

Dalihan Na Tolu as the Philosophical Foundation of Social Relational Ethics: A Cultural Philosophy Perspective from Batak Toba Local Wisdom

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ABSTRACT

Globalization, digital transformation, and increasing multicultural interaction have significantly altered patterns of social relationships, leading to the emergence of individualism, declining communal solidarity, and weakening cultural identity. These developments have encouraged scholars to reconsider local wisdom as an alternative philosophical foundation for rebuilding social ethics. Although Dalihan Na Tolu has long been recognized as the traditional kinship system of the Batak Toba community, previous studies have predominantly interpreted it from anthropological, sociological, and customary law perspectives. Consequently, its philosophical structure has not yet been systematically reconstructed within the framework of cultural philosophy. This study aims to reconstruct Dalihan Na Tolu as the philosophical foundation of social relational ethics by examining its ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. This research employed a qualitative library research design using philosophical hermeneutics. Primary and secondary sources concerning cultural philosophy, Batak Toba culture, Dalihan Na Tolu, hermeneutic philosophy, and relational ethics were analyzed through hermeneutic interpretation, conceptual analysis, comparative philosophical dialogue, and theoretical synthesis. The findings demonstrate that Dalihan Na Tolu represents a comprehensive philosophical system rather than merely a customary institution. Ontologically, it conceptualizes human beings as relational beings whose identity is constituted through reciprocal social relationships. Epistemologically, cultural knowledge is constructed through tradition, symbols, language, historical experience, communal deliberation, and intergenerational interpretation. Axiologically, Dalihan Na Tolu embodies respect, responsibility, solidarity, justice, relational balance, deliberation, and peace as fundamental ethical values governing communal life. The principal contribution of this study is the formulation of the Philosophical Relational Ethics Model of Dalihan Na Tolu, an integrative framework that synthesizes relational ontology, hermeneutic epistemology, and relational axiology into a coherent model of cultural philosophy. This model extends the discourse of Indonesian cultural philosophy while demonstrating that indigenous wisdom can serve as a universal philosophical resource for strengthening social ethics within multicultural societies.

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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has been characterized by profound transformations resulting from globalization, digitalization, and the rapid expansion of intercultural interaction. While these developments have generated unprecedented opportunities for innovation, knowledge exchange, and economic integration, they have simultaneously intensified individualism, weakened communal solidarity, and accelerated the erosion of local cultural identities. The increasing dominance of instrumental rationality and technological mediation has altered the quality of interpersonal relationships, producing ethical challenges that cannot be adequately addressed through legal or institutional mechanisms alone. These conditions indicate the urgent need to reconstruct ethical frameworks capable of strengthening human relationships within increasingly pluralistic and multicultural societies. As emphasized in the research report, contemporary social changes have created an urgent necessity to revitalize indigenous cultural values as philosophical foundations for social ethics.

Within the discourse of cultural philosophy, culture is not merely understood as a collection of customs or inherited traditions but rather as a symbolic system through which human beings interpret reality and construct meaningful existence. Ernst Cassirer (1944) argued that humans are *animal symbolicum*, whose understanding of reality is mediated through symbols embodied in language, religion, art, myth, and social institutions. Similarly, Clifford Geertz (1973) conceptualized culture as "webs of significance" spun by human beings themselves, emphasizing that culture should be interpreted as a system of meanings rather than merely observable social practices. These perspectives suggest that every cultural tradition possesses ontological assumptions concerning human existence, epistemological mechanisms through which knowledge is transmitted, and axiological values guiding ethical behavior. Consequently, indigenous cultural systems should be approached not only as anthropological phenomena but also as philosophical traditions capable of contributing to universal ethical discourse. This philosophical orientation forms the conceptual foundation of the present study.

Indonesia, recognized as one of the world's most culturally diverse nations, possesses numerous indigenous philosophical traditions that remain underexplored within contemporary academic discourse. Among these traditions, *Dalihan Na Tolu*, the fundamental socio-cultural system of the Batak Toba community, occupies a distinctive position. Historically, *Dalihan Na Tolu* has functioned as the normative framework regulating kinship, customary obligations, conflict resolution, and communal harmony through the interdependent principles of *Somba Marhula-hula* (respect for wife-giving relatives), *Manat Mardongan Tubu* (prudence toward clan relatives), and *Elek Marboru* (compassion toward wife-taking relatives). These principles establish reciprocal responsibilities among social actors while maintaining equilibrium within communal life. Beyond their customary functions, however, these principles embody profound philosophical assumptions concerning human dignity, reciprocity, justice, solidarity, and moral responsibility. The research report argues that *Dalihan Na Tolu* should therefore be interpreted as a comprehensive system of cultural philosophy rather than merely as a customary institution.

