

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ORAL TRADITIONS OF ONANG-ONANG CULTURE THROUGH CULTURAL LITERACY TO IMPROVE THE COMMUNITY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT INDEX

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse the reconstruction of the Onang-Onang oral tradition based on cultural literacy as an effort to improve the Community Literacy Development Index (IPLM). Onang-Onang is an oral tradition of the Mandailing people that embodies aesthetic, moral, religious and social values, and serves as a medium for the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. However, the passage of time, modernisation, and the declining interest of the younger generation in local traditions have posed challenges to the continuity of Onang-Onang. This study employs a literature review method with a descriptive-analytical approach through the examination of various relevant academic sources. The findings indicate that the reconstruction of Onang-Onang can be achieved through documentation, digitisation, reinterpretation of meaning, and integration into education and community literacy activities. These strategies not only ensure the continuity of the tradition but also broaden public access to local cultural knowledge. Thus, the reconstruction of Onang-Onang art based on cultural literacy has the potential to be an effective step in strengthening cultural identity whilst supporting the contextual and sustainable improvement of the Community Literacy Development Index (IPLM).

Keywords: Onang-Onang, oral tradition, cultural literacy, cultural reconstruction, Community Literacy Development Index.

Introduction

Oral tradition is a form of cultural expression that emerged before society knew writing, and to this day remains a living medium for the transmission of values, knowledge and collective identity. In the context of Indonesian society, oral tradition is not merely an aesthetic legacy, but also a space for social education that contains norms, advice and perspectives on life passed down across generations. Studies on oral traditions indicate that forms such as folktales, pantuns, proverbs, and traditional songs can serve as a source of inspiration for the development of literary texts and the strengthening of literacy culture, as they are capable of linking local cultural experiences with the skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing (Sulistyorini, 2023).

One oral tradition rich in cultural value is Onang-Onang, a traditional song of the Mandailing people that features in various customary contexts, particularly at wedding ceremonies. Onang-Onang serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying prayers, advice, expressions of hope, and life lessons from parents to children or from the community to individuals undergoing significant life transitions. Recent popular and academic sources confirm that Onang-Onang is an oral literature containing religious, social, and cultural advice, conveyed through figurative language and parables within a sacred traditional setting (Fadhilah, 2024).

However, in contemporary social developments, the existence of oral traditions such as Onang-Onang faces serious challenges due to modernisation, changing communication patterns, and the natural decline in spaces for cultural transmission. Many oral traditions are losing their social function as the younger generation is more familiar with digital media than with local cultural performances. This situation is also evident in Onang-Onang, which, whilst still surviving, tends to be confined to specific events such as weddings, thereby narrowing the space for cultural reproduction (Silalahi et al., 2017). If this situation persists, oral traditions risk becoming dysfunctional as a medium of cultural education and will remain merely as ceremonial symbols.

In a cultural context, reconstruction can be understood as the process of reordering, revitalising and contextualising traditional elements so that they retain their meaning without losing their historical roots. In the case of Onang-Onang, reconstruction does not mean eliminating the original form of the tradition, but developing ways of transmitting and presenting it to suit the needs of modern society. This approach is in line with the view that oral traditions can be developed into verbal and non-verbal literary texts such as audio, audiovisual, infographics, and film to support broader literacy (Sulistiyorini, 2023).

Cultural literacy itself is the ability to understand, appreciate, and actively engage with living cultural practices within society. Cultural literacy does not stop at knowledge of culture, but also encompasses critical awareness, appreciation of diversity, and the ability to use culture as a source of learning and character development. Research on the cultural literacy movement indicates that cultural literacy plays a role in strengthening national identity, enhancing appreciation for local culture, and supporting cross-cultural learning through both formal education and community activities (Pramesti et al., 2025).

The link between cultural literacy and the strengthening of oral traditions becomes increasingly important when considered in relation to the community literacy development index. The IPLM is an instrument used to describe the level of community literacy development through elements such as the equitable distribution of library services, the adequacy of collections, library staff, visitation rates, library standards, community involvement in outreach, and library membership. Official data from Satu Data Indonesia explains that the IPLM is constructed from elements of community

literacy development and community aspects as the basis for measurement relating to the fostering and development of libraries as vehicles for lifelong learning (Satu Data Indonesia, 2024).

