

**Research Article**

# The Symbolism and Role of Menhir Stones in the Tradition of Ancestral Reverence in Kalimbuang Bori Toraja

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore the symbolic meaning and analyze the role of menhirs in the ancestral veneration traditions of the Kalimbuang Bori community, North Toraja. The research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, documentation, and literature study as data collection techniques. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data and identify cultural and spiritual meanings related to the presence of menhirs. The findings reveal that menhirs symbolize social status, represented by their size and the number of buffaloes sacrificed during their erection. The taller the menhir, the higher the social position of the family. Beyond their social role, menhirs also function as spiritual mediators connecting the living with their ancestors, symbols of continuity, and means of reinforcing social solidarity through collective participation in ritual practices. Moreover, menhirs serve as cultural identity markers that are transmitted across generations, highlighting Kalimbuang Bori not only as a heritage site but also as a living symbol of Toraja's cultural and spiritual values.

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## 1. Introduction

North Toraja is one of the regions in Indonesia that continues to sustain a megalithic tradition as an integral component of its social and spiritual life. This tradition does not merely survive as a material residue of the past; rather, it remains an active cultural apparatus through which intergenerational relationships, social organization, and religious expression are produced and maintained. Megalithic expressions in Toraja are evident in menhirs (simbuang), stone graves (including liang and patane), and the broader settlement landscape and vernacular architecture of the Tongkonan, all of which are imbued with symbolic significance. These forms articulate sacred values and collective identity, demonstrating how material culture functions as a cultural language that connects communities to ancestors and to the social order through which ancestral relationships are recognized and legitimized (Abialtar et al., 2023; Scarlett, 2022).

From the perspective of cultural geography, Toraja megalithic traditions are particularly compelling because they develop and persist within a distinctive mountainous environment. Hilly topography, spatial constraints and opportunities, and the availability of local stone resources constitute an ecological–spatial context that shapes material choices, construction techniques, and the placement of megalithic features. Previous studies indicate that menhirs are frequently positioned in places of high social and spiritual salience, such as ceremonial grounds and mortuary areas, while stone graves commonly draw upon natural rock formations or are created through the carving of large stone masses. Likewise, vernacular architecture reflects adaptation in materials and design to local environmental conditions (Amirullah et al., 2024; Garisi et al., 2024; Amir et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding Toraja megalithic traditions requires an integrated reading that links symbolic–ritual dimensions with the physical environmental conditions that enable these practices to endure over time.

One of the most prominent sites within the Toraja megalithic landscape is Kalimbuang Bori in the Sesean area, widely recognized for its menhirs (simbuang) as central elements within mortuary rites and ancestral veneration. At this site, the menhir is not simply an object; it operates as a marker of

social memory and cultural identity, while simultaneously representing social stratification as expressed and reaffirmed through ritual performance (Aal, 2017; Amirullah et al., 2024). Within the framework of Aluk Todolo belief, the menhir can be understood as a symbolic medium that bridges the profane and the transcendent, serving as a material conduit for expressing respect toward ancestors and for reaffirming spiritual values transmitted across generations (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Ahmed et al., 2021). Although North Toraja has experienced socio-religious transformations, scholarship suggests that key elements of traditional and spiritual values remain embedded in everyday life, indicating cultural resilience and ongoing processes of negotiating and reproducing meaning (Akbar, 2017; Amirullah et al., 2024).

At the same time, the relationship between culture and the physical environment cannot be reduced to a single, deterministic causal logic. Classical debates on environmental determinism have evolved toward more balanced perspectives in which the environment is understood as a set of enabling and constraining conditions, while human communities retain cultural agency in selecting, interpreting, and institutionalizing practices (Setiawan, 2024). In this regard, Kalimbuang Bori offers a productive analytical site for explaining why the menhir persists as a living cultural practice: not solely as inherited tradition, but as a phenomenon intertwined with social structure, belief systems, and the local spatial–environmental configuration. This perspective aligns with cultural ecology approaches that emphasize reciprocal human–environment interactions mediated through material practices, social institutions, and symbolic systems (Frenkel, 2013).

This study positions the menhir (simbuang) at Kalimbuang Bori as a point of convergence between symbolic meaning, social function, and the physical environmental context of Sesean. Two principal research questions are advanced: first, how the symbolic meanings of the menhir represent ancestral veneration and social status within the Kalimbuang Bori community, and how the menhir contributes to the maintenance of associated cultural and spiritual values; and second, how the physical environmental characteristics of Sesean—particularly hilly topography, the availability and use of stone resources, and the spatial configuration of the site—support the selection, placement, and continued use of menhirs as a medium for ancestral veneration, including why menhirs remain the dominant material–ritual form. By focusing on these questions, the study aims to enrich understandings of the Toraja cultural landscape through a synthesis of symbolic–ritual analysis and cultural geographic approaches centered on human–environment relations.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Type of Research

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive–analytical design. A qualitative approach is selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of the meanings, beliefs, and socio-cultural practices associated with the use of menhirs (simbuang) in ancestral veneration traditions. The descriptive–analytical design is used to provide a detailed portrayal of the phenomenon while simultaneously interpreting the interrelationships among spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions within the local context of Kalimbuang Bori, North Toraja (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this strategy, field data are not merely described but are also analyzed to identify patterns of meaning and their implications for the continuity of tradition and the social dynamics of the community (Miles et al., 2020).

