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Negotiation of Identity and Meaning Communication in the Bugis Uang Panai Tradition in Indonesia

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Abstract This study explores the continuity and adaptation of *Uang Panai* (Panai Money), a marriage payment tradition in the Bugis diaspora in Sangatta, East Kutai, Indonesia. Using the frameworks of social exchange, cultural resilience, symbolic interactionism, and economic anthropology, it views practice as a multidynamic exchange with respect, prestige, and reciprocity. The qualitative approach using purposive sampling involved diverse informants, and data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings showed that *Uang Panai* is key to Bugis identity during migration and modernization. More than just a socioeconomic institution, this tradition serves as an arena of cultural communication, facilitating verbal negotiations between families, the strategic use of a specialized customary lexicon, and the articulation of symbolic meaning through ritualized speech and indirect discourse in the process of reaching marriage agreements. Dynamic negotiations are influenced by the bride's attributes and the family's finances. Flexible payments adapt to burdens and preserve value. Thus, *Uang Panai* reinforces kinship, cohesion, and diaspora resilience.

Keywords: *Uang Panai, Bugis diaspora, Cultural communication, Symbolic interactionism, Marriage negotiation*

1. Introduction

Marriage as a universal social institution is firmly embedded in the cultural structures of societies across the world. In addition to being a form of union between two individuals, marriage functions as a mechanism for forming alliances between families, which is manifested through a series of rituals, customs, and economic transactions that contain cultural symbolism (Cleuziou & McBrien, 2021; Majic & Murib, 2024; Mubangizi & Tlale, 2023; Wan, 2024). These rituals and transactions constitute a form of symbolic action, where spoken words, ceremonial dialogues, and even strategic silences actively construct the reality of the marital alliance. From an anthropological perspective, these practices not only reflect the historical values and social structure of an ethnic group but also form a process of cultural communication that mediates the alignment of

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norms, status affirmation, and the formation of collective meanings (Bau & Fernández, 2023; Popescu et al., 2025). This communication is inherently linguistic, relying on a shared lexicon of custom, ritualized speech acts, and symbolic vocabularies to articulate and legitimize the social bonds being forged.

Marriage establishes a set of rights and obligations that are recognized by social and legal norms (Blau, 2017). However, these rights and obligations do not stand in the abstract; they are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized through the social interactions and communication practices that accompany the marriage ritual. Thus, the study of marriage customs is essentially a study of kinship dynamics, social hierarchies, and communication mechanisms that regulate relationships between groups (Hotte & Marazyan, 2020; Righetto, 2023).

In many societies, the tradition of dowry, or *bride price*, is not simply understood as an economic transfer but as a form of communicative action that conveys messages about honor, commitment, social status, and reciprocal relations between families (Aasoglenang et al., 2024; Du, 2025; Hotte & Lambert, 2023). Payment serves as a symbolic medium that articulates social expectations and negotiates the position of the parties in the cultural structure (Akurugu et al., 2022; Corno et al., 2020; Ermanto et al., 2025). Therefore, studying the tradition of dowry means examining how cultural values are transmitted through interpersonal communication and collective rituals.

In the Bugis community, including the diaspora community in Sangatta District, East Kutai, the tradition of *Uang Panai* (Panai Money) is a concrete form of integration between the customary economy and cultural communication. *Uang Panai* is generally understood as payment from the groom-to-be's family to the bride-to-be's family; it not only serves as an economic mechanism but also as an arena for symbolic negotiation, where two families build an understanding of the value, honor, and prospects of kinship relationships (Laksana et al., 2020; Marwing, 2024; Masthurah et al., 2024). The amount of *Uang Panai* is also a medium for the groom-to-be's family to communicate its ability, commitment, and appreciation of the bride-to-be's family.

In the contemporary context, the practice of *Uang Panai* is often a public discussion, especially when the value requested increases, which puts economic pressure on the groom-to-be's family and alters perceptions among younger generations (Jannah et al., 2021). Thus, it allows the emergence of intergenerational negotiations, reinterpretation of meaning, and changes in family communication patterns related to marriage customs. The migration of the Bugis to areas such as East Kutai reinforces the role of *Uang Panai* in maintaining ethnic identity, strengthening diaspora solidarity, and managing social relations in a multicultural environment (Mulyoutami et al., 2020; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999).

Given this background, this study aimed to examine the existence and dynamics of the *Uang Panai* tradition in the Bugis community in Sangatta, East Kutai, Indonesia, by emphasizing the communicative dimension of this cultural practice. It examined (1) the sociocultural meaning of *Uang Panai*, (2) the process of negotiation and communication between families, (3) the symbolism formed through social interaction, and (4) the function of this tradition in strengthening the cohesion and cultural identity of diaspora communities. This approach is expected to broaden the understanding of *Uang Panai* not only as a customary payment system but also as a cultural communication practice that plays an important role in forming, maintaining, and transforming social relations in contemporary Bugis society.

2. Theoretical Framework

Research on the existence of the *Uang Panai* tradition in the Bugis community in Sangatta, East Kutai, draws on several key theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of its sociocultural dynamics. This framework integrates theories from anthropology, sociology, and economic anthropology to analyze various aspects of customary practices. Social exchange theory (SET) provides a fundamental perspective for understanding the nature of reciprocity in human interactions, particularly in the context of marriage. It argues that social behavior results from an exchange process that aims to maximize profits and minimize costs (Ahmad et al., 2023). In the context of marriage, *Uang Panai* can be analyzed as a form of social exchange in which the groom-to-be's family bears costs (financial payments) in exchange for the benefits obtained from the marital alliance, such as the bride-to-be's status, kinship relationship, and reproductive potential (Chala & Haro, 2023;

Rajâa & Mekkaoui, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). This theory helps explain the perceptions of value and the reasons for the payment of *Uang Panai*. The amount given is not only in the form of economic transactions but also reflects social capital, such as the bride-to-be's family status, educational background, beauty, and lineage. Willingness to pay a higher price is understood as an investment in a high-status alliance and a form of proof of the groom-to-be's ability, thereby increasing his social prestige. For the bride-to-be's family, this payment can be understood as compensation for the reduction in her labor or contributions while increasing the family's dignity (Said et al., 2024; Syrda, 2025; Yu, 2024).