In practice, improving cultural literacy requires an approach that is more closely aligned with the culture of the local community. If literacy is understood narrowly as the act of reading in a library, then much of the potential of local culture remains unintegrated into literacy development. In fact, research on cultural literacy shows that the utilisation of oral traditions, literary texts based on local wisdom, and digital media can expand the scope of literacy and foster a love of reading through content that is contextual and relevant to people's lives (Sulistiyorini, 2023). Therefore, Onang-Onang can be positioned as a source of cultural literacy that not only enriches the local cultural heritage but also supports the achievement of the IPLM indicators.

Previous research on Onang-Onang indicates that this tradition is rich in cultural and educational values. Ayu Tiara Fadhilah found that the lyrics of the Batak Mandailing Onang-Onang contain five types of cultural values: the nature of human life, the nature of human work, the nature of human time, the relationship between humans and nature, and the relationship between humans and humans (Fadhilah, 2024). Another study on the Onang-Onang tradition of the Batak Angkola people also highlighted religious educational values, resilience, compassion, and honesty, whilst affirming its potential for implementation in formal education, particularly in local content learning.

Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies still treat Onang-Onang merely as an object of analysis regarding cultural values or oral literature, without explicitly linking it to the framework of community literacy development. On the other hand, research on the IPLM generally focuses on library indicators, services, and community participation, without significantly integrating local cultural resources as instruments to strengthen literacy (Satu Data Indonesia, 2024). It is this gap that opens up an opportunity for this study to offer a new perspective, namely the reconstruction of traditional oral arts based on cultural literacy as part of a strategy to improve the IPLM.

The approach of reconstructing Onang-Onang based on cultural literacy is also relevant to the needs of 21st-century education, which demands a connection between local knowledge and literacy competencies. Oral traditions adapted into teaching materials, digital content, or educational media can broaden the scope of literacy whilst preserving the continuity of cultural identity. Literature on strengthening cultural literacy indicates that contextual literary texts can foster a love for one's region, curiosity, and a passion for reading, as they provide learning experiences closely tied to the lives of learners and the community (Sulistiyorini, 2023). Furthermore, the use of digital technology offers new opportunities for the reconstruction of oral traditions. Formats such as audio, short videos, podcasts, infographics, and social media can be used to disseminate Onang-Onang, making it more accessible to the younger generation. Experiences in developing literacy in oral traditions through podcasts

demonstrate that digital media can broaden the public's knowledge of oral traditions whilst enhancing public communication skills (Haira et al., 2025). Thus, the reconstruction of Onang-Onang is not merely conservative but also adaptive to the changing times.

Based on the above, this study is significant as it positions Onang-Onang as a cultural resource that can be reconstructed into a tool for community literacy. This focus is significant because cultural literacy and community literacy development fundamentally share the same objective: to strengthen the community's ability to understand, access, and utilise knowledge meaningfully. By incorporating oral traditions into the literacy agenda, communities do not merely read texts, but also interpret their own culture, values, and identity. This aligns with literacy policy directions that emphasise lifelong community development through the strengthening of an inclusive and contextual literacy ecosystem.

Research Methodology

This study employs a literature review method using a descriptive-analytical approach, which involves examining various relevant written sources such as books, national and international journal articles, and other documents related to the Onang-Onang oral tradition, cultural literacy, and the Community Literacy Development Index (IPLM) (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025). Data were collected through a process of inventorying, selecting, and classifying sources, then critically analysed to identify concepts, patterns of relationships between variables, and research gaps that have not been extensively studied. The results of the literature analysis were then synthesised to produce a theoretical foundation and conceptual framework regarding the reconstruction of oral tradition-based arts grounded in cultural literacy as a strategy for enhancing the IPLM (Walliman & Walliman, 2021).