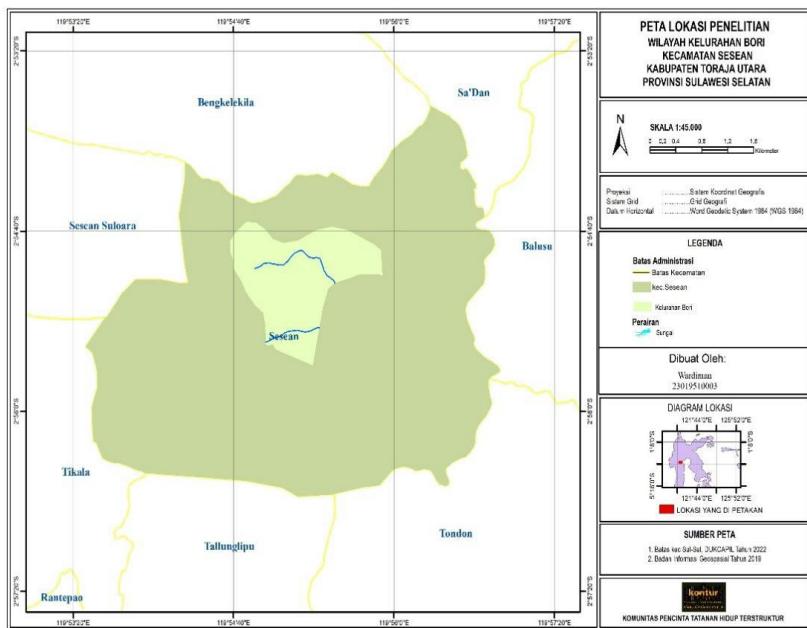
### 2.2 Variables and Operational Definitions

This study is structured around three principal analytic variables—spiritual, cultural, and social—each operationalized through empirical indicators to allow systematic investigation. The spiritual variable refers to the religious values, functions, and beliefs attached to menhirs within ritual practices and local belief systems; its indicators include the role of menhirs in ritual sequences and community beliefs regarding the menhir's spiritual power, explored primarily through interviews with customary leaders and ritual actors. The cultural variable is defined as traditions and cultural values reflected in the use and preservation of menhirs; its indicators include the purposes for erecting menhirs and the types of rituals in which menhirs are used, documented through field observation and documentation. The social variable concerns the role of menhirs within the community's social structure, particularly as markers of social status; its indicators include material cues (e.g., size and

physical characteristics of menhirs) and the social narratives that accompany them, gathered through targeted brief surveys and interviews.

### 2.3 Research Site and Timeframe

The study is conducted at the Kalimbuang Bori site in North Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia (Figure 1). This site is selected due to the prominent presence of menhirs (simbuang) as key elements in ancestral veneration practices and as an important component of the local megalithic cultural landscape. Fieldwork commenced in May 2025, with the duration adjusted to ensure adequate data collection through interviews, observation, and documentation in accordance with local community activities and site dynamics.



**Figure 1.** Research Location Map

### 2.4 Research Informants

Primary data are obtained through in-depth interviews with informants who possess relevant knowledge of and direct involvement in ancestral veneration traditions and site management. The interviews aim to elicit information regarding the symbolic meanings of menhirs, their role in sustaining cultural and spiritual values, and any changes occurring in the practice of these traditions (Suri, 2021; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Informants are classified into two categories. Key informants consist of customary leaders, given their extensive understanding of ritual procedures and the symbolic interpretations attached to menhirs. Supporting informants include the managers of the Kalimbuang Bori site—who oversee preservation efforts and hold administrative knowledge and historical information concerning site use—as well as local residents who engage with the site in everyday contexts and during ritual occasions.

### 2.5 Research Instruments

The principal research instrument is a semi-structured interview guide. The guide contains core questions and thematic prompts that must be explored, while allowing flexibility for the researcher to develop follow-up probes based on participants' responses. The use of semi-structured interviews ensures that data collection remains aligned with the study objectives while remaining sufficiently open to capture variation in experience, reasoning, and contextual detail that is critical in cultural and religious studies.

## 2.6 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection employs four complementary techniques. First, participant observation is used to record spatial conditions, activities, and social interactions associated with the menhirs and the site. Second, in-depth interviews are conducted to gather narratives, local knowledge, and symbolic interpretations from customary leaders, site managers, and community members. Third, documentation is undertaken through systematic note-taking and visual recording (e.g., photographs and artifact-related notes) of menhir forms, site layout, and supporting evidence. Fourth, a literature review is conducted to strengthen the conceptual foundation, enrich historical and cultural context, and situate field findings within relevant scholarly debates.

