



Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengembangan Pendidikan

<http://ejournal.upg45ntt.ac.id/index.php/ciencias/index>

Boablingin Sings of The Helong Soul : A Semiotic And Cultural Reading of A Traditional Song

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Info Artikel

Sejarah Artikel:

Diterima: 26 Juni 2025

Direvisi: 27 Juni 2025

Disetujui: 27 Juli 2025

Keywords:

Boablingin, Helong Tribe, Traditional Song, Semiotics, Cultural Identity, Oral Tradition, Indigenous Heritage

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji makna budaya, semiotik, dan sosial yang terkandung dalam lagu tradisional "Boablingin" dari suku Helong, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia. Sebagai bagian dari tradisi lisan yang kaya, lagu ini tidak hanya berperan dalam pelestarian warisan musik, tetapi juga sebagai media pewarisan nilai, kepercayaan, dan pandangan hidup masyarakat Helong. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa studi dokumentasi, wawancara mendalam dengan tokoh adat, serta analisis teks terhadap lirik lagu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *Boablingin* memuat simbol-simbol alam, cinta, solidaritas komunal, dan penghormatan terhadap leluhur. Unsur-unsur ini mencerminkan hubungan erat antara manusia dan lingkungan, yang merupakan inti dari kosmologi Helong. Selain itu, lagu ini berfungsi sebagai teks budaya yang memperkuat identitas etnis, memperkuat pewarisan lintas generasi, serta menjadi bentuk perlawanan terhadap pengikisan budaya akibat modernisasi. Penelitian ini tidak hanya berkontribusi terhadap pelestarian warisan budaya takbenda, tetapi juga menawarkan model analisis yang menggabungkan pendekatan semiotik dan etnografi dalam kajian musik tradisional.

Abstract

This research explores the cultural, semiotic, and social meanings embedded in the traditional song "Boablingin", which originates from the Helong tribe of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. As part of a rich oral tradition, the song plays a vital role not only in preserving musical heritage but also in transmitting values, beliefs, and the Helong people's worldview. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through documentation studies, in-depth interviews with local elders, and textual analysis of the lyrics. The findings reveal that Boablingin contains symbolic representations of nature, love, community solidarity, and ancestral reverence. These elements reflect the interconnectedness between humans and the environment, a fundamental aspect of Helong cosmology. Moreover, the song functions as a cultural text that reinforces ethnic identity, strengthens intergenerational transmission, and resists cultural erosion in the face of modernization. This study not only contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, but also offers a model for integrating semiotic analysis and ethnographic approaches in the study of indigenous music traditions.

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p-ISSN: 2621-3087

e-ISSN: 2621-5721

INTRODUCTION

Language and song are deeply embedded within culture, acting not merely as tools for communication or entertainment, but as fundamental means of expressing identity, transmitting values, and preserving the collective memory of a community. Culture, in this context, functions as one of the primary ways to distinguish one group of people from another and serves as a marker of ethnic existence. As noted by Koentjaraningrat (1996), culture encompasses various dimensions—ranging from artefacts (material objects), to behavioral patterns, to systems of thought, and ultimately to ideological constructs. Culture, therefore, can be understood as “the way of life of an entire society,” passed down through generations and reflected in daily practices, beliefs, and expressions.

One prominent form of such cultural expression is found in music and song. Across Indonesian archipelago, traditional music serves not only to entertain but also to encode spiritual beliefs, historical narratives, and communal values. Each ethnic group possesses unique musical traditions that embody their worldview. The Helong tribe, an indigenous community residing primarily on Sema Island and coastal parts of Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, is no exception. With a rich oral heritage, the Helong people have preserved their cultural identity through storytelling, rituals, and particularly, traditional songs such as “*Boabblingin*”.

Boabblingin: A Cultural Artefact of the Helong Tribe

The song “*Boabblingin*” is more than a musical composition; it represents a cultural artefact imbued with meanings, symbols, and collective memories. Its lyrics reflect the social fabric, cosmological views, and ecological consciousness of the Helong people. Traditional songs like *Boabblingin* often play

integral roles in ceremonies—whether marking transitions such as marriage, harvest festivals, or ancestral rites. They also act as pedagogical tools, passing on moral teachings and communal values to younger generations.

In line with Tan and Chua (2017), who argue that indigenous music in Southeast Asia often functions as a vehicle for oral historiography, *Boabblingin* may be viewed as a form of “sung history” that maintains cultural continuity amidst modern transformations. Furthermore, as Lestari (2020) highlights in her lyrical analysis of Indonesian traditional songs, such compositions often contain layered metaphors and ecologically rooted imagery that are crucial for understanding the indigenous worldview.