Results and Discussion

The Existence and Challenges of the Onang-Onang Oral Tradition from a Cultural Literacy Perspective

Oral traditions are a form of cultural heritage that not only embody aesthetic values but also serve as a medium for transmitting knowledge, norms and collective identity from one generation to the next. Within Indonesian society, oral traditions take various forms, such as folktales, pantuns, incantations, poems and traditional songs that thrive within communities. Onang-Onang, as an oral tradition of the Mandailing people, demonstrates that local culture is not only passed down through objects or documents, but also through the practices of storytelling, singing, and traditional rituals that are interwoven with the social life of the community. Therefore, the existence of Onang-Onang can be understood as part of a cultural mechanism to maintain the continuity of values, language, and ethnic identity (Sulistiyorini, 2023).

Onang-Onang holds a distinctive position within Mandailing customs as it is not merely entertainment, but an integral part of traditional ceremonies, particularly weddings. In recent academic sources and cultural reports, Onang-Onang is described as a traditional song that accompanies traditional processions and contains prayers, hopes, advice, and expressions of affection for the bride and groom or the family holding the traditional ceremony (Fadhilah, 2024); (Aslan, 2017). This function demonstrates that Onang-Onang is not a standalone art form, but rather part of a broader social system of meaning. In other words, the existence of Onang-Onang illustrates how Mandailing society positions art as a medium for cultural and moral communication within the traditional sphere.

The existence of Onang-Onang can also be seen in its status as an oral text containing cultural and educational values. Research into the lyrics of Mandailing Onang-Onang has found that these songs contain cultural values regarding the nature of human life, the nature of human work, the nature of time, the relationship between humans and nature, and the relationship between humans and their fellow humans (Fadhilah, 2024). This finding reinforces the view that Onang-Onang is not merely an aesthetic expression, but also a means of internalising multi-layered life values. From a cultural literacy perspective, these values make Onang-Onang relevant as a learning resource that helps communities interpret their own culture more critically and meaningfully.

In addition to cultural values, Onang-Onang also contains strong educational values. Research by Ismail Rahmad Daulay indicates that the lyrics of Onang-Onang at Batak Angkola weddings contain religious values, resilience, compassion, and honesty, with indicators such as religious devotion, discipline, kindness, responsibility, and a democratic attitude (Daulay, 2014). This confirms that oral traditions can serve as tools for character education, operating subtly through symbols, repetition, and advice within a customary context. Consequently, the significance of Onang-Onang lies not merely in the form of its performance, but also in the tradition's ability to instil moral values in community members.

From the perspective of cultural literacy, Onang-Onang demonstrates that local communities actually possess rich literacy resources, though these are not always positioned as part of the formal literacy ecosystem. Cultural literacy demands the ability to understand, appreciate, and utilise culture as a source of knowledge and character formation. Studies on the cultural literacy movement affirm that local culture can serve as a gateway to fostering a love of reading, an appreciation of the arts, and a stronger sense of national identity (Aulia et al., 2026). Within this framework, Onang-Onang functions as a cultural text that can be read, interpreted, taught, and revived through educational media and digital documentation.

The existence of Onang-Onang is also closely linked to the Mandailing traditional marriage system. In research and descriptions of Mandailing culture, Onang-Onang is

referred to as part of the traditional rituals accompanying weddings and accompanying the tor-tor procession and traditional music (Fadhilah, 2024); (Aslan et al., 2019). Its presence underscores that this oral tradition serves a symbolic function in marking the transition in the social status of the bride and groom whilst reinforcing inter-family ties. Thus, Onang-Onang is not merely a vocal art form, but also a significant marker of the social structure and collective values of Mandailing society.

Despite its significant status, the existence of Onang-Onang faces serious challenges due to social and cultural changes. Modernisation, urbanisation, and shifts in the tastes of the younger generation have increasingly limited the performance space for this oral tradition, particularly if it is only maintained during specific traditional ceremonies. Recent cultural sources indicate that Onang-Onang now appears more frequently at special events, meaning that the continuity of its transmission is not as strong as in the past (Silalahi et al., 2017). If the space for its actualisation continues to shrink, this tradition risks being understood merely as a ceremonial symbol

The next challenge stems from the public's diminishing understanding of the meaning of Onang-Onang's lyrics and symbols. As they are conveyed through figurative language, metaphors and specific cultural contexts, not all listeners are able to grasp their full meaning. Research by Ayu Tiara Fadhilah indicates that Onang-Onang lyrics contain complex cultural values, but these meanings only become clear when analysed systematically (Fadhilah, 2024). This situation highlights a gap between performance practice and the public's interpretative literacy. Without efforts at documentation and cultural education, these meanings will become increasingly difficult for younger generations to understand.