## 2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data are analyzed using thematic analysis conducted in a systematic sequence. The first stage involves transcription, converting interview recordings and field notes into text to ensure orderly documentation and facilitate close examination. The second stage entails repeated, comprehensive reading of the data to understand context, narrative flow, and central ideas. The third stage is coding, in which labels are assigned to relevant data segments (sentences, phrases, or key statements) to represent particular ideas. In the fourth stage, codes are clustered into preliminary themes that capture recurring patterns of meaning. The fifth stage involves reviewing and refining these preliminary themes to ensure consistency with the data corpus and alignment with the research focus. In the sixth stage, final themes are clearly named and defined in a concise yet precise manner. The final stage synthesizes the findings by organizing and presenting results according to the established themes, producing a coherent scholarly narrative on the spiritual, cultural, and social roles of menhirs in the Kalimbuang Bori community (Miles et al., 2020).

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Results

#### 3.1.1 The Meaning of Menhirs in the Ancestral Veneration Tradition of the Kalimbuang Bori Community, North Toraja

Field findings indicate that menhirs (simbuang) at Kalimbuang Bori are primarily understood as markers of mortuary rites and as durable signs of social memory for descendants. The customary leader, Mr. Samuel Padda, explained that a menhir is erected so that future generations can recognize that a member of their family once underwent a formal ritual at that location. Menhir erection is not performed arbitrarily; it is conducted only in conjunction with death and is governed by strict customary provisions. One principal rule concerns entitlement: only certain families—particularly those with recognized tongkonan affiliations in the area—are considered legitimately authorized to erect a menhir. In this sense, the menhir not only signifies the ritual event but also reflects the social boundaries and legitimacy embedded within customary social organization.

Informants further emphasized the requirement of buffalo sacrifice as a prerequisite for erection. For smaller menhirs (approximately 1–4 meters), at least seven buffalo must be sacrificed; for larger menhirs (approximately 5–9 meters), the number may reach twenty-five buffalo or more. This rule illustrates that the menhir's size is not a purely physical attribute but an index of social position and economic capacity. The higher the menhir, the higher the family's social standing, which informants associated with noble rank, commonly referred to as Tana' Bulaan. This interpretation was corroborated by the site manager (Mr. Muas) and local residents (Mr. Erik), both of whom reiterated the strong correlation between menhir height and elevated social status. Mr. Asdar added that menhirs are erected for deceased individuals who are "able to be ritually honored," and he recalled a minimum sacrificial requirement of five buffalo, reinforcing the general pattern that menhir erection functions as a mortuary marker while demanding substantial material resources. Overall, the meaning of menhirs at Kalimbuang Bori converges on three interrelated dimensions: (1) markers of ancestors and mortuary ceremonies, (2) symbols of social status, and (3) expressions of adherence to customary rules, particularly those related to tongkonan entitlement and the mandated scale of buffalo sacrifice.

### 3.1.2. The Role of Menhirs in Sustaining Cultural and Spiritual Values in the Kalimbuang Bori Community, North Toraja

Beyond their meanings as markers and status symbols, menhirs also play a significant role in sustaining spiritual values, cultural continuity, and social cohesion. The customary leader (Mr. Samuel Padda) described the menhir as a “connector” to ancestral spirits; as long as the stone stands, the spiritual relationship with the ancestors is believed to remain intact. Accounts of post-ritual experiences—such as feelings of calmness, happiness, and inner assurance—suggest that menhirs are perceived not merely as symbolic representations but as mediating instruments in lived religious experience. Socially, informants highlighted that, historically, the processes of hauling and erecting the menhir were conducted collectively by many participants (family, neighbors, and the wider community). Thus, the menhir does not only affirm a vertical relationship with ancestors but also reinforces horizontal relations through communal cooperation and shared ritual labor.

The site manager (Mr. Muas) characterized the menhir as pa’rapuan to dolo (ancestral heritage) that safeguards Toraja identity. In his account, the menhir serves as material evidence that a family has performed the rambu solo’ mortuary ritual for their ancestors, functioning as a culturally legible archive that can be “read” across generations. At the same time, he noted the contemporary positioning of menhirs as a cultural attraction for visitors, while emphasizing that public recognition should not strip the menhir of its sacred significance; it should not be reduced to mere spectacle. This view aligns with Mr. Erik’s statement that the menhir symbolizes that ancestors have been properly honored (dipa’rapuan to dolo) and functions as a bridge to the ancestors (to dolo). Mr. Asdar further strengthened the social–collective dimension by describing the menhir as a heritage that “binds” present generations to their predecessors, particularly because its erection involves collective labor from stone selection and retrieval to final installation.

Accordingly, the role of menhirs in sustaining the cultural and spiritual values of the Kalimbuang Bori community can be synthesized into three intertwined domains. First, the spiritual role: menhirs function as a medium of veneration and connection to ancestors, supporting emotional and spiritual reassurance after ritual performance. Second, the cultural role: menhirs operate as ancestral heritage that safeguards Toraja identity and provides material testimony of customary rites (rambu solo’), ensuring intergenerational transmission of cultural values even as the tradition becomes more visible to outsiders. Third, the social–collective role: the practice of erecting menhirs fosters cooperation, strengthens community solidarity, and reinforces social ties among families, neighbors, and the