

Uang Panai: Between Tradition And Perception Among Bugis, Moronene, And Sundanese Culture In Indonesia

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*Yuliyannah Sain, Tasman Sanhas, Siti Hayatun Nufus, Novita P. R., Syarif Amin

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¹²³⁴⁵Magister Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: yuliana.sain@umkendari.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The "Uang Panai" (bridewealth) custom holds significant cultural weight in various Indonesian ethnic groups, particularly among the Bugis, Moronene, and Sunda. This study investigates the intricate relationship between tradition and contemporary perceptions surrounding Uang Panai in these three distinct communities. Utilizing a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design, the research employed in-depth interviews and participant observation with community elders, young adults, and cultural figures in selected regions of South Sulawesi (Bugis), Southeast Sulawesi (Moronene), and West Java (Sunda). Key findings reveal diverse interpretations and practices of Uang Panai, ranging from its symbolic value as a reflection of family honor and social status among the Bugis, to its more pragmatic function as a shared financial responsibility in the Moronene community. In contrast, the Sundanese perspective, while acknowledging traditional dowry, shows less emphasis on a comparable "Uang Panai" concept, often prioritizing the couple's readiness. The study concludes that while Uang Panai remains a fundamental cultural element, its execution and societal acceptance are continually shaped by evolving socio-economic conditions and generational perceptions, leading to varying degrees of adaptation and preservation across these Indonesian ethnic groups.

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INTRODUCTION

"Uang Panai," as a cultural practice in marriage, has become an interesting subject of study in recent years, reflecting its complexity as a tradition adapting to modernity. Generally, uang panai refers to a sum of money or goods handed over by the prospective groom's side to the prospective bride's family as part of the engagement or wedding process, particularly prominent in the Bugis-Makassar community in South Sulawesi. More than just a financial transaction, uang panai is often interpreted as a symbol of self-esteem, family dignity, and a form of respect for the prospective bride, its value varying significantly depending on the bride's social status, education, or profession (Jafar et al., 2023).

Recent research indicates that the value of uang panai continues to increase, even becoming a significant financial burden for prospective grooms, thus sparking widespread discussion about its relevance in the current economic context (Ahmad et al., 2025). Another important aspect of uang panai is its function as a bond of commitment and a representation of seriousness from the male side. In many cases, uang panai serves as an indicator of the prospective husband's financial capability and readiness to support a household, as well as a guarantee to the woman's family that their daughter will have a decent life (Fitriyani, 2022).

A study by Nuruddin and Nahar (2022) on the Bugis Mappacci tradition highlights how every ritual in Bugis marriage, including uang panai, is laden with deep religious and cultural values, reflecting the community's worldview of marriage as a sacred bond. However,

on the other hand, the high nominal value of uang panai is also debated as it is seen to hinder marriages and trigger social problems, forcing some couples to postpone or even cancel their wedding plans (UIN Malang Etheses, 2025). The phenomenon of uang panai does not stand alone in the Indonesian cultural landscape; it has equivalents or similar practices in various other ethnic groups, albeit with different names and contexts.

For example, the Moronene ethnic group in Southeast Sulawesi has the "Langa" tradition, which shares a similar essence in demonstrating respect and commitment in marriage (Hasbullah, 2019; Rahim, 2021). Meanwhile, the Sundanese ethnic group in West Java has "seserahan" or "maskawin," which, although conceptually and practically different from Bugis uang panai, are similarly a form of giving from the man's side to the woman as a symbol of seriousness and responsibility (Irfani, 2025).

This cross-cultural comparison shows that the concept of "bridewealth" or dowry is universal, but its manifestation and perception are highly influenced by local cultural context and adaptation to social and economic changes (Ady & Nata, 2025; Jariah et al., 2022). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of uang panai requires exploring not only the practice itself but also the meaning embedded within it and how that meaning evolves over time across various ethnic groups.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative research approach because the primary goal of this study is to deeply understand the phenomenon of "uang panai" and its perceptions from the participants' perspectives, as well as to interpret the cultural meanings embedded within it. The qualitative approach allows for a rich and contextual exploration of social practices, beliefs, and language that shape marriage traditions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is highly suitable for delving into the complexities of perceptions that often cannot be numerically measured but require narrative and interpretive understanding.