Another challenge is the weakness of formal documentation and transmission. In oral traditions, continuity depends heavily on the presence of active speakers, singers, or traditional custodians. When the inheriting generation no longer masters the language, context, and performance techniques, the tradition becomes vulnerable to being severed. Research on Onang-Onang underscores the need for documentation to ensure this tradition does not disappear from community life (Aulia et al., 2026). Thus, documentation is not merely the preservation of archives, but a strategy for cultural literacy to ensure that traditional knowledge remains accessible and can be studied.

Economic issues and the costs of traditional customs are also factors affecting the survival of Onang-Onang in social practice. In the context of the research on Mandailing Onang-Onang, it is noted that the organisation of traditional wedding ceremonies often requires significant expenditure, leading some members of the community to no longer perform traditional rituals in their entirety (Fadhilah, 2024). As traditional rituals decline, the scope for Onang-Onang performances also narrows. This demonstrates that the sustainability of oral traditions depends not only on cultural awareness but also on the socio-economic conditions of the communities that support them.

From a cultural literacy perspective, these challenges actually highlight the importance of recontextualising Onang-Onang to ensure its relevance to contemporary society. Traditions that are preserved solely in their traditional forms risk becoming alienated from younger generations who live in the digital realm. Therefore, a cultural literacy approach requires the repackaging of traditions into more accessible forms, such as transcriptions, translations, documentary videos, podcasts, or local teaching materials (Haira et al., 2025). In this way, Onang-Onang can remain authentic in terms of its values whilst being adaptable in terms of media.

Strengthening cultural literacy through Onang-Onang is also vital for preserving the Mandailing ethnic identity amidst the tide of cultural homogenisation. Oral traditions possess social cohesive power as they link the community's language, history, customs, and spiritual values. When communities rediscover Onang-Onang as a cultural text, they do not merely understand a song, but also grasp the Mandailing people's worldview (Fadhilah, 2024). In this sense, cultural literacy acts as a bridge between the heritage of the past and the learning needs of the present.

From an educational perspective, Onang-Onang holds great potential for integration into language, literature, and local content education. Daulay's research confirms that the educational values within Onang-Onang can be utilised in formal education, particularly for the character development of students (Daulay, 2014). This aligns with the view that cultural literacy is not merely about knowing culture, but also about making it a source of contextual and meaningful learning. Thus, Onang-Onang can be used to strengthen cultural awareness in schools whilst fostering an appreciation for local traditions.

Overall, the existence of Onang-Onang from a cultural literacy perspective demonstrates that this oral tradition still possesses strong vitality, yet faces serious challenges regarding transmission, interpretation, documentation, and social relevance. Existing research confirms that Onang-Onang holds significant cultural, educational, and social functions for the Mandailing community. Therefore, its preservation must be directed not only towards efforts to maintain traditional performances, but also towards cultural literacy strategies that enable this tradition to be interpreted, understood, and re-engaged with by the current generation. Through such an approach, Onang-Onang will remain a source of identity, education, and cultural pride.

Reconstruction of Onang-Onang Art Based on Cultural Literacy to Improve IPLM

The reconstruction of the Onang-Onang oral tradition should be understood as a process of reorganisation that respects the original form of the tradition whilst adapting it to the needs of the times and the literacy interests of the community. In the context of cultural literacy, reconstruction is not merely a matter of transferring the tradition into a new form, but of reviving it so that it can be read, understood and

utilised by a generation living in a digital ecosystem. The concept of cultural engineering emphasises that preservation can be achieved through conservation, reconstruction, revitalisation, and innovation as a series of interconnected cultural actions (Nalan, 2022). Therefore, Onang-Onang can be reconstructed as a relevant medium of cultural literacy to strengthen community literacy development.