To explain the sustainability of the *Uang Panai* tradition in a changing society and in a new region, such as Sangatta, this study draws on theories of resilience and cultural adaptation, which emphasize how traditions, rituals, and values are maintained, modified, or reinterpreted in response to internal and external pressures (Baumard & André, 2025; Cardinal & Loughmiller-Cardinal, 2025; Haider & Cleaver, 2023). The tradition of *Uang Panai* survives because it fulfils important cultural functions, such as strengthening social cohesion, validating lineage, and being a marker of Bugis ethnic identity (Rinaldi et al., 2023; Suriyani, 2024; Wardani, 2024). In the context of the diaspora in Sangatta, preserving this tradition is an important means of maintaining Bugis identity amid a diverse population. This theory helps explain variations in the amount of *Uang Panai* or in the negotiation process due to adjustments to local economic conditions, although the essence of the tradition is maintained (Aris et al., 2024; Marwing, 2024; Sunarti et al., 2022). Thus, the tradition's resilience is evidenced not just in its continued practice, but in the persistence of its unique discursive form, even as the nominal amounts and payment schedules adapt.

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that individuals construct meaning through social interactions and symbolic interpretation. These interactions and interpretations are fundamentally mediated by language; symbols are invoked, contested, and agreed upon through discursive exchange. This perspective reveals the non-monetary values contained in *Uang Panai*, such as family honor, prestige, and the formation of social contracts through marital alliances (Ali et al., 2022; Almokdad et al., 2025; Jones & Malone, 2025; Pedraza, 2023; Tur et al., 2025). *Uang Panai* is not only a material value but also a discursive and symbolic anchor. The language used to discuss it—the specialized terms, the polite requests, the metaphorical justifications—constitutes the primary means through which meanings of honor, prestige, and contract are constructed and exchanged. It symbolizes the groom-to-be's respect for the bride-to-be's family, economic ability, and values attached to the bride-to-be. The negotiation process involves complex symbolic interpretations between the two families. This perspective reveals the non-monetary values contained in the practice of *Uang Panai*, such as family honor, prestige, and the formation of social contracts through marital alliances (Said et al., 2024; Sanusi et al., 2025; Suriyani, 2024).

The approach of economic anthropology, particularly the concept of dowry (or bridewealth), provides a relevant lens for analyzing the *Uang Panai* tradition. Bridewealth is understood as the transfer of goods or money from the groom to the bride at the time of, or before, marriage. This practice is often seen as compensation for the loss of the bride's labor or reproductive capacity, as well as a mechanism to legitimize offspring (Beer, 2022; Muna et al., 2025; Schaffnit & Lawson, 2021; Stewart & Strathern, 2023). This perspective helps contextualize *Uang Panai* in a cross-cultural framework regarding marriage payments. The concept of reciprocity, which is not always direct or equivalent but contributes to long-term social relationships, is particularly relevant. *Uang Panai* can be understood as the initiation of a long-term reciprocal relationship between two families that involves future support and obligations (Amrin et al., 2024; Munro et al., 2024).

This study draws from the extant literature on the subject to posit that *Uang Panai* should be conceptualized as a communicative cultural practice rather than merely an economic obligation. SET provides a framework for understanding the sociocultural significance of *Uang Panai* and the negotiation processes between families. This theory highlights the manner in which material payments serve as a medium for conveying social value, prestige, and relational commitment. Theories of cultural resilience and adaptation support the examination of how this tradition is maintained and reinterpreted within the Bugis diaspora in Sangatta, revealing its role in sustaining social cohesion and ethnic identity amid changing contexts. Furthermore, symbolic interactionism provides a critical framework for understanding how meanings of honor and respect are discursively constructed through language during

Uang Panai negotiations. The collective perspective of the scholars aligns the reviewed literature with the objectives of the present study, as it frames *Uang Panai* as a dynamic site where language, culture, and social relations intersect.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, ethnographic approach to examine the dynamics of the *Uang Panai* tradition as a cultural and communication practice in the Bugis community in Sangatta, East Kutai, Indonesia. Its primary focus is linguistic and interactional data that emerge in interviews, customary negotiations, and ritual communication (Andini et al., 2025; Halim & Mohd Din, 2025; Rositama, 2024). Consequently, special attention was paid to the specific lexicon, speech patterns, and discursive strategies participants used when discussing, negotiating, and justifying *Uang Panai*. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling approach, targeting individuals with direct knowledge and in-depth experience of the *Uang Panai* tradition. To ensure a balanced diversity of perspectives and representations, the informants were placed into three groups: parents of the bride-to-be, bridal couples (brides-to-be and grooms-to-be), and millennials.

3.1. Participants

The study involved 18 informants who were deliberately selected from different generations, including the older generation, such as the parents of the bride-to-be, as well as the groom-to-be and millennials, who were deliberately selected and grouped into six sets. Each group represented a different social role in the *Uang Panai* tradition: community leaders (cultural and traditional authorities), religious leaders (interpreters of religion and morality), millennials (contemporary young adult perspectives), brides (women as direct subjects of the tradition), grooms, and grooms' families (actors involved in financial negotiations and support). There were three informants in each group. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 68 years, representing a diverse range of generational perspectives. They had to be at least 17 years old to ensure they had sufficient psychological and social maturity to provide views on the Uang Panai tradition. This age criterion also allows them to understand the marriage process and engage in discussions about customs, both as participants in Uang Panai and community members.

The informants included 12 men and 6 women. This demographic composition ensured representation of social roles, age groups, and genders, allowing for exploration of perceptions of the *Uang Panai* tradition. There were more male informants because men play a more dominant role in formal negotiations and decision-making in the *Uang Panai* practice. Additionally, field access restrictions limited the availability of female informants in certain authoritative roles. Thus, gender distribution reflected both sociocultural realities and methodological considerations. In the Uang Panai tradition, men and women have different but complementary roles: men are more involved in the negotiation process, while women, especially from the bride-to-be's family, play more symbolic and social roles. Therefore, it is essential to gather the perceptions of both parties in a fair and representative manner.