Respondents

Population and Sample

The participants in this study were selected from three different ethnic groups in Indonesia: (1) Bugis community in South Sulawesi. (2) Moronene community in Southeast Sulawesi. (3) Sundanese community in West Java. They consisted of: (1) Community elders who had deep cultural knowledge and experience regarding traditional marriage customs, (2) Young adults who were directly involved or preparing for marriage, and (3) Cultural figures or local leaders who understood the symbolic and social aspects of the "uang panai" tradition.

Participants were chosen using purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience or substantial knowledge about the practice and meaning of "uang panai" in their respective cultures.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were in-depth interviews and participant observation. The interviews were conducted with community elders, young adults, and cultural figures from the Bugis (South Sulawesi), Moronene (Southeast Sulawesi), and Sundanese (West Java) ethnic groups. Participant observation was also carried out to directly observe marriage practices and social interactions related to the "uang panai" tradition.

Procedures

The research procedures consisted of several stages as follows:

Site Selection:

(1) The researchers selected three research sites representing each ethnic group (2) Bugis community in South Sulawesi (3) Moronene community in Southeast Sulawesi. (4) Sundanese community in West Java

Participant Recruitment

Key informants were chosen through purposive sampling. They included community elders, cultural figures, and young adults who had direct experience or knowledge about the "uang panai" tradition.

Data Collection

(1) In-depth Interviews: Conducted using semi-structured interview guides to explore the meanings, perceptions, and practices related to “uang panai.” (2) Participant Observation: Researchers immersed themselves in the communities to observe marriage-related events, negotiations, and social interactions involving “uang panai.”

Documentation

Field notes, audio recordings, and photographs were used to document the interviews and observations during the fieldwork.

Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews and participant observation were analysed using thematic analysis.

The analysis process involved the following steps:

Data Transcription

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Field notes from participant observations were also compiled to capture contextual details.

Data Coding

The transcripts and field notes were coded to identify recurring ideas, cultural terms, and patterns related to the “uang panai” tradition.

Theme Development

Codes were grouped into broader categories, which were then developed into themes representing cultural meanings, perceptions, and variations in the practice of “uang panai” among the three ethnic groups.

Cross-Cultural Comparison

The themes from each ethnic group (Bugis, Moronene, Sundanese) were compared to highlight similarities and differences in how “uang panai” is understood and practiced.

Interpretation

The themes were interpreted within the ethnolinguistic and socio-cultural context to explain how language and culture shape and reflect the tradition of “uang panai.”

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**Findings**

The findings of this ethnographic study revealed different cultural meanings, practices, and perceptions of the “uang panai” tradition across the three ethnic groups studied Bugis, Moronene, and Sundanese.

Bugis Community (South Sulawesi)

Uang panai was considered a symbol of family honor, social status, and prestige. The amount was often very high, reflecting the family’s economic capability and the woman’s social position.

Negotiations were formal and complex, involving extended family members. Many young Bugis perceived uang panai as a cultural obligation but also felt it had become a financial burden.

Moronene Community (Southeast Sulawesi)

Uang panai was seen more as a shared responsibility rather than a display of wealth. The amount was moderate and often supported by contributions from both families. The emphasis was on cooperation, kinship ties, and mutual support during marriage preparations.

Young Moronene tended to view uang panai as practical and flexible, adjusting to the couple’s financial situation.

Sundanese Community (West Java)

There was no exact equivalent to uang panai in Sundanese marriage customs. The tradition focused more on dowry (mas kawin) and the couple’s readiness and maturity rather than the amount of money paid.