Despite its cultural significance, previous scholarship has predominantly examined Dalihan Na Tolu from anthropological, sociological, legal, communication, and educational perspectives. Existing studies have successfully explained its role in maintaining kinship

structures, preserving customary law, transmitting cultural values, and facilitating conflict resolution within Batak society. Nevertheless, these investigations generally remain descriptive and empirical, emphasizing observable cultural practices while overlooking the deeper philosophical structure underlying the system itself. Consequently, the ontological conception of human existence embedded in *Dalihan Na Tolu*, its epistemological processes of cultural knowledge formation, and its axiological framework of relational ethics have not been systematically reconstructed. This theoretical gap constitutes the principal research problem addressed by the present study and reflects the need for a philosophical reinterpretation of indigenous wisdom within the broader field of cultural philosophy.

The relevance of such reconstruction is reinforced by contemporary developments in relational philosophy. Martin Buber (1970) proposed that authentic human existence emerges through the dialogical *I-Thou* relationship, wherein the Other is recognized as a subject rather than an object. Emmanuel Levinas (1969) further argued that ethical responsibility toward the Other precedes all theoretical knowledge, making responsibility the foundation of morality. Likewise, Paul Ricoeur (1992) emphasized recognition, narrative identity, and symbolic interpretation as essential components of ethical selfhood, whereas Charles Taylor (1992) highlighted recognition as a prerequisite for justice within multicultural societies. Although these philosophers developed their theories within Western intellectual traditions, their central ideas resonate remarkably with the ethical principles embodied in *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Such conceptual convergence demonstrates that indigenous Indonesian philosophy possesses theoretical relevance extending beyond its local cultural context and deserves recognition within global philosophical discourse.

Employing philosophical hermeneutics as its methodological framework, this study reconstructs *Dalihan Na Tolu* by examining its ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. The analysis reveals that the Batak Toba philosophical tradition conceptualizes human beings as fundamentally relational beings whose identities are constituted through reciprocal relationships rather than isolated individuality. Furthermore, cultural knowledge is transmitted through symbols, tradition, language, historical experience, communal deliberation, and intergenerational interpretation, while ethical values are expressed through respect, responsibility, solidarity, justice, relational balance, deliberation, and peace. These findings demonstrate that *Dalihan Na Tolu* represents a coherent philosophical system integrating theories of existence, knowledge, and morality into a unified cultural worldview.

The principal contribution of this study lies in the formulation of the Philosophical Relational Ethics Model of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, an integrative conceptual framework synthesizing relational ontology, hermeneutic epistemology, and relational axiology. Unlike previous studies that primarily regarded *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a customary institution or kinship system, the present research demonstrates that it constitutes a comprehensive philosophy of culture capable of enriching contemporary discussions on relational ethics and multicultural coexistence. By establishing a dialogue between Batak Toba indigenous wisdom and contemporary philosophical thought, this study contributes to the development of Indonesian cultural philosophy while simultaneously expanding the global discourse on indigenous philosophies as legitimate sources of universal ethical theory.

Literature Review

Cultural Philosophy as the Foundation of Human Social Existence

Cultural philosophy investigates culture as a comprehensive system through which human beings construct meaning, identity, and ethical orientation. Unlike anthropology, which primarily examines cultural practices empirically, cultural philosophy seeks to uncover the ontological, epistemological, and axiological structures underlying cultural phenomena (Cassirer, 1944). From this perspective, culture is neither a passive inheritance nor merely a collection of traditions; rather, it constitutes an active process through which individuals interpret reality and establish meaningful relationships with others.

Cassirer (1944) introduced the concept of *animal symbolicum*, arguing that human beings distinguish themselves from other living creatures by their ability to create and interpret symbolic forms. Language, religion, myth, art, law, and customs are not isolated cultural products but interconnected symbolic systems through which humans understand themselves and their world. Consequently, every cultural institution embodies a philosophical worldview that reflects assumptions concerning reality, knowledge, and morality.

Similarly, Geertz (1973) emphasized that culture should be interpreted as *webs of significance* spun by human beings themselves. Rather than focusing solely on observable behavior, Geertz proposed *thick description* as a method for interpreting the symbolic meanings embedded within cultural practices. This interpretive perspective implies that indigenous traditions cannot be adequately understood through descriptive observation alone but require philosophical interpretation capable of revealing their underlying conceptual structures.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to Dalihan Na Tolu because its customary practices represent symbolic expressions of a broader philosophical understanding of human relationships. The present research therefore approaches Dalihan Na Tolu not merely as a social institution but as an integrated philosophical system comprising assumptions regarding existence, knowledge, and ethical responsibility, consistent with the conceptual framework formulated in the research report.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Local Wisdom

Hermeneutics has evolved from a method of textual interpretation into a comprehensive philosophical approach for understanding meaning within historical and cultural contexts. Gadamer (2004) argued that interpretation is not simply the recovery of an author's original intention but a dialogical process in which understanding emerges through the interaction between tradition and contemporary consciousness. Every act of interpretation is influenced by historical horizons that continuously shape human understanding.

Ricoeur (1976) further developed philosophical hermeneutics by emphasizing that symbols possess meanings exceeding their literal expressions. According to Ricoeur, symbols invite continuous interpretation because they disclose deeper existential realities. Through this perspective, cultural traditions become repositories of philosophical insight rather than merely historical artifacts.