This selection not only considers their involvement in *Uang Panai* but also variations in communicative practices, such as patterns of delivering customary demands, linguistic mitigation strategies in negotiations, and the way they articulate *Uang Panai* symbolism. This ensured the data captured a range of linguistic performances from the formal, traditional rhetoric of elders to the more pragmatic, Indonesian-influenced discourse of the youth, reflecting the sociolinguistic reality of the diaspora. The informants in the parents of the bride-to-be group play a direct role in negotiating *Uang Panai*. In Bugis tradition, their role is crucial in determining the amount of *Uang Panai* and in maintaining harmony in relationships between families. They can speak to the parents' responsibility to maintain the family's good name and ensure that the amount of *Uang Panai* falls within the groom-to-be's economic means. They can also outline the social dynamics in the negotiation process so that the demand for *Uang Panai* does not burden the groom-to-be's family while still maintaining traditional values. This group enables the level of flexibility to be understood, such as whether the amount of *Uang Panai* can be reduced due to the groom-to-be's economic limitations or increased to reflect the social status of the bride-to-be's family.

The informants in the bridal couple group were grooms-to-be and brides-to-be, who are directly involved in the marriage process. They provide personal views on the meaning and relevance of the

Uang Panai tradition in their lives. The grooms-to-be usually express feelings and economic pressure that arise from the large amount of *Uang Panai* that must be paid. The brides-to-be usually focus more on the symbolic aspects and values of family respect associated with this tradition, including whether it remains relevant to modern society's social values. The views of both sides are important for understanding whether the younger generation maintains this tradition, starts to modify it, or even questions its sustainability in the modern socioeconomic context.

The informants in the millennials group were young men and women aged at least 17 years who were not married but had views on the tradition of *Uang Panai*. This generation has a value orientation shaped by globalization, so it is often more critical of traditions deemed burdensome. They consider the high cost to be an obstacle to getting married, especially in current economic conditions. They also consider whether a tradition is still worth maintaining or needs to be modified to better align with the values of equality, efficiency, and the realities of the modern economy. Their perspective provides an overview of the direction of cultural change and the possibility of the future adaptation of traditions.

3.2. Instrument

3.2.1. Interview

In this qualitative ethnographic study on the *Uang Panai* tradition among the Bugis diaspora in Sangatta, the primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide with 24 core open-ended questions (see Appendix A), Although the interview guide consisted of 24 core questions, not all questions were posed to every informant. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the questions to be adjusted according to the informant's role, relevance, and lived experience. Follow-up and probing questions were used selectively to explore emerging themes, ensuring depth rather than uniformity of responses. These core questions were supplemented by flexible follow-up probes to capture deeper sociocultural and communicative insights into the *Uang Panai* tradition. The questions were categorized into thematic clusters to explore the sociocultural dimensions of the practice. Open-ended questions focused on personal experiences, such as "Can you describe your involvement in determining the amount of *Uang Panai* during a family negotiation?", to capture individual narratives from parents of the bride-to-be, brides-to-be, and grooms-to-be. Probing questions delved into symbolic meanings, such as "How does the value of *Uang Panai* reflect family honor or social status in your view?", aiming to uncover interpretations influenced by cultural resilience and symbolic interactionism. For millennial informants, questions addressed contemporary relevance, including "In what ways do you think economic changes should influence the tradition of *Uang Panai*?", to highlight adaptation and generational shifts. These questions were designed to be flexible, allowing follow-ups based on responses, while ensuring cultural sensitivity to avoid leading biases. The guide incorporated linguistic elements from Bugis customs, such as references to terms like *mappacci* (honor), to foster rapport and authenticity. Questions were also designed to elicit metalinguistic awareness, prompting informants to explain the meaning of key terms and to describe what constitutes appropriate or respectful language during negotiations.

3.2.2. Observation

Participatory observations were conducted over a six-month period, encompassing nine observational events, including marriage proposals, *mappacci* rituals, and wedding ceremonies. During each observation, the researchers systematically documented interactional practices, negotiation sequences, paralinguistic features (e.g., pauses, tone, and laughter), and responses to Uang Panai arrangements. This approach enriches the data because the researchers not only hear explanations but also note paralinguistic features such as strategic pauses, tone of voice, and laughter, which are critical to understanding the full communicative impact of an utterance. For example, during *mappacci*, researchers can observe the response of the bride-to-be's family to the amount of *Uang Panai* paid and whether there is tension or acceptance. Observations also helped the researchers to understand the adaptation process, such as changes in payment methods (cash, staged, or alternatives) in response to current economic conditions.

3.2.3. Document Analysis

Document analysis was employed not only for content but also as a record of formalized language use. Customary letters and agreements were analyzed for their formulaic phrasing, ceremonial titles, and the specific terminology used to formalize the Uang Panai amount and terms. Visual documents, such as photographs of proposal events and wedding rituals, were scrutinized for patterns in attire, spatial arrangements, and symbolic items, such as silk sarongs or traditional cakes, revealing consistency in cultural expressions. Customary letters and notes on instalment payments, such as "paid in two stages," highlighted adaptive mechanisms in response to financial constraints. Additionally, secondary sources, such as local customary regulations and scholarly articles on Bugis marriage customs, were reviewed to contextualize primary data within broader anthropological frameworks. This analysis employed content coding to identify recurring themes of reciprocity and prestige, ensuring objectivity by cross-referencing with observational notes. By integrating these documents, this study achieved a comprehensive view of *Uang Panai'*s evolution, emphasizing its role in sustaining diaspora identity amid modernization.

3.3. Procedure

The research procedure followed a systematic sequence of data collection and qualitative analysis. Data collection was conducted over a six-month period through three main stages: semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were produced immediately after each observation to capture interactional sequences, paralinguistic features, spatial arrangements, and contextual details. Relevant documents, including customary letters, family records, and visual materials, were digitized and organized chronologically.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The process began with familiarization, in which all interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of the data corpus. This was followed by open coding, where meaningful units related to communication practices, negotiation processes, symbolic meanings, and adaptive strategies were identified. Coding was conducted manually and supported by NVivo 12 to ensure systematic organization and traceability across data sources. In the next stage, axial coding was applied to group related codes into broader analytical categories by identifying patterns and relationships across interviews, observations, and documents. These categories were then refined through selective coding, resulting in higher-order themes that captured recurring meanings and interactional dynamics. The themes from this process were finalized through constant comparison across data types to ensure analytical consistency and triangulation.