Cultural literacy within the framework of community development requires the ability to actively recognise, understand, and internalise cultural heritage. Nalan (2022) emphasises that cultural literacy is vital for positioning culture as a national asset that can be protected, preserved, developed, and utilised. If this principle is applied to Onang-Onang, then this oral tradition does not remain merely a traditional performance, but is elevated to a source of cultural knowledge that can be transformed into texts, audio, video, and teaching materials. Thus, the reconstruction of Onang-Onang based on cultural literacy becomes a strategy to broaden community access to local cultural knowledge and enhance literacy awareness in a more contextual manner.

One of the key foundations of reconstruction is systematic documentation. In oral traditions, documentation plays a role in preserving texts, melodies, performance contexts, social functions, and symbolic meanings so that they are not lost as the number of inheritors begins to dwindle. Nalan (2022) emphasises that the inventory, description, and publication of intangible cultural heritage must be supported by information technology to ensure it is meaningfully passed on to future generations. In the context of Onang-Onang, documentation can be carried out through the transcription of lyrics, translation of meanings, recordings of performances, and digital archives so that this tradition can be accessed by schools, libraries, cultural centres, and the general public.

Reconstruction should also focus on efforts to revitalise the role of Onang-Onang in social life. Whereas Onang-Onang was previously confined to specific traditional settings, within the framework of cultural literacy this tradition can be expanded to serve as educational material in schools, communities and public spaces. Research on cultural literacy through visual arts education indicates that contextual learning rooted in local culture has proven effective in fostering cultural literacy from an early age (Pramesti et al., 2025). This provides a basis for positioning Onang-Onang as a cultural learning medium that bridges local knowledge with literacy processes across various levels of education.

Education serves as a strategic space for reconstructing Onang-Onang to contribute to the enhancement of the IPLM. The IPLM is not only related to library infrastructure but also to community participation in literacy activities, reading culture, and access to knowledge resources. When Onang-Onang is integrated into local content learning, community literacy activities, or regional library programmes, this tradition helps to broaden community participation in the literacy ecosystem. Other research

confirms that cultural and civic literacy in primary schools can strengthen global diversity and build pupils' understanding of cultural values (Nalan, 2022).

The reconstruction of Onang-Onang also requires reinterpretation so that the meanings it contains are more easily understood by the younger generation. The lyrics of Onang-Onang are rich in figurative language, proverbs, and profound traditional symbols, so a literal understanding alone is insufficient. Research findings on cultural values within the lyrics of Onang-Onang indicate that this tradition embodies values regarding the essence of life, work, time, the relationship between humans and nature, and the relationship between humans and their fellow beings (Fadhilah, 2024). Therefore, the reconstruction must include contextual explanations, a cultural glossary, and communicative translations so that the meaning of Onang-Onang can be studied as a living source of cultural literacy.

From a literacy development perspective, Onang-Onang can be developed into a more varied range of literacy products. In addition to written documentation, this tradition can be packaged in the form of short videos, podcasts, storybooks based on local culture, teaching modules, and social media content. Experience in developing literacy in oral traditions through digital media shows that formats familiar to the younger generation can broaden understanding of local traditions. With this approach, the reconstruction of Onang-Onang not only preserves the tradition but also makes it relevant to the digital culture that dominates contemporary society.

Reconstruction strategies must also take into account the dimension of community participation. Effective reconstruction is not carried out solely in a top-down manner, but involves traditional leaders, cultural figures, teachers, librarians and the younger generation as active participants in preservation. Nalan (2022) emphasises the importance of cooperation between internal and external parties in the process of reinterpreting, producing and reproducing cultural heritage. In the context of Onang-Onang, community participation will ensure that reconstruction remains faithful to traditional values whilst remaining open to innovations that support cultural literacy. This is important so that traditions do not become detached from their roots and continue to gain social legitimacy from their supporting communities (Nalan, 2022).

The concept of reconstruction is also aligned with a local culture-based learning approach. Research on strengthening cultural literacy through visual arts in primary schools indicates that pupils' direct involvement in local cultural practices can enhance their understanding of cultural meaning and reinforce a sense of pride in national identity (Pramesti et al., 2025). If this principle is applied to Onang-Onang, then pupils will not only study the text, but will also be able to hear, interpret, and even reconstruct the performance form through arts and literacy activities. Thus, oral traditions become an active learning resource that enriches the community's literacy experience.