Applying philosophical hermeneutics to Dalihan Na Tolu enables the researcher to move beyond descriptive accounts of customary rituals toward an exploration of the philosophical meanings embedded within Batak cultural symbols. Rather than treating *Somba Marhulahula*, *Manat Mardongan Tubu*, and *Elek Marboru* merely as customary obligations,

hermeneutic analysis reveals them as ethical principles expressing an integrated understanding of relational existence. This methodological orientation corresponds directly to the analytical framework employed in the research report, which combines hermeneutic interpretation, conceptual analysis, comparative philosophy, and philosophical synthesis.

Relational Ethics in Contemporary Philosophy

Contemporary ethical philosophy has increasingly shifted its attention from autonomous individualism toward relational conceptions of human existence. Rather than defining morality exclusively through universal rules or individual autonomy, relational ethics emphasizes interpersonal responsibility, recognition, dialogue, and reciprocity as fundamental ethical categories.

Martin Buber (1970) introduced one of the most influential relational philosophies through his distinction between I-Thou and I-It relationships. According to Buber, authentic human existence emerges only when persons encounter one another as subjects rather than objects. Ethical life therefore begins with dialogue characterized by mutual recognition and openness.

Levinas (1969) extended this relational perspective by arguing that responsibility toward the Other precedes all theoretical knowledge. Ethics originates not from rational calculation but from the face-to-face encounter in which the Other calls the self into responsibility. This asymmetrical responsibility constitutes the foundation of moral existence.

Ricoeur (1992) complemented these perspectives through his theory of recognition, emphasizing that personal identity develops through reciprocal interpretation and recognition within social relationships. Likewise, Taylor (1992) argued that recognition represents a fundamental human need because individuals construct their identities through interaction with others. Failure to recognize cultural identities results in social injustice and moral exclusion.

These philosophical perspectives collectively demonstrate that relationality constitutes the foundation of ethical life. Their conceptual convergence provides an important theoretical framework for understanding Dalihan Na Tolu, whose three normative principles similarly emphasize reciprocal obligations, recognition, respect, and social harmony. The present study therefore establishes a philosophical dialogue between Batak indigenous wisdom and contemporary relational ethics to demonstrate their complementary insights into human coexistence.

Dalihan Na Tolu as Indigenous Cultural Philosophy

Within Batak Toba society, Dalihan Na Tolu has traditionally been understood as the normative framework governing kinship relationships, customary obligations, ceremonial practices, and conflict resolution. The metaphor of the three-legged stove symbolizes balance, stability, and interdependence among three complementary social positions: *Hula-hula*, *Dongan Tubu*, and *Boru*. Social harmony can only be maintained when these three relational positions perform their respective ethical responsibilities.

The research report demonstrates that Dalihan Na Tolu extends far beyond customary regulation. Ontologically, it conceptualizes human beings as fundamentally relational entities whose identities are constituted through reciprocal social relationships. Epistemologically, cultural knowledge is transmitted through symbols, oral traditions, communal deliberation, historical experience, and intergenerational interpretation. Axiologically, Dalihan Na Tolu

embodies respect, responsibility, solidarity, justice, deliberation, peace, and relational balance as foundational ethical values governing communal life.

Accordingly, Dalihan Na Tolu should be recognized as an indigenous philosophy of culture capable of contributing to broader discussions concerning relational ethics, intercultural dialogue, and multicultural coexistence. Such recognition expands the scope of Indonesian philosophy by demonstrating that local wisdom possesses conceptual sophistication comparable to philosophical traditions developed elsewhere.

Research Gap

A comprehensive review of previous studies reveals three principal limitations.

1. Most investigations have approached Dalihan Na Tolu from anthropological, sociological, communication, educational, or customary law perspectives, emphasizing its empirical functions while neglecting its philosophical foundations.
2. Existing scholarship has not systematically reconstructed the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions constituting Dalihan Na Tolu as an integrated philosophical system.
3. Previous research has rarely established an explicit dialogue between Batak indigenous philosophy and contemporary theories of relational ethics developed by Buber, Levinas, Ricoeur, and Taylor. Consequently, the theoretical significance of Dalihan Na Tolu within global philosophical discourse remains underdeveloped.

The present study addresses these limitations by reconstructing Dalihan Na Tolu through philosophical hermeneutics and integrating its ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions into a unified conceptual framework. This reconstruction culminates in the formulation of the Philosophical Relational Ethics Model of Dalihan Na Tolu, representing the principal theoretical contribution and novelty of the research.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using library research as its primary methodological approach. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for philosophical inquiry because it seeks to understand meanings, values, concepts, and interpretive structures rather than measuring observable phenomena through numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike empirical social research, which primarily investigates behavioral patterns through surveys or experiments, philosophical research aims to reconstruct conceptual frameworks that explain the nature of reality, knowledge, and morality.

Library research was selected because the object of this investigation consists of philosophical concepts embedded within the Batak Toba cultural tradition of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. As emphasized in the research report, the study does not attempt to describe customary practices empirically but instead reconstructs the philosophical foundations underlying Dalihan Na Tolu through critical interpretation of documentary sources. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions of Dalihan Na Tolu as an integrated system of cultural philosophy.