To enhance analytical rigor, themes were cross-validated by comparing interview narratives with observed interactional practices and documentary evidence. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analysis to document analytical decisions and minimize researcher bias. This stepwise procedure ensured that the findings were grounded in the data and transparently linked to the analytical framework of the study.

4. Results

This section presents the qualitative findings on the existence of the *Uang Panai* tradition in the Bugis community in Sangatta, East Kutai, Indonesia. The analysis was conducted according to the main themes and ideas that emerged from in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis, interpreted from the perspectives of SET, cultural persistence and adaptation, symbolic interactionism, and economic anthropology.

4.1. Interviews

This study explored the multifaceted perceptions of the *Uang Panai* tradition among key stakeholder groups in Bugis society. The semi-structured interviews, comprising questions tailored for community leaders, religious figures, millennials, brides, grooms, and grooms' families (see Appendix B), were analyzed to uncover core themes related to the practice's sociocultural meaning, negotiation processes,

evolving symbolism, and role in cultural cohesion. To systematically address the research questions, the emergent themes were organized and aligned accordingly. Table 1 synthesizes these thematic findings, mapping the stakeholders' perspectives onto the four central dimensions of inquiry.

Table 1

Stakeholder Perceptions of the Uang Panai Tradition: Thematic Analysis Based on Four Research Dimensions

Research Dimension	Emerging Thematic Findings	Representative Data Excerpts
1. Sociocultural Meaning of *Uang Panai*	Symbol of family honor (*siri'*) and female dignity.	*"Uang Panai is a measure of respect for the woman and her family. If its value is low without a clear reason, it can be perceived as demeaning the family's dignity."* (TM-1) *"As a Buginese woman, Uang Panai is important because it concerns the family's self-respect."* (MW-2)
	Marker of Bugis cultural identity in diaspora.	*"Uang Panai is preserved because it is a cultural heritage that affirms Bugis identity."* (TM-2)
	Proof of the prospective husband's sincerity and responsibility.	*"Uang Panai serves as proof of a man's sincerity to be responsible in the household."* (TM-2)
	Religious perspective: *Uang Panai* as accepted *'urf* (custom) provided it does not contravene Sharia.	*"In the Islamic religious view, the Uang Panai tradition is understood as part of the living custom ('*urf*) in society... it can be accepted as a social agreement as long as it is not burdensome."* (TA-1)
2. Inter-Family Negotiation and Communication Processes	Deliberation (*musyawarah*) as a key mechanism.	*"As long as it remains within reasonable bounds and is decided through deliberation, Uang Panai stays relevant."* (TM-3)
	Active involvement of the groom's family.	*"As parents, we feel responsible for helping our child fulfill the Uang Panai. However, we hope the amount remains reasonable."* (KP-1)
	Negotiation of the amount based on economic capacity.	*"Do you agree if the amount of Uang Panai is adjusted according to the family's economic condition?"* (MW-3)
	Collective expectation for a fair and humane amount.	*"We want this tradition to be implemented with wisdom so as not to burden the younger generation."* (KP-3)
	Role of religion in affirming the importance of fair deliberation.	*"The determination of the Uang Panai amount should be conducted through deliberation based on good intentions, not on social prestige."* (TA-2)
	Symbol of sincerity and a test of commitment.	*"In my experience, Uang Panai becomes a test of sincerity."* (MP-3)

	Negative perception as a display of social status.	*"Problems arise when this tradition is turned into a platform for social status display."* (TM-3)
	Shifting symbolism from cultural token to financial burden.	*"For us, Uang Panai sometimes feels like a financial requirement, rather than a cultural symbol anymore."* (GM-3)
3. Symbolism Formed Through Social Interaction	Aspiration for substantive, non-material symbolic meaning.	*"I hope this tradition emphasizes symbolic meaning over mere material value."* (MP-3)
	Religious perspective: clear distinction between *Uang Panai* (custom) and *mahar* (religious obligation).	*"Mahar is a religious obligation that is the absolute right of the bride. Uang Panai is a customary tradition that does not affect the validity of the marriage."* (TA-2)
	Maintenance of social propriety and norms.	*"This tradition has long existed and functions to maintain matrimonial decorum."* (TM-2)
	Reinforcement of Bugis cultural identity.	*"I am proud of the Uang Panai tradition... we respect the custom."* (KP-2)
4. Its Function in Strengthening Cohesion and Cultural Identity (Diaspora Context)	Tension between cultural preservation and adaptation to economic realities.	*"...social pressure regarding its amount often makes prospective grooms feel psychologically burdened."* (MP-2)
	Adaptation in the context of diaspora and modernity.	*"...it should be adapted to contemporary conditions, not merely following old standards."* (GM-2)
	Role of religion in reminding that tradition should not obscure marriage's meaning as an act of worship.	*"Religion is present to balance between the demands of custom and the essence of marriage as an act of worship that brings tranquility and blessings."* (TA-3)

Note: TM = Community Leader; TA = Religious Leader; MW = Bride; MP = Groom; KP = Groom's Family; GM = Millennials

1. Sociocultural Meaning of Uang Panai

Uang Panai is fundamentally understood as a symbol of family honor (*siri'*), specifically the dignity of the woman and her family. As articulated by a community leader (TM-1), this tradition serves as a *"measure of respect,"* where a low value can be interpreted as demeaning to the family's dignity and honor. This perspective is reinforced by a bride (MW-2) who asserts that *Uang Panai "concerns the family's self-respect."* Beyond merely an individual symbol of honor, the tradition functions as a crucial marker of Bugis cultural identity, especially within the diaspora context. TM-2 explains that *Uang Panai "is preserved because it is a cultural heritage that affirms Bugis identity,"* signifying its role as a cultural boundary marker amidst a diverse environment.