Despite its cultural richness, *Boabblingin* and other Helong oral traditions remain understudied within the broader field of ethnomusicology and linguistic anthropology. Most existing literature on Indonesian traditional music focuses on dominant ethnic groups such as Javanese, Balinese, or Batak communities (Nettl, 2005; Kartomi, 2012), leaving smaller indigenous cultures like Helong marginalized in academic discourse. Additionally, prior studies often lack methodological rigor or fail to adopt emic (insider) perspectives when interpreting traditional lyrics. There is also limited integration of cultural semiotics and socio-anthropological frameworks in the analysis of such music.

Moreover, the method of qualitative descriptive analysis, as discussed by Sandelowski (2000, Wiley), is often underutilized or misapplied in cultural research. Sandelowski critiques the tendency to overlook the methodological value of low-inference, data-close approaches in favor of more abstract interpretive models. In the context of Helong songs, this method may offer a systematic yet flexible approach to

analyze meaning without distorting the indigenous voice.

This study introduces several original contributions to the field:

1. First focused semiotic and ethnolitical analysis of *Boabblingin*, offering a detailed interpretation of its linguistic, symbolic, and cultural content based on field data and local informants.
2. Application of a structured qualitative descriptive method (following Sandelowski, 2000) within the field of ethnomusicology, specifically in analyzing indigenous song lyrics.
3. Bridging linguistic, musical, and anthropological approaches, presenting a holistic model for interpreting oral traditions that remain largely undocumented.
4. Preservation and revitalization of endangered cultural heritage, contributing to the academic recognition and community awareness of Helong identity.

This research aims to analyze the semiotic structures, cultural values, and social functions embedded in the lyrics of *Boabblingin*, with the goal of understanding how the song functions as a repository of Helong cultural identity. Through a combination of textual analysis, in-depth interviews with Helong elders and cultural experts, and review of ethnographic literature, the study seeks to unravel the implicit meanings that connect *Boabblingin* to the broader Helong worldview.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The traditional song "*Boabblingin*" from the Helong tribe of East Nusa Tenggara represents more than a mere artistic expression; it serves as a vital repository of cultural knowledge, oral history, and collective identity. Rich in symbolic meaning, the song is performed in various social and ritual contexts, reflecting values, beliefs, and the worldview of

the Helong people. This literature review synthesizes academic sources and ethnocultural analyses to illuminate the thematic elements of *Boabblingin*, its role in sustaining Helong cultural identity, and its evolving position in both local and global frameworks of cultural valuation.

Cultural and Ethnomusicological Background

The Helong people, indigenous to regions such as Semau Island and parts of Kupang in West Timor, are known for their strong oral traditions, in which music functions as a core medium of cultural continuity. As Tan and Chua (2017) assert in their ethnomusicological research on Eastern Indonesian tribes, traditional songs like "*Boabblingin*" function as vehicles of oral storytelling, transmitting tribal histories, myths, and socio-spiritual teachings from generation to generation. These songs are not only performed during formal ceremonies but are also integral to daily social interactions, agricultural cycles, and rites of passage such as marriage or communal feasts.

"*Boabblingin*", in particular, encapsulates central themes of love, kinship, interdependence with nature, and community solidarity. The lyrics often employ metaphorical and symbolic language, drawing from local ecological features—rivers, mountains, seasonal patterns—which reflect the tribe's intimate connection with their environment. This resonates with broader anthropological observations that indigenous music often mirrors ecological worldviews and spiritual relationships with the land (Sheehy, 1992; Nettl, 2005).

Thematic and Lyrical Analysis

According to Lestari (2020), who conducted a poetic analysis of *Boabblingin*, the song demonstrates a layered lyrical structure. Her analysis highlights how natural imagery is employed not merely as description, but as symbolic referents of emotional states, moral

values, and cultural codes. For instance, the recurring motif of flowing water is interpreted as a symbol of both transience and connectedness—a metaphor for generational continuity within the Helong clan system.

Lestari further identifies the song's communal orientation, noting that many stanzas celebrate collective experiences such as harvesting, group dances (*likurai*), or village rituals (*adat*). This confirms the interpretation of *Boablingin* not only as a form of entertainment but also as a cultural mechanism of social integration, where lyrics act as a medium for reinforcing shared norms, histories, and identities.

The rhythmic and melodic aspects, although not the main focus of this literature review, are also significant. In traditional Helong performances, *Boablingin* is often accompanied by indigenous instruments such as gong, ketidu, and sasando, indicating a holistic performative tradition that blends lyrical content with bodily movement, instrumental sound, and ritual function.