Following George (2008), library research enables scholars to synthesize dispersed theoretical knowledge and reconstruct conceptual models from existing documentary

evidence. This approach is therefore particularly suitable for philosophical studies seeking to formulate new theoretical propositions through critical interpretation rather than empirical observation.

Philosophical Paradigm

The study was conducted within the paradigm of cultural philosophy, which understands culture as a symbolic and normative system through which human beings interpret existence and organize ethical life. Cassirer (1944) argued that humans are *animal symbolicum*, meaning that human existence is mediated by symbolic forms such as language, religion, law, myths, and cultural traditions. Consequently, culture should not be regarded merely as inherited customs but as a philosophical expression of human existence.

The epistemological foundation of this study is philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer (2004) maintains that understanding is not the reproduction of an author's original intention but a dialogical process between historical tradition and contemporary interpretation. Every interpreter approaches tradition through a historically situated horizon, and understanding emerges through what Gadamer describes as the *fusion of horizons*.

Similarly, Ricoeur (1976) argues that symbols always contain a surplus of meaning, making interpretation an ongoing philosophical process rather than a search for fixed meanings. Within this perspective, *Dalihan Na Tolu* is interpreted as a symbolic cultural system whose philosophical significance extends beyond its customary functions. This hermeneutic perspective corresponds directly to the analytical framework described in the research report, where philosophical interpretation serves as the principal method for reconstructing *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a comprehensive philosophy of culture.

Object of the Study

Following the methodological tradition of philosophical inquiry (Bakker, 1984), this research distinguishes between the material object and the formal object of investigation. The material object comprises the Batak Toba cultural tradition of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, including its customary principles, symbolic structures, philosophical narratives, and historical development.

The formal object concerns the philosophical dimensions underlying *Dalihan Na Tolu*, specifically its ontological conception of human existence, epistemological processes of cultural knowledge formation, and axiological principles governing ethical relationships. The purpose of the study is therefore not merely to explain customary practices but to reconstruct the philosophical system embedded within Batak cultural wisdom. This distinction follows the research design presented in the final report.

Sources of Data

The study utilized documentary sources consisting of primary and secondary literature. Primary sources included classical philosophical works on cultural philosophy, hermeneutics, and relational ethics together with authoritative publications discussing Batak Toba philosophy and *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Secondary sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, dissertations, conference proceedings, and institutional publications concerning indigenous philosophy, local wisdom, intercultural ethics, and Batak cultural traditions.

The selection of literature followed four criteria outlined in the research report:

1. Conceptual relevance to the research objectives;

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2. Academic credibility of the source;
3. Philosophical significance;
4. Contribution to the reconstruction of *Dalihan Na Tolu* as cultural philosophy.

Consistent with Snyder (2019), a systematic literature selection process improves conceptual transparency while minimizing interpretive bias in qualitative research.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed a systematic documentary review consisting of five consecutive stages.

1. Relevant literature concerning cultural philosophy, Batak Toba culture, *Dalihan Na Tolu*, hermeneutics, and relational ethics was identified through academic books, peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, university repositories, and official publications.
2. Documentary sources were evaluated according to relevance, originality, and academic quality. Literature lacking conceptual contribution to the philosophical reconstruction of *Dalihan Na Tolu* was excluded from further analysis.
3. Selected documents were classified into thematic categories representing ontology, epistemology, axiology, cultural philosophy, hermeneutics, and relational ethics.
4. Conceptual coding was undertaken to identify recurring philosophical concepts and symbolic meanings embedded within the literature.
5. The coded materials were organized into an integrated philosophical corpus serving as the basis for hermeneutic interpretation and theoretical synthesis. These procedures correspond to the stages of literature identification, selection, classification, coding, and corpus construction described in the research report.

Data Analysis

The analytical framework combined philosophical hermeneutics, conceptual analysis, comparative philosophy, and philosophical synthesis.

1. Philosophical Hermeneutic Analysis
Hermeneutic interpretation constituted the first stage of analysis. Rather than treating *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a fixed customary institution, the study interpreted its symbols, narratives, and cultural expressions to reveal their deeper philosophical meanings. Gadamer (2004) argues that interpretation always involves dialogue between historical tradition and contemporary understanding, while Ricoeur (1976) maintains that symbols continuously disclose new meanings through interpretation.
2. Conceptual Analysis
The second stage involved identifying key philosophical concepts embedded within *Dalihan Na Tolu*, including relational existence, reciprocity, solidarity, recognition, justice, deliberation, communal responsibility, and human dignity. According to Beaney (2013), conceptual analysis enables philosophical research to clarify meanings and reveal logical relationships among fundamental concepts.
3. Comparative Philosophical Analysis
The third analytical stage compared Batak indigenous philosophy with contemporary theories developed by Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Ernst Cassirer, and Clifford Geertz. Comparative analysis was conducted not to establish philosophical dependence but to identify conceptual correspondence and

theoretical complementarity between indigenous wisdom and contemporary relational philosophy.