Concurrently, *Uang Panai* is viewed as tangible proof of the prospective husband's sincerity and responsibility. TM-2 refers to it as "proof of a man's sincerity to be responsible in the household," linking financial capability to moral readiness for family life. The religious perspective provides a unique normative framework. A religious leader (TA-1) positions *Uang Panai* as '*urf* (local custom)

that is accepted in Islam insofar as it does not contradict Sharia and is *"not used as a tool to complicate marriage."* This view acknowledges the social legitimacy of the tradition while simultaneously imposing ethical and religious boundaries, creating a space for negotiation between custom (adat) and religion (*agama*).

2. Inter-Family Negotiation and Communication Processes

The process of determining the *Uang Panai* amount is dominated by the principle of deliberation (musyawarah) as the mechanism for establishing a legitimate agreement. TM-3 affirms the relevance of the tradition *"as long as it remains within reasonable bounds and is decided through deliberation."* This process involves the active involvement and collective responsibility of the groom's family. KP-1, representing the parents of the prospective groom, states, *"As parents, we feel responsible for helping our child,"* yet hopes the amount remains *"reasonable,"* reflecting the tension between customary obligation and economic concern.

The core of contemporary negotiation is the adjustment of the nominal amount based on real economic capacity. The question posed by a bride (MW-3), *"Do you agree if the amount of Uang Panai is adjusted according to the family's economic condition?"* reflects the younger generation's awareness of the importance of flexibility. This leads to a collective expectation for a fair and humane agreement. KP-3 hopes the tradition is implemented *"with wisdom so as not to burden the younger generation."* From a religious standpoint, TA-1 emphasises that deliberation must be based on *"good intentions, not on social prestige,"* thereby providing a moral foundation for negotiation that is fair and prioritises welfare (*maslahah*).

Importantly, the process of discussion emerges as a central interactional mechanism that sustains the tradition. Deliberation allows actors to negotiate symbolic value, redistribute moral responsibility, and reach compromise outcomes that preserve social harmony. Linguistically, discussion legitimizes flexibility, enabling families to maintain face (saving dignity) while adjusting expectations. In this way, discourse does not merely describe tradition; it actively produces and stabilizes it.

3. Symbolism Formed Through Social Interaction

Uang Panai operates within a dynamic and often ambiguous realm of symbolism. On one hand, it remains a symbol of sincerity and a test of commitment. MP-3 states, *"In my experience, Uang Panai becomes a test of sincerity."* On the other hand, there is a strong negative perception that the tradition has shifted into an *"platform for social status display"* (TM-3). It is this shift that triggers a fundamental change in meaning from cultural symbol to financial burden. GM-3 clearly states, *"For us, Uang Panai sometimes feels like a financial requirement, rather than a cultural symbol anymore."*

This condition gives rise to a strong aspiration among stakeholders, particularly the younger generation, to restore substantive symbolic meaning. MP-3 hopes this tradition *"emphasises symbolic meaning over mere material value."* Religious leaders provide a crucial clarification within this symbolic framework by drawing a clear distinction between *Uang Panai* (custom) and *mahar* (religious obligation). TA-2 asserts, *"Mahar is a religious obligation ... Uang Panai is a customary tradition,"* a critical distinction that prevents the excessive sacralization of *Uang Panai* and preserves the authority of religion in the marriage contract (*akad nikah*).

The discourse employed by parents of brides-to-be illustrates how *Uang Panai* functions as what Bourdieu conceptualizes as symbolic capital. Educational attainment, family reputation, and gendered expectations are converted into culturally recognized value. When a mother stated, *"If our child goes to college, we feel that it is an effort and pride,"* education is discursively transformed into legitimacy for higher *Uang Panai*. In this sense, *Uang Panai* becomes a medium through which cultural capital (education) is translated into symbolic capital (honor and recognition), reinforcing social stratification within the marriage market.

At the same time, the data reveal the presence of discursive resistance and moral negotiation. The frequent use of mitigating expressions and justificatory language indicates an attempt to temper the symbolic rigidity of tradition such as biased indicates an effort to soften the symbolic demands of

tradition. This aligns with Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes how language reflects and reshapes power relations (Fattahizadeh & Langrodi, 2022). Here, power is not exercised coercively, but negotiated through culturally acceptable moral reasoning. Families of brides maintain symbolic authority, while simultaneously acknowledging economic realities faced by grooms.

Religious actors play a crucial role in reframing the discourse by introducing an alternative moral hierarchy. By emphasizing that *mahar* is religiously obligatory while *Uang Panai* is conditional, religious leaders subtly challenge the absolutism of adat without rejecting it outright. Statements such as "*Uang Panai is okay as long as it is not burdensome"* function as discursive boundary-setting, allowing tradition to persist while being ethically regulated. This illustrates how competing normative systems—*adat* and *agama*—are harmonized through language rather than confrontation.

Generational differences further highlight the dynamic nature of meaning-making. Younger informants frequently re-signified *Uang Panai* using economic and psychological terminology, referring to it as stress, burden, or financial requirements. Such language signals a semantic shift from symbolic appreciation toward material constraint. Yet, even within this critical stance, the rejection is partial rather than total. Most millennial informants still acknowledged the cultural importance of *Uang Panai*, suggesting a desire for reinterpretation rather than abolition. This supports the view that tradition survives through adaptive discourse rather than rigid continuity.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings can be interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism, where social meanings are continuously constructed and reconstructed through interaction and language. The negotiation of *Uang Panai* is not merely an administrative step preceding marriage, but a symbolic encounter in which actors define worth, dignity, and social position. Da Silva (2023) argues that meanings arise out of social interaction and are modified through interpretive processes. This is evident in how informants repeatedly used evaluative language, such as respect, self-esteem, and sincerity, to frame *Uang Panai* as a moral symbol rather than a transactional demand.

4. Its Function in Strengthening Cohesion and Cultural Identity (Diaspora Context)

In the diaspora context, *Uang Panai* plays a dual role. It functions as a mechanism for maintaining traditional social norms and propriety. TM-2 mentions its function to *"maintain matrimonial decorum."* Simultaneously, this tradition is an important tool for reinforcing Bugis cultural identity in the host land. Pride and respect for this custom are expressed by a groom (MP-2) and a family member (KP-2), demonstrating its role in preserving cultural bonds.