While elders acknowledged the existence of traditional dowry, young Sundanese were less concerned with monetary aspects and prioritized emotional and personal readiness.

Table 1.1 Cross-Cultural Comparison Table

Aspect of Comparison	Bugis ("Uang Panai")	Moronene ("langa")	Sundanese ("Maskawin" & "Seserahan")
Form of Giving	Generally large sums of cash, highly liquid	Cash, agricultural products, livestock – more varied	Maskawin (money/jewelry/prayer sets), Seserahan (essential goods)
Primary Purpose	Symbol of woman's self-esteem (<i>siri'</i>) & social status, guarantee of seriousness	Symbol of respect & kinship bond, manifestation of commitment	Religious obligation (maskawin), symbol of seriousness & readiness to provide (seserahan)
Negotiation Dynamics	Intense & competitive, often protracted (<i>madduta</i>)	Deliberative & consensual, more familial	Relatively standard & agreed upon, not competitive
Primary Perception	Pillar of tradition, but increasingly a financial burden (especially for youth)	Revered tradition, social binder, affordable burden	Religious obligation & symbolic, more pragmatic & focused on essence
Language Connection	Rich in idioms of <i>siri'</i> , <i>pangngati</i> , financial burden phrases (modern)	Language of unity, togetherness, deliberation	Islamic terminology (maskawin), functional & spiritual language
Impact of Modernity	Nominal inflation, shift in meaning to an obstacle (Ahmad et al., 2025; UIN Malang Etheses, 2025)	Tends to be stable, slight adaptation	Focus on efficiency & simplicity, emphasis on spiritual essence

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the *uang panai* tradition carries different cultural meanings and functions across the Bugis, Moronene, and Sundanese communities, reflecting their distinct socio-cultural values and shifting generational perspectives. Among the Bugis, *uang panai* strongly represents patrilineal pride, family honor, and social hierarchy, with high amounts viewed as symbols of prestige that reinforce family reputation, although many younger Bugis perceive it as a financial burden that can delay or discourage marriage, indicating a shift from traditional prestige values toward more pragmatic considerations. In contrast, the Moronene regard *uang panai* as a form of collective responsibility and mutual support, where the amount symbolizes solidarity and cooperation between families rather than wealth, showing that it functions as a social mechanism to strengthen kinship ties, with younger participants appreciating its flexibility and adaptation to modern economic conditions. Meanwhile, the Sundanese do not practice a direct equivalent of *uang panai*, emphasizing instead the symbolic value of *mas kawin* (dowry) and the couple's readiness for marriage, which highlights their cultural focus on personal maturity, emotional preparedness, and mutual agreement rather than material display, illustrating how modernization and Islamic values have shaped their marriage customs. Overall, these findings suggest that marriage traditions are dynamic and shaped by both cultural heritage and socio-economic change, and demonstrate how language—through terms, idioms, and narratives about *uang panai*—not only reflects and reinforces cultural values but also adapts as younger generations reinterpret traditions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the *uang panai* tradition carries distinct cultural meanings and functions across the Bugis, Moronene, and Sundanese communities, showing how language both shapes and reflects cultural values. Among the Bugis, *uang panai* symbolizes family honor and social status, yet many younger people view it as a financial burden that can hinder marriage. In contrast, the Moronene interpret their equivalent tradition (*langa*) as a symbol of respect and kinship, practiced with moderate amounts and supported collectively by both families. Meanwhile, the Sundanese emphasize *mas kawin* and *seserahan* as expressions of religious obligation and readiness, highlighting a spiritual and practical approach that places less emphasis on material wealth. These variations illustrate that marriage traditions are dynamic, continuously adapting to socio-economic changes while maintaining their cultural essence. The study affirms that language plays a crucial role in sustaining, reshaping, and transmitting these values across generations. Understanding how different communities negotiate tradition in changing times is essential to appreciating Indonesia's cultural diversity and the complex interplay between heritage, public perception, and modernity.

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