4. Philosophical Synthesis

The final stage integrated the ontological, epistemological, and axiological findings into a unified conceptual framework. Through philosophical synthesis, the study formulated the Philosophical Relational Ethics Model of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, representing the principal theoretical contribution and novelty of the research. This synthesis transformed descriptive cultural knowledge into an integrated philosophical model explaining ethical relationships within multicultural society.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established through four complementary strategies.

- a. Source triangulation was employed by comparing philosophical classics, Batak cultural literature, and recent scholarly publications to ensure conceptual consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- b. Each documentary source underwent critical evaluation concerning authenticity, academic credibility, and philosophical relevance before inclusion in the analysis.
- c. Interpretive consistency was maintained throughout the hermeneutic process by continuously relating textual interpretation to the broader conceptual framework developed in the study.
- d. Philosophical validation was achieved through logical coherence, argumentative consistency, and conceptual transparency rather than statistical reliability. These procedures are consistent with the validity framework adopted in the research report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Philosophical Reconstruction of *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a Cultural Philosophy

The philosophical reconstruction undertaken in this study demonstrates that *Dalihan Na Tolu* should not be understood merely as a customary institution regulating kinship relationships within Batak Toba society. Rather, it represents an integrated philosophical system that articulates a comprehensive understanding of human existence, cultural knowledge, and ethical responsibility. Through philosophical hermeneutics, the symbolic principles of *Somba Marhula-hula*, *Manat Mardongan Tubu*, and *Elek Marboru* are interpreted not simply as customary obligations but as expressions of a coherent worldview concerning relational existence. This interpretation is consistent with the principal objective of the research, namely reconstructing *Dalihan Na Tolu* as the philosophical foundation of social relational ethics rather than limiting its significance to the domain of customary law.

From the perspective of cultural philosophy, every cultural tradition contains symbolic structures that express a particular conception of reality. Cassirer (1944) argues that culture is constituted through symbolic forms that mediate human understanding of the world. Consequently, symbols embedded within indigenous traditions should be interpreted not merely as historical artifacts but as philosophical expressions of human existence. Similarly, Geertz (1973) maintains that culture consists of “webs of significance” through which communities continuously interpret and negotiate the meanings of social life. These theoretical perspectives provide the philosophical basis for interpreting *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a

symbolic system embodying ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions rather than merely a practical mechanism for regulating social interaction.

The findings of this research reveal that the philosophical structure of *Dalihan Na Tolu* is organized around three mutually interconnected dimensions. The first concerns the nature of human existence (ontology), the second concerns the formation and transmission of cultural knowledge (epistemology), and the third concerns ethical values governing communal life (axiology). These dimensions do not function independently but interact continuously, producing an integrated cultural philosophy that shapes both individual identity and collective social order. Such an interpretation extends previous scholarship that predominantly described *Dalihan Na Tolu* from anthropological or sociological perspectives without systematically reconstructing its philosophical foundations.

The hermeneutic reconstruction also demonstrates that *Dalihan Na Tolu* possesses philosophical relevance beyond Batak cultural boundaries. Its emphasis on reciprocity, mutual recognition, deliberation, and communal responsibility resonates strongly with contemporary discussions on relational ethics, intercultural dialogue, and multicultural citizenship. Consequently, *Dalihan Na Tolu* should be recognized not merely as local wisdom but as an indigenous philosophical tradition capable of contributing to universal ethical discourse. This interpretation corresponds directly with the research conclusion that Batak cultural wisdom represents a legitimate philosophical resource for strengthening social ethics within pluralistic societies.

Ontological Dimension: Human Beings as Relational Persons

One of the most significant findings emerging from this study concerns the ontological understanding of human existence embedded within *Dalihan Na Tolu*. The analysis demonstrates that Batak Toba philosophy conceives human beings fundamentally as relational persons, whose identity is constituted through reciprocal relationships rather than autonomous individuality. Human existence is therefore understood as inherently social, where personal dignity and communal belonging develop simultaneously through interaction with others. The research report explicitly identifies this relational conception of humanity as the ontological foundation of *Dalihan Na Tolu*.

Unlike modern individualistic paradigms that prioritize autonomy and self-sufficiency, *Dalihan Na Tolu* assumes that no individual exists independently of the social network in which he or she participates. Every person simultaneously occupies different relational positions within society, including *Hula-hula*, *Dongan Tubu*, and *Boru*. These positions are not rigid social classifications but dynamic ethical relationships characterized by reciprocal rights, obligations, and responsibilities. Consequently, human identity remains relational rather than isolated, contextual rather than abstract, and communal rather than purely individual.

This ontological perspective exhibits significant conceptual correspondence with Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. According to Buber (1970), authentic human existence emerges only through the I-Thou relationship, in which another person is encountered as a subject possessing intrinsic dignity rather than as an object of instrumental use. Human beings become fully themselves only through genuine dialogue characterized by openness, mutual recognition, and reciprocity. Similarly, *Dalihan Na Tolu* emphasizes that social harmony depends upon recognizing each participant as an ethically significant person whose dignity deserves respect. The Batak principle of *Somba Marhula-hula*, for example, institutionalizes

recognition through respect, while *Manat Mardongan Tubu* and *Elek Marboru* cultivate prudence, compassion, and mutual care within social relationships.