However, this preservation is not without consequence. There is a constant tension between cultural preservation and the economic pressures of diaspora reality. MP-2 reveals that *"social pressure regarding the amount of Uang Panai often makes prospective grooms feel psychologically burdened."* Consequently, the demand for adaptation within the context of modernity and diaspora becomes strong. GM-2 calls for the tradition to be *"adapted to contemporary conditions, not merely following old standards."* A religious leader (TA-3) adds a spiritual dimension to this cohesive function by reminding that *"religion is present to balance between the demands of custom and the essence of marriage as an act of worship,"* emphasising that social cohesion must not sacrifice the sacred meaning of marriage itself.

Overall, the interviews reveal that *Uang Panai* is a living and continually negotiated cultural institution. It is a field of encounter and sometimes contestation between the values of *siri'* (honour), collective identity, the economic realities of the younger generation, and religious norms. The tradition is sustained not due to the rigidity of its rules, but precisely through flexibility in deliberation, its adaptive capacity to economic pressures, and its ability to integrate various systems of meaning (custom, religion, modern economics). These findings demonstrate that within the context of the Bugis diaspora in Sangatta, *Uang Panai* has transformed from a mere "customary payment" into a complex process of cultural communication, where the meanings of honour, responsibility, and identity are continuously re-formed through interaction and dialogue across generations and stakeholder groups.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that *Uang Panai* operates as a discursively mediated institution, where meaning, power, and morality intersect. The tradition endures not because of fixed rules, but because actors continuously reproduce it through language that balances honor, empathy, and pragmatism. This insight contributes to broader discussions on how customary practices adapt within changing socioeconomic contexts, particularly in societies where tradition, religion, and modernity coexist.

4.2. Observations

Field observations were conducted during several Bugis family events in Sangatta that are culturally associated with marriage preparation, including *mappese-pese*, initial meetings between prospective in-laws, and wedding-related rituals. These observations were not intended to establish new procedural stages, but rather to document recurrent interactional patterns across key moments of the marriage process.

Across all observed events, *Uang Panai* emerged not merely as an economic arrangement but as a socially regulated interactional space governed by Bugis norms of respect (*sipakatau*), restraint, and honor (Figure 1). Meetings typically took place in the living room of the bride-to-be's family home, often a traditional stilt house. Spatial arrangements were highly structured: male elders and representatives of the groom's family occupied the front area, while women gathered separately, preparing food and attending to domestic arrangements. This spatial division reinforced gendered and generational roles in decision-making.

Figure 1
The Process of Handing Over Uang Panai to the Bride's Family



Communication during these encounters was marked by low vocal intensity, indirect phrasing, and strategic pauses, particularly when topics approached sensitive issues related to *Uang Panai*. In one observed interaction, a senior family elder stated slowly and deliberately, *"Uang Panai is not just money. It is our honor as a family of women."* Such utterances functioned as discursive anchors, reaffirming the symbolic value of *Uang Panai* and setting moral boundaries for subsequent negotiation (see Table 2).

Table 2
Observation of the Uang Panai Handover Procession

Analytical Theme	Focus on Sociolinguistic Practice	Participant Quotes
The sociocultural significance of *Uang Panai*	The lexical and pragmatic meaning of *Uang Panai* as honor and social legitimacy	"*Uang Panai is not just money. This is our honor as a family of women*." (Female family elder)

Negotiation and communication between families	Indirect communication strategies, pauses, linguistic mitigations, and generation hierarchies	""*Let's look at this together; What matters is good intentions and is not burdensome*." (Female family representative)
Symbolism in social interaction	Language as a symbol of honor (*siri'*), politeness, and emotional control	"*If you talk too quickly about numbers, it's disrespectful*." (Senior family members)
Social cohesion and diaspora cultural identity	Discourse on identity and cultural continuity in the overseas context	"*A marriage without Panai feels culturally incomplete*." (Young generation of Bugis diaspora)

Rather than unfolding through rigid procedural stages, discussions concerning *Uang Panai* developed gradually and relationally over repeated visits. Initial meetings focused on kinship recognition and expressions of goodwill, often symbolized through the exchange of local food items such as Bugis cakes, coffee, or agricultural produce. Direct reference to the nominal amount of *Uang Panai* was deliberately postponed, reflecting a cultural preference for relational attunement before material negotiation.

When the issue of *Uang Panai* eventually surfaced, it was typically introduced by senior members of the groom's family after shared meals. Observational data indicate a noticeable shift in interactional dynamics at this moment: voices softened, pauses lengthened, and non-verbal cues, such as lowered gazes, deep sighs, or exchanged glances, became more pronounced. In one instance, after a figure was mentioned, a female family member intervened gently, stating, *"Let's look at this together; the important thing is good intention."* This utterance exemplifies how affective language is used to mitigate potential tension and preserve relational harmony.

Observations also documented the practical deployment of *Uang Panai* following the agreement. In several households, wedding preparations were already underway, with visible indicators such as stacks of printed invitations, silk sarongs, and rented decorations. A mother of the bride explained that the funds *"really helped the smooth running of the event,"* highlighting the functional dimension of *Uang Panai* alongside its symbolic meaning. In other cases, newly married couples used part of the funds to purchase household necessities, framing *Uang Panai* as a transitional resource for establishing a new domestic life.

Generational contrasts were particularly salient in informal observational settings. Younger male participants were frequently observed displaying emotional restraint when financial issues were discussed. One young man remarked, *"Sometimes I have to wait until I am financially ready. It can also feel embarrassing for the girl's family."* Such expressions reveal the psychological burden associated with the tradition, even as it continues to be culturally respected. Conversely, older family members consistently framed *Uang Panai* as an essential marker of cultural continuity, cautioning against its reduction to mere financial calculation.

Among younger Bugis adults, especially in casual conversations outside formal meetings, a more adaptive discourse emerged. While they affirmed that marriage without *Uang Panai* would be considered culturally incomplete, they also emphasized flexibility regarding its amount. This suggests that the tradition is not eroding, but rather undergoing discursive recalibration, balancing cultural legitimacy with contemporary economic realities.

Overall, the observations demonstrate that *Uang Panai* is sustained through interactional practices, linguistic moderation, and embodied conduct, rather than through fixed procedural stages. The repetition of similar communicative patterns across different events reinforces the understanding of *Uang Panai* as a living tradition, maintained through negotiation, moral reasoning, and shared cultural sensibilities.

