarily on economic growth often neglect cultural preservation. Local governments prioritise physical infrastructure and mass tourism, which are considered to provide immediate economic benefits. For example, the development of a park with an external architectural style in the Kalabahi coastal reclamation area overlooks the potential to strengthen local identity through the Batu Dolu symbol. Nugroho and Dkk (2018) emphasise that, without strong political commitment from stakeholders, efforts to revitalise local wisdom will continue to be

subordinated to short-term economic interests. Comprehensive integration of development planning and cultural preservation is therefore needed so that Batu Dolu does not become merely a marginalised symbol amid modernisation.

The challenge of revitalisation is evident in the gap between older and younger generations. While older generations possess deep knowledge of the sacred meaning and history of Batu Dolu, younger generations often remain passive spectators rather than creative participants. Top-down, ceremonial revitalisation efforts, such as the use of Batu Dolu in regional symbols, fail to create opportunities for young people to interpret its values and connect them to their identities in the digital age. As a result, young people, who should be key actors in cultural preservation, may feel alienated and regard Batu Dolu as static and irrelevant to their lives.

Revitalisation approaches centred on traditional elites and government often overlook the contributions of marginalised groups, particularly women and younger people. Women, as custodians of traditions and family narratives, play a crucial role in transmitting Batu Dolu values. Younger people, meanwhile, can reinterpret and communicate these cultural narratives through diverse forms of creative media. Excluding these groups from the planning and implementation of revitalisation programmes makes preservation efforts superficial and unsustainable because such initiatives address symbolic aspects without involving those most closely connected to everyday cultural life.

The Gap Between Historical Values and Contemporary Practices

The phenomenon of cultural lag is clearly evident in how the Alor people transmit the values associated with Batu Dolu. An artefact that once stood at the centre of social, political, and spiritual activity and symbolised customary governmental authority is now more often viewed as an administrative element within an official regional emblem. Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation (1997) is highly relevant to understanding this shift in meaning. According to Hall, the meaning of a symbol is not fixed but is shaped through dominant cultural practices and discourses.

In the context of Batu Dolu, the transition from a living symbol of customary power to merely a symbol of local government reflects a shift from traditional values to modern bureaucratic logic. Effective revitalization requires considering how the representation of Batu Dolu can be restored to its original meaning through media, education, and everyday cultural practices. This shift in function demonstrates a significant difference in understanding between the older generation, who interacted directly with the symbol, and the current generation, who only know Dolu as an official and ceremonial representation. This separation of meaning is further exacerbated by the lack of efforts to internalize Dolu values through education or traditional traditions.

This separation of meanings is further exacerbated by the weak internalization of Dolu values through education or traditional traditions. This suggests that Dolu revitalization remains limited to symbolic aspects, such as recognizing Dolu in the regional government emblem, but has not been accompanied by concrete efforts such as integration into the local curriculum, maintaining historical sites, or developing cultural tourism destinations focused on Dolu. Consequently, the noble values that should be passed on are diminished, making it difficult for the younger generation to understand their philosophical and historical meaning. This situation aligns with Baharuddin's (2021) statement, which emphasizes that modernization often causes communities to set aside local wisdom amidst social change. This is evident in the case of Batu Dolu, where modern lifestyles, economic pressures, and the hegemony of global values have displaced traditional practices that were once the foundation of social life. Thus, there is a significant gap between Dolu's historical significance as a symbol of traditional civilization and its role in the social life of the Alor people today.

The impact of this phenomenon is contradictory. On the one hand, Dolu remains valued as an important artifact and is preserved in the official emblem of the regional government. However, on the other hand, its essence is fading, leaving the younger generation only familiar with Dolu as a physical object without a deep understanding of its philosophy and historical value. If left unchecked, Dolu risks becoming merely a "silent symbol" and losing its social and historical significance. Therefore, it is crucial to bridge the gap between historical values and modern practices through a holistic revitalization strategy (Darajad & Wula, 2022).

Revitalization should not be limited to administrative aspects, but also encompass educational dimensions, the preservation of physical artifacts, and the application of Dolu values in contemporary socio-cultural life. These efforts can be realized through a curriculum that incorporates local wisdom, the preservation of historical sites, the involvement

of the younger generation in traditional traditions, and the development of cultural tourism that promotes the Dolu narrative as part of the heritage of civilization. With these steps, Batu Dolu has the potential to once again serve as a link between ancestral heritage and the dynamics of modern society in the age of globalization.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that: 1) Batu Dolu (the Altar) symbolises the social identity and customary government of the major tribes and kingdoms that developed on Alor Island, from the mountainous kingdoms of Kolana, Mataru, Pureman, and Batu Lolong to the coastal kingdoms of Kui-Malua and Alor in Alor Besar, Alor Kecil, Dulolong, and Kalabahi City. The Alor Regency Government has adopted Batu Dolu as a principal regional symbol displayed on the uniforms of its employees. 2) The revitalisation of Batu Dolu remains largely confined to its official symbolic role. It has not yet been fully incorporated into the local curriculum, the restoration and maintenance of Batu Dolu at tribal houses, or the creation of miniature Batu Dolu monuments representing civilisation in cultural parks and coastal areas of Kalabahi City, Alor Regency.

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