The relational ontology identified in this study also resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy. Levinas (1969) argues that responsibility toward the Other precedes theoretical knowledge because ethical obligation originates in the face-to-face encounter itself. The presence of another person immediately calls the self into responsibility before any contractual or legal relationship is established. This philosophical insight parallels the ethical orientation embedded within *Dalihan Na Tolu*, where social obligations emerge directly from relational identity rather than from external institutional authority. Ethical responsibility is therefore constitutive of personhood rather than an optional moral commitment.

Furthermore, Charles Taylor's (1992) theory of recognition provides an additional interpretive framework for understanding the ontological significance of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Taylor maintains that individual identity develops through processes of mutual recognition within social communities. Misrecognition or failure to acknowledge the dignity of others results not merely in social exclusion but also in the distortion of personal identity itself. The findings of the present study indicate that *Dalihan Na Tolu* institutionalizes recognition through reciprocal social roles that affirm both individual dignity and collective solidarity. Such institutionalized recognition contributes to the preservation of communal cohesion across generations.

The ontological findings therefore demonstrate that *Dalihan Na Tolu* advances a relational conception of humanity that differs substantially from modern individualistic paradigms. Human beings are understood as persons whose existence is realized through dialogue, reciprocity, responsibility, and communal participation. This relational ontology constitutes the philosophical foundation upon which the epistemological and axiological dimensions of *Dalihan Na Tolu* are subsequently constructed. Consequently, the study argues that Batak Toba philosophy offers an important indigenous contribution to contemporary relational philosophy by affirming that authentic human existence is fundamentally constituted through ethical relationships with others rather than through isolated individual autonomy.

Epistemological Dimension: *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a Hermeneutic System of Cultural Knowledge

One of the principal findings of this research concerns the epistemological structure underlying *Dalihan Na Tolu*. The analysis demonstrates that knowledge within the Batak Toba cultural tradition is not conceived as abstract or individual cognition but as a communal and interpretive process transmitted through symbolic practices, customary language, collective memory, historical experience, and intergenerational dialogue. The research report identifies tradition, cultural symbols, customary language, lived experience, and communal deliberation as the principal epistemic media through which Batak society constructs and preserves cultural knowledge.

Unlike the positivistic conception of knowledge that emphasizes objective observation and empirical verification, the epistemology embedded within *Dalihan Na Tolu* is fundamentally hermeneutic. Knowledge is continuously produced through interpretation, reinterpretation, and dialogue among members of the community. Cultural wisdom is therefore understood as dynamic rather than static, allowing each generation to reinterpret

inherited traditions in response to changing historical and social circumstances while preserving their normative significance.

This finding is consistent with Gadamer's (2004) philosophical hermeneutics, which argues that understanding is not the passive reception of information but an active dialogical process between historical tradition and present consciousness. According to Gadamer, every act of understanding is historically conditioned because interpreters inevitably approach tradition through their own historical horizons. Genuine understanding emerges through what he famously describes as the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), in which past and present enter into productive dialogue. Consequently, tradition is not an obstacle to knowledge but its indispensable condition.

The epistemological structure of *Dalihan Na Tolu* reflects precisely this dialogical character. Knowledge concerning social obligations, kinship responsibilities, ceremonial procedures, and ethical conduct is not transmitted through codified legal documents but through continuous participation in customary life. Community members gradually internalize cultural values by observing rituals, participating in family deliberations (*marhata*), listening to traditional speeches, interpreting proverbs (*umpasa*), and engaging in everyday communal interaction. Knowledge therefore develops through participation rather than detached observation.

Ricoeur's (1976) theory of symbolic interpretation further strengthens this analysis. Ricoeur maintains that symbols always "give rise to thought" because they contain meanings that transcend their immediate linguistic expressions. Symbolic language therefore possesses what Ricoeur calls a surplus of meaning, inviting successive generations to reinterpret inherited traditions within new historical contexts. The symbolic expressions embedded within *Dalihan Na Tolu* function in precisely this manner. Concepts such as *Somba Marhulahula*, *Manat Mardongan Tubu*, and *Elek Marboru* cannot be reduced to literal social rules; instead, they embody multilayered ethical meanings concerning reciprocity, dignity, solidarity, prudence, and communal responsibility. Their philosophical significance is disclosed only through continuous hermeneutic interpretation.

The research findings further indicate that language occupies a central epistemological position within Batak culture. Traditional speeches (*hata adat*), ritual dialogues, genealogical narratives (*tarombo*), proverbs (*umpasa*), and customary expressions constitute important media through which cultural knowledge is preserved and communicated across generations. These linguistic forms function not merely as instruments of communication but also as repositories of collective memory and moral reasoning. Through oral tradition, communities transmit historical experiences, ethical norms, and philosophical insights that shape communal identity. This observation supports Geertz's (1973) argument that culture should be understood as a symbolic system of meanings rather than merely a set of observable behaviors.