In relation to IPLM, the reconstruction of Onang-Onang can support the achievement of community literacy indicators through increased visits, participation,

and the utilisation of culture-based literacy services. Regional libraries, community reading gardens, and cultural documentation centres can utilise Onang-Onang materials as flagship local collections. When the community comes to read, listen to, or watch Onang-Onang documentation, these activities help foster a more active culture of literacy. The concept of cultural literacy to enlighten the nation emphasises that culture can serve as a resource for human development—fostering critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills (Nalan, 2022).

Improving IPLM also requires continuity between literacy activities and the strengthening of local identity. Onang-Onang can be used as thematic material in school literacy programmes, cultural speech competitions, traditional arts festivals, or writing classes based on local wisdom. These activities not only broaden the public's access to cultural knowledge but also strengthen the relationship between reading and writing literacy and cultural literacy. Studies on local cultural literacy for children indicate that children introduced to local culture from an early age have a better understanding of the diversity and cultural identity of their surroundings (Rosdiana, 2025); (Erwan et al., 2023)

Within the framework of reconstruction, it is also important to develop more communicative presentation formats. For example, the lyrics of Onang-Onang could be translated into standard Indonesian, accompanied by explanations of cultural meanings, and then presented in the form of a pocket book or digital module. Such a presentation would make it easier for teachers, librarians, and literacy facilitators to use Onang-Onang as learning material across all age groups. Nalan (2022) emphasises that cultural reconstruction is part of the preservation process that allows cultural heritage to gain a “new lease of life” in keeping with the times. Therefore, the reinterpretation of Onang-Onang must take into account educational, aesthetic, and cultural accessibility aspects.

A successful reconstruction must yield tangible impacts on the community's literacy behaviour. When Onang-Onang is present in learning spaces, reading rooms, and digital platforms, the community will find it easier to access local culture as a meaningful source of knowledge. At this point, literacy is no longer understood merely as a technical ability to read, but also as the ability to understand cultural symbols and connect them to social life. Research on culture-based arts education confirms that contextual learning experiences can foster emotional and intellectual engagement with local culture (Pramesti et al., 2025). This is what makes the reconstruction of Onang-Onang relevant as a strategy for enhancing community literacy.

Overall, the cultural literacy-based reconstruction of Onang-Onang art is a strategic effort to link the preservation of tradition with the development of community literacy. Through documentation, reinterpretation, digitisation, and integration into education and public literacy services, Onang-Onang can function as a living and adaptive source of cultural learning. The concepts of cultural literacy and cultural

engineering demonstrate that effective preservation requires innovation, not merely the repetition of old forms. Therefore, the reconstruction of Onang-Onang has the potential to strengthen Mandailing cultural identity whilst supporting the enhancement of IPLM in a more sustainable manner.

Conclusion

The traditional oral art of Onang-Onang holds a very important place as part of Mandailing cultural heritage, embodying aesthetic, moral, social and religious values. Its existence serves not only as entertainment during traditional ceremonies, but also as a medium for passing on values, identity and local knowledge from one generation to the next. From a cultural literacy perspective, Onang-Onang is a rich learning resource as it contains life lessons that can strengthen the community's understanding of their own culture.

The reconstruction of Onang-Onang based on cultural literacy is a strategic step to ensure this tradition remains relevant amidst social change, modernisation, and the development of digital technology. Reconstruction efforts can be carried out through documentation, digitisation, reinterpretation of meaning, and integration into formal and non-formal education, as well as community literacy services. In this way, Onang-Onang is not only preserved as a form of traditional art, but also revived as a medium for cultural education accessible to the younger generation and the wider community.

Ultimately, the reconstruction of the Onang-Onang oral tradition through cultural literacy holds great potential for supporting improvements in the Community Literacy Development Index. Through strengthening community participation, expanding access to sources of cultural knowledge, and utilising local traditions as literacy materials, literacy development becomes more contextual and rooted in regional identity. With this approach, Onang-Onang can serve as a bridge between cultural preservation and the sustainable strengthening of a literate society.

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