4.3. Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted using family archives, customary records, wedding photographs, and documents related to the determination of the *Uang Panai*. These documents provide a factual perspective on the variation in the amount of *Uang Panai*, the customary administrative structure, and the pattern of fund use. The customary family records showed that the amount of *Uang Panai* ranged from IDR 15,000,000 to IDR 150,000,000 between 2011 and 2023. In some documents, the bride-to-be's education is recorded alongside the amount of *Uang Panai*, such as "S1 Economics – 50 million," showing that the educational variable was recorded as an administrative component of customary family practices. Some documents included additional notes, such as "may be paid in instalments" or "paid in two instalments," indicating formal flexibility in payment practices.

An analysis of the photographs of the proposal showed the arrangement of typical Bugis dishes, such as *barongko*, *cucur*, and *taloba* cakes, which are placed on the main table. The photographs also showed uniformity in sitting patterns, consistent with the observational data, such as the separation of the groom-to-be's and bride-to-be's families. The wedding photographs also showed the use of traditional clothing, such as *bodo* clothes and silk sarongs, as well as the *sigale-gale* crown worn by the bride (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Wedding Photos of the Use of Bodo Clothes and Sigale-Gale Crowns



Some family archives also contained an agreement letter for the determination of *Uang Panai* signed by both parties, complete with the meeting date, the names of those present, and the nominal details. In these two documents, evidence of gradual payments was recorded over two to three periods, indicating informal but structured administrative practices in the implementation of *Uang Panai*.

5. Discussion

This study examined (1) the sociocultural meaning of *Uang Panai*, (2) the negotiation and communication processes between families, (3) the symbolism constructed through social interaction, and (4) the function of this tradition in reinforcing social cohesion and cultural identity within a Bugis diaspora community. Rather than merely reaffirming established theories of symbolic interactionism and social exchange, the findings offer a more critical account of how *Uang Panai* simultaneously sustains cultural continuity and reproduces structural tensions related to gender, economy, and power.

Consistent with symbolic interactionist perspectives, *Uang Panai* functions as a socially constructed symbol through which honor, respect, and family dignity are communicated and negotiated (Ali et al., 2022; Almokdad et al., 2025; Sanusi et al., 2025). Informants' repeated use of moral language, such as *Honor*, *Dignity*, and *Sincerity*, confirms that *Uang Panai* is not understood merely as an economic requirement, but as a cultural expression of relational commitment. Similar interpretations have been documented in bridewealth practices across diverse societies, where monetary transfers serve as

symbolic affirmations of marriage legitimacy and social belonging (Aasoglenang et al., 2024; Hotte & Lambert, 2023; Rasyid et al., 2024)

However, the findings complicate this interpretation by revealing an inherent ambivalence in the symbolic valuation of women. While *Uang Panai* is framed as recognition of women's worth, that recognition is articulated through quantification. This aligns with critiques in economic anthropology that caution against the subtle commodification of intimate relationships, where symbolic practices gradually absorb market logics (Cleuziou & McBrien, 2021; Popescu et al., 2025). In this sense, *Uang Panai* both elevates women symbolically and risks reinforcing the perception that women's social value can be "priced," thereby reproducing gendered hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Apart from symbolic interaction, the negotiation of *Uang Panai* emerges as a discursive process shaped by politeness norms, indirect speech, and face-saving strategies. This supports the argument that power in cultural practices is often exercised through language and moral framing rather than explicit coercion (Fattahizadeh & Fereshteh, 2022). Expressions such as "good intention" or "not burdening" (see Table 2) function as moral regulators that allow negotiation to proceed without overt conflict, thereby preserving social harmony (Saadna, 2024). Yet, the findings also suggest that these discursive strategies may obscure unequal bargaining positions. Families of grooms—particularly those with limited economic resources—are culturally constrained from openly contesting high demands, reinforcing what social exchange theorists describe as asymmetrical obligation (Said et al., 2024). Thus, while negotiation appears consensual, it operates within a moral economy that subtly privileges the symbolic authority of the bride's family. This insight extends SET by illustrating how moral norms can legitimize unequal exchanges under the guise of tradition (Chala & Haro, 2023).

Document analysis showing explicit monetary ranges and educational labels attached to *Uang Panai* amounts signals a growing rationalization of the tradition. This finding resonates with studies indicating that bridewealth practices increasingly intersect with economic calculation in contexts of modernization and mobility (Almaida, 2023; Chen et al., 2024). While flexibility mechanisms, such as installment payments, demonstrate adaptive capacity, they also underscore the financial strain borne disproportionately by young men. Global evidence suggests that high bridewealth obligations can delay marriage, increase indebtedness, and exacerbate psychological stress (Chae et al., 2021; Corno et al., 2020). The emotional restraint and anxiety observed among younger male participants in this study reflect these broader patterns. Thus, *Uang Panai* cannot be understood solely as a cultural asset; it also constitutes a potential structural barrier to marriage and economic stability, particularly in diaspora communities navigating precarious livelihoods.

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in demonstrating how *Uang Panai* strengthens social cohesion and cultural identity among the Bugis diaspora in Sangatta. As argued in the literature on migrant communities, ritual practices often serve as anchors of identity and continuity in unfamiliar social environments (Aris et al., 2024; Marwing, 2024). *Uang Panai* functions as a boundary marker that reaffirms Bugis identity and intergenerational continuity, even as its meanings are renegotiated. However, this cohesion is achieved at uneven social costs. Younger generations, particularly men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, bear a disproportionate burden in sustaining the tradition. This finding extends cultural resilience theory by highlighting that adaptability does not necessarily imply equity (Baumard & André, 2025; Cardinal & Loughmiller-Cardinal, 2025). Cultural persistence, in this case, is contingent upon selective sacrifice, raising critical questions about sustainability and social justice within traditional systems.