Historical experience likewise constitutes an important source of cultural knowledge. The Batak community continuously reconstructs its understanding of social life through accumulated experiences of cooperation, conflict resolution, marriage alliances, migration, and communal deliberation. These experiences are interpreted collectively and incorporated into cultural memory, enabling traditions to evolve without losing their normative foundations.

Consequently, knowledge within *Dalihan Na Tolu* is not fixed or immutable but remains historically dynamic while preserving continuity with ancestral wisdom.

Another important finding concerns the role of communal deliberation in knowledge formation. Decisions affecting family and community life are generally reached through collective discussion rather than unilateral authority. Deliberation functions not merely as a decision-making procedure but also as an epistemic process through which participants exchange perspectives, negotiate meanings, and collectively interpret customary norms. Such dialogical interaction enables cultural knowledge to remain responsive to changing circumstances while maintaining social legitimacy. This epistemic orientation reflects Habermas's (1984) concept of communicative rationality, according to which mutual understanding is achieved through rational dialogue grounded in reciprocity rather than domination. Although emerging from different philosophical traditions, both Habermas and *Dalihan Na Tolu* recognize dialogue as the primary medium through which communities construct shared understanding.

The epistemological reconstruction presented in this study therefore demonstrates that *Dalihan Na Tolu* embodies a sophisticated indigenous theory of knowledge grounded in interpretation, participation, dialogue, and collective memory. Knowledge is produced not by isolated individuals but through ongoing interaction among persons, symbols, traditions, and historical experiences. Such an understanding differs fundamentally from positivistic epistemology while exhibiting strong conceptual affinity with contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. These findings reinforce the conclusion that *Dalihan Na Tolu* should be recognized not merely as customary knowledge but as an indigenous epistemological system capable of contributing to broader discussions in cultural philosophy and intercultural ethics.

Axiological Dimension: *Dalihan Na Tolu* as the Foundation of Social Relational Ethics

The philosophical reconstruction undertaken in this study reveals that the ultimate significance of *Dalihan Na Tolu* lies not merely in its ontological understanding of human existence or its epistemological process of cultural knowledge formation, but in its axiological capacity to establish an ethical framework governing social life. The analysis demonstrates that the Batak Toba tradition embodies a coherent constellation of values including respect, responsibility, solidarity, justice, relational balance, deliberation, and peace which collectively regulate interpersonal relationships and sustain communal harmony. Rather than functioning as isolated moral prescriptions, these values form an integrated ethical system through which individuals understand their obligations toward others and participate responsibly within the community. The research report identifies these values as the principal axiological foundation of *Dalihan Na Tolu*.

From the perspective of cultural philosophy, values are not external rules imposed upon society but normative orientations emerging from a community's historical experience and symbolic understanding of reality. Kluckhohn (1951) argues that cultural values constitute enduring conceptions of the desirable that guide human action and social organization. Likewise, Scheler (1973) maintains that values possess an objective significance because they orient human beings toward moral goods that transcend subjective preferences. Within this framework, *Dalihan Na Tolu* may be interpreted as a value system in which ethical norms are embedded within symbolic relationships rather than abstract legal principles.

The first and most fundamental ethical value identified in this study is respect, institutionalized through the principle of *Somba Marhula-hula*. Respect in the Batak philosophical tradition is not understood as passive obedience or hierarchical submission. Instead, it expresses recognition of the dignity, wisdom, and moral authority embodied in social relationships. The obligation to honour *Hula-hula* reflects a broader ethical commitment to recognizing the intrinsic worth of others as members of the same moral community. This interpretation closely parallels Taylor's (1992) theory of recognition, which argues that recognition is a fundamental human need because personal identity develops through reciprocal acknowledgment. Failure to recognize the dignity of others results not only in social injustice but also in the fragmentation of communal life.

Closely related to respect is the value of responsibility, which permeates the entire structure of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. The findings indicate that ethical obligations arise from relational identity rather than contractual agreement or external authority. Every individual is expected to fulfil responsibilities appropriate to his or her relational position, thereby ensuring the continuity of social cooperation and mutual trust. This understanding resonates strongly with Levinas's (1969) philosophy, according to which ethical responsibility precedes theoretical reflection and constitutes the primary condition of human existence. In both perspectives, responsibility is not an optional virtue but the very foundation of interpersonal relationships.

A third value emerging from the philosophical reconstruction is solidarity, expressed through mutual assistance, cooperation, and collective participation in communal life. Batak customary practices encourage individuals to share both burdens and celebrations, reinforcing social cohesion across generations. Such solidarity extends beyond immediate family relationships to encompass the wider customary community, thereby creating networks of reciprocal support that strengthen social resilience. Durkheim's (1984) concept of moral solidarity provides an illuminating theoretical perspective for interpreting this finding. Although Durkheim distinguished between mechanical and organic solidarity, he consistently emphasized that shared moral commitments are indispensable for maintaining social integration. Similarly, *Dalihan Na Tolu* cultivates solidarity through common ethical values rather than coercive institutional control.