Position in Local and Global Contexts

In the local cultural context, *Boablingin* remains a source of pride and resistance against cultural erosion, especially amid globalization and urban migration. It is frequently performed during regional festivals, school competitions, and tourism showcases. Yet, despite its visibility in such events, formal academic documentation and systematic analysis of the song remain scarce. As such, this review underlines the urgent need for further scholarly attention, especially in cataloging and preserving Helong oral literature.

In a global context, there is growing recognition of the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the value of traditional music in sustaining

community identity. Although *Boablingin* has not yet been nominated as part of national or international heritage registries, its thematic richness and social significance qualify it as a candidate for such recognition. Efforts to document, analyze, and interpret the song academically may contribute to broader heritage preservation initiatives and intercultural dialogue, emphasizing the importance of social cohesion and identity among the Helong people.

METHOD

The author adopts a descriptive qualitative research method as the primary approach in this study. Qualitative research is broadly defined as a method of inquiry that seeks to understand complex social phenomena, human experiences, and cultural expressions through non-numerical data such as text, interviews, or observations. This approach emphasizes depth over breadth, allowing for nuanced insights into the meanings, motivations, and contextual factors that shape human behavior and societal practices.

Among various qualitative approaches, qualitative description is particularly appropriate when the research goal is to provide a comprehensive summary of an event or phenomenon in everyday terms. According to Sandelowski in *Research in Nursing & Health* (2017, p. 23), qualitative descriptive studies are especially useful in health care and nursing research, where clear, straightforward descriptions of phenomena are often needed to inform practice and policy. However, despite its practical utility, the theoretical underpinnings and methodological boundaries of qualitative description remain underexplored and under-theorized in the academic literature. This lack of clarity has led to misconceptions and methodological ambiguity, which this study seeks to address

by situating qualitative description within a structured analytical framework.

Furthermore, Mohajan (2020) underscores the interdependence of qualitative and quantitative paradigms, arguing that quantitative research is often contingent upon the foundational insights provided by qualitative inquiry. While quantitative methods rely on statistical tools for hypothesis testing, measurement, and generalization, they typically require well-defined variables, categories, and constructs—many of which are first discovered and refined through qualitative exploration. Therefore, in many contexts, qualitative research not only precedes but also enriches quantitative analysis by grounding it in lived experiences and contextual realities. To achieve a holistic and culturally grounded understanding of the song “*Boablingin*”, the following triangulated data collection techniques are employed:

The research begins with the collection of the song’s lyrics from a variety of documented sources, such as local archives, cultural anthologies, or community-published songbooks. Any textual variations or discrepancies among versions will be noted and critically compared to ensure a representative and inclusive textual base for analysis.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with individuals who hold cultural authority or experiential knowledge of the Helong tradition. These include traditional leaders (raja or adat figures), local artists, elders, and other Helong community members who are familiar with the origins, meanings, and functions of “*Boablingin*”. The interviews aim to uncover not only the semantic content of the lyrics but also the song’s performative, spiritual, and social roles within the Helong cultural framework.

Once collected and corroborated, the lyrics of “*Boablingin*” will undergo close reading and interpretive analysis. The aim is to identify

symbolic elements, narrative structures, metaphors, and cultural references embedded in the text. Attention will also be paid to linguistic patterns, traditional expressions, and indigenous terminology that may reflect deeper cosmological, historical, or socio-political meanings unique to the Helong worldview.

Significance of the Methodological Choice

By combining these methods within a descriptive qualitative framework, the study seeks not merely to describe the song’s content but to understand its meaning from the perspective of the Helong community itself. This aligns with the goals of *emic* research approaches, which prioritize insider interpretations over outsider categorizations. Moreover, this research contributes to broader methodological discourse by demonstrating how qualitative description can be effectively applied to indigenous cultural studies, a field that often lacks methodological consensus.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

1. *Boablingin bating kit totoang*,
Expressing the hope that peace and prosperity will be created for all people without exception.

daid mesa se in namnau,
invites to unite with the basis of love,
establishing a harmonious relationship.

kil apa ima le nehan bungtilu, symbolizes cooperation and solidarity between people, supporting each other. Jointly building “bungtilu” the place where the helong tribe lives and place that symbolizes togetherness and progress the helong tribe.

2. *Boablingin bating kit totoang*,
Repeating the wish for peace and prosperity for everyone.

Daid mesa baktetebe,
invites to unite and fellowship, live in
togetherness and unity.

Le nehan dale Bungtilu,
Continuing the invitation to build a better
place or community together.