By foregrounding ambivalence, tension, and unintended consequences, this study advances theoretical discussions on bridewealth beyond confirmation of symbolic interactionism. It conceptualizes *Uang Panai* as a dynamic moral economy, where symbolic meaning, economic rationality, and gender norms intersect and sometimes collide. This perspective contributes to broader debates on how cultural traditions adapt under conditions of economic pressure and shifting gender expectations (Jamaludin et al., 2025; Yu, 2024). Practically, the findings suggest the need for community-level reflection on adaptive strategies that preserve symbolic meaning while mitigating financial and gendered inequalities. Theoretically, they invite further inquiry into how discourse and moral reasoning sustain traditions while simultaneously constraining agency within them.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide: Uang Panai Tradition among the Bugis Diaspora in Sangatta

This study employed a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 24 core open-ended questions, distributed equally across six informant groups (four questions per group). Follow-up probes were used flexibly to clarify meanings and elicit deeper explanations.

A. Community Leaders / Customary Authorities
1. How do you define the cultural meaning of *Uang Panai* in Bugis marriage traditions today?
2. What considerations are usually taken into account when determining the amount of *Uang Panai*?
3. How are negotiations over *Uang Panai* typically conducted to maintain harmony between families?
4. In your view, how has the Uang Panai tradition changed in the diaspora context?

B. Religious Leaders
1. How do you view *Uang Panai* in relation to religious marriage requirements such as *mahar*?
2. What ethical principles should guide families when negotiating *Uang Panai*?
3. In what situations should the amount of *Uang Panai* be adjusted or reconsidered?
4. How do you help mediate conflicts related to *Uang Panai* demands?

C. Parents of the Bride-to-Be
1. Can you describe your role in determining the amount of *Uang Panai*?
2. How does *Uang Panai* relate to family honor and social reputation?
3. How do you balance traditional expectations with the groom's economic capacity?
4. What communication strategies are used to avoid conflict during negotiations?

D. Brides-to-Be
1. What does *Uang Panai* mean to you personally?
2. How do you feel when discussions about the amount of *Uang Panai* take place?
3. Do you think *Uang Panai* still represents respect and dignity for women today? Why or why not?
4. How should this tradition adapt to contemporary social conditions?

E. Grooms-to-Be
1. How do you experience the process of preparing and negotiating *Uang Panai*?
2. What challenges do you face in fulfilling *Uang Panai* obligations?
3. How does *Uang Panai* influence your readiness for marriage?
4. What forms of flexibility do you consider fair in this tradition?

F. Millennials (Unmarried Young Adults)
1. How do you perceive the relevance of the *Uang Panai* tradition today?
2. Do you see *Uang Panai* as a cultural value or an economic burden? Please explain.
3. How should *Uang Panai* be modified to suit modern economic realities?
4. What role should younger generations play in preserving or transforming this tradition?

Note: All interviews were conducted with cultural sensitivity, using polite and indirect language in accordance with Bugis norms, and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

Appendix B.
Summary of Interview Findings

This appendix presents a thematic summary of in-depth interviews conducted with multiple stakeholder groups regarding the tradition of *Uang Panai* within Bugis society. The findings reflect convergent and divergent perspectives across social, religious, and generational lines.

A. Community Leaders (TM-1, TM-2, TM-3)

Community leaders consistently described *Uang Panai* as a culturally significant institution symbolizing honor (*siri'*), responsibility, and the seriousness of marital intention. TM-1 emphasized its role as a moral and cultural obligation rooted in Bugis philosophical values, while TM-2 highlighted its function as a social bond between extended families. TM-3 noted a growing tension between cultural preservation and contemporary economic realities. Across all TM respondents, there was a shared acknowledgment of shifting practices, characterized by increased dialogue, flexibility, and consideration of economic capacity, indicating an adaptive reinterpretation of tradition rather than its abandonment

B. Religious Leaders (TA-1, TA-2, TA-3)

Religious leaders framed *Uang Panai* as a form of local custom (*'urf*) that is permissible in Islam as long as it does not contradict core religious principles. All TA respondents clearly distinguished *Uang Panai* from *mahar*, emphasizing that only *mahar* constitutes a religious obligation affecting the validity of marriage. TA-1 and TA-2 warned against excessive demands that could hinder marriage and create social hardship, while TA-3 stressed the need for proportionality and justice. Collectively, religious leaders positioned Islam as a moderating force that seeks to balance cultural continuity with ethical considerations of fairness and ease in marriage

C. Millennials (GM-1, GM-2, GM-3)

Millennial respondents expressed ambivalent attitudes toward *Uang Panai*. While recognizing its symbolic value as a marker of Bugis identity, they reported significant economic and psychological pressures associated with its contemporary practice. GM-1 and GM-3 highlighted delayed marriages due to financial constraints, whereas GM-2 underscored the emotional strain experienced by both men and women. All GM respondents advocated for contextualized and negotiable determinations of *Uang Panai*, emphasizing dialogue, empathy, and economic realism to preserve the tradition's symbolic meaning without transforming it into a financial burden

D. Brides (MW-1, MW-2, MW-3)

Bride respondents generally viewed *Uang Panai* as a meaningful cultural symbol reflecting respect toward women and their families. However, they consistently rejected the notion that marital success or family honor should be measured by its monetary value. MW-1 and MW-3 emphasized that responsibility and character outweigh material indicators, while MW-2 cautioned against excessive nominal demands that could undermine the sanctity of marriage. All MW respondents supported adjusting *Uang Panai* according to economic conditions and expressed expectations for a more humane and flexible application of the tradition

E. Grooms (MP-1, MP-2, MP-3)

Grooms respondents acknowledged *Uang Panai* as an important symbol of commitment and cultural respect but reported experiencing substantial financial and social pressure. MP-1 highlighted psychological stress linked to social comparison, while MP-2 and MP-3 pointed to the risk of reducing male worth to economic capability alone. Despite these challenges, all MP respondents affirmed the continued relevance of *Uang Panai* when practiced with proportionality, negotiation, and sensitivity to contemporary socio-economic realities

F. Groom's Family (KP-1, KP-2, KP-3)

Family representatives from the groom's side emphasized their mediating role in negotiating *Uang Panai*. KP-1 and KP-3 described active involvement in ensuring that cultural expectations do not overburden younger generations, while KP-2 stressed emotional concerns as a parent. All KP respondents supported preserving *Uang Panai* as a cultural identity marker but called for adaptive implementation grounded in mutual understanding, fairness, and collective well-being rather than social prestige