The study further identifies justice as a constitutive element of Batak relational ethics. Justice within *Dalihan Na Tolu* does not primarily refer to legal equality but to the equitable fulfilment of reciprocal rights and obligations among members of the community. Every relational position carries corresponding duties that contribute to maintaining balance and preventing domination by any particular group. This conception of justice is therefore restorative and relational rather than merely distributive. Ricoeur (1992) similarly argues that justice emerges through recognition of the other within relationships governed by reciprocity, suggesting that ethical coexistence requires balancing individual dignity with communal responsibility.

Another central value revealed through the analysis is relational balance. The metaphor of the three-legged stove itself symbolizes equilibrium among the interconnected roles of *Hula-hula*, *Dongan Tubu*, and *Boru*. Social harmony depends not upon the supremacy of one relational position over another but upon the dynamic balance maintained through reciprocal interaction. The findings indicate that relational balance functions as an organizing ethical principle capable of preventing conflict and preserving communal stability. This emphasis on

equilibrium reflects the broader philosophical conviction that harmonious coexistence requires continuous negotiation of reciprocal responsibilities rather than unilateral assertion of individual interests.

The research also demonstrates the ethical significance of deliberation as a normative mechanism for resolving disagreement and reaching collective decisions. Deliberation within Batak society is not merely procedural but embodies respect for dialogue, participation, and consensus. Ethical legitimacy is achieved through communicative engagement rather than coercive authority. This finding corresponds with Habermas's (1996) discourse ethics, according to which legitimate norms emerge through rational communication characterized by equal participation and mutual respect. Although developed within distinct philosophical traditions, both discourse ethics and *Dalihan Na Tolu* affirm that dialogue constitutes an indispensable foundation of ethical community.

Finally, the analysis identifies peace as the ultimate ethical objective of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Peace is understood not simply as the absence of conflict but as the restoration and maintenance of harmonious relationships among individuals, families, and communities. The values of respect, responsibility, solidarity, justice, relational balance, and deliberation collectively function to preserve social harmony by preventing alienation and facilitating reconciliation when conflicts arise. Thus, peace represents the culmination of relational ethics rather than an independent moral principle.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that *Dalihan Na Tolu* embodies a comprehensive system of social relational ethics grounded in reciprocal recognition, moral responsibility, communal solidarity, and dialogical coexistence. Unlike ethical theories centred exclusively on individual rights or abstract moral rules, the Batak philosophical tradition emphasizes relationships as the primary locus of moral life. Ethical action derives its meaning from participation in networks of reciprocity that sustain both individual dignity and communal well-being. This relational orientation provides a significant indigenous contribution to contemporary philosophical discussions concerning ethics, multiculturalism, and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study reconstructs *Dalihan Na Tolu* as the philosophical foundation of social relational ethics through the perspective of cultural philosophy. The findings demonstrate that *Dalihan Na Tolu* should not be understood merely as a customary institution governing kinship relations within Batak Toba society but as an integrated philosophical system encompassing ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. Ontologically, the study reveals that human beings are conceived as fundamentally relational beings whose identities are constituted through reciprocal relationships rather than autonomous individuality. Epistemologically, cultural knowledge is continuously constructed and transmitted through tradition, cultural symbols, customary language, historical experience, communal deliberation, and intergenerational interpretation. Axiologically, *Dalihan Na Tolu* embodies a coherent system of ethical values, including respect, responsibility, solidarity, justice, relational balance, deliberation, and peace, which collectively guide social interaction and sustain communal harmony. These findings confirm that the three philosophical dimensions are inseparable and

together constitute a coherent framework for understanding human existence, cultural knowledge, and ethical life.

The integration of these three dimensions constitutes the principal contribution of this study. The research demonstrates that relational ontology provides the foundation for the construction of cultural knowledge, while hermeneutic epistemology explains how that knowledge is preserved and renewed through interpretation and collective experience. In turn, relational axiology transforms cultural understanding into ethical practice through reciprocal responsibility and social participation. Based on this philosophical reconstruction, the study formulates the Philosophical Relational Ethics Model of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, which positions indigenous Batak Toba wisdom as a coherent philosophical framework rather than merely a customary or sociocultural tradition. This model contributes to the development of cultural philosophy by offering an integrative understanding of the relationship between human existence, knowledge, and morality within a single indigenous philosophical system.

Overall, this study demonstrates that *Dalihan Na Tolu* possesses philosophical significance extending beyond its local cultural context and may contribute to broader discussions on relational ethics, cultural philosophy, and multicultural coexistence. By reconstructing its ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations through philosophical hermeneutics, the research affirms that indigenous knowledge systems should be recognized as legitimate sources of philosophical reflection capable of enriching contemporary academic discourse. Accordingly, *Dalihan Na Tolu* represents not only an essential component of Batak Toba cultural heritage but also an indigenous philosophical tradition that offers conceptual resources for strengthening ethical relationships, fostering social cohesion, and promoting harmonious coexistence within increasingly pluralistic societies.

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