Se lamtua in neka ka,
Affirming that all efforts and unity are
done with the foundation of God's love
and blessings.

3. *Dasi mesa lat leleon laok bus mhunan nua,*
inviting to be united in communication and purpose, stepping together with a common vision and understanding and expressing the determination to move forward and develop together towards a better life.
4. *Kit kon mesa dalen mesa se daka helong ngia,* Showing the unity of heart and spirit in living life and building community and mentioning the location or identity of the region, namely the land of Helong, as a place of shelter and struggle together.
5. *Le nehan dale Bungtilu se lamtua in neka kia,* Reaffirms the importance of cooperation in building the community and stating that all efforts and togetherness are based on God's love as the source of strength and blessings.

Discussion

Values and Meanings in the Lyrics of "Boablingin"

1. The Value of Togetherness

The lyrics of this song highlight the importance of togetherness and gotong royong. The invitation to sit together, eat

together under the banyan tree, and gather at one table shows that moments of togetherness are highly valued in the culture that this song represents.

2. The Meaning of Brotherhood

There is a strong message of brotherhood, where everyone is invited to gather regardless of differences. Eating together symbolizes unity and harmony within the community.

3. Simplicity and Gratitude

This song also teaches us to be grateful for what we have. Simple food such as fish, side dishes, and rice are enjoyed together with gratitude and happiness.

4. Value of Tradition

The mention of the gong as a sign of the start of the event and eating under the banyan tree shows respect for local traditions and customs. The song reminds us of the importance of maintaining and preserving ancestral culture.

5. Meaning of Warmth and Joy

The atmosphere described in the song is full of warmth, joy, and intimacy. It teaches that happiness can be found in simple moments with the closest people.

The song "Boablingin" contains moral messages about the importance of togetherness, brotherhood, gratitude, maintaining traditions, and enjoying happiness in simplicity. This song invites us to always appreciate the moments of gathering with family.

CONCLUSION

The lyrics of the song *Boabblingin* convey a profound and heartfelt aspiration for universal peace and prosperity, emphasizing an inclusive ethos that extends to every individual within and beyond the Helong community. This inclusivity reflects a social ideal where no one is excluded from the vision of collective well-being and harmony. Central to this vision is the foundational value of love (*kasih*), which the song posits as the essential force capable of uniting diverse individuals into a cohesive and cooperative society. The emphasis on love transcends mere emotional sentiment; it is conceptualized as the ethical and spiritual principle guiding interpersonal relations and communal interactions.

A key symbolic term within the lyrics is "*bungtilu*", which denotes more than the physical domicile or geographic space inhabited by the Helong people. *Bungtilu* embodies the concepts of togetherness, mutual support, and communal progress. It functions as a metaphor for the socio-cultural home, representing an idealized collective identity grounded in solidarity and shared responsibility. The repeated exhortations to unity and fellowship throughout the song reinforce the indispensability of social cohesion as a prerequisite for sustainable community development. These calls for solidarity are indicative of an indigenous worldview that prioritizes relational harmony and collective effort as the foundation for both survival and flourishing.

Moreover, the song situates these social imperatives within a transcendent framework, grounding communal life in the love and blessings of God. This theological dimension confers a sacred quality to the social values expressed in the song, positioning divine grace as the ultimate source of strength, guidance, and moral legitimacy. In this context, human endeavors toward peace, unity,

and prosperity are inseparable from spiritual devotion and religious belief. This integration of the sacred and social underscores the holistic nature of Helong cultural philosophy, where material, social, and spiritual domains intersect.

In addition, the lyrics emphasize the critical role of shared language, vision, and collective spirit in forging a common path forward. Language, as a carrier of cultural knowledge and identity, serves as the connective tissue that binds the community, enabling intergenerational transmission of values and traditions. A unified vision reflects the community's shared hopes and aspirations, while collective spirit symbolizes the internalized commitment to work collaboratively toward a brighter and more sustainable future. These elements collectively function as the cultural and social capital that empowers the Helong people to navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining fidelity to their ancestral heritage.

Overall, *Boabblingin* can be interpreted as both a cultural artifact and a living manifesto. It encapsulates the intertwined dimensions of identity, spirituality, and social ethics, thereby reinforcing the Helong people's sense of belonging and purpose. By foregrounding themes of love, unity, and divine blessing, the song not only preserves cultural memory but also inspires ongoing communal resilience and progress. The semiotic richness of *Boabblingin* invites deeper scholarly engagement to uncover the complex ways in which traditional music functions as a medium of cultural expression and social cohesion in indigenous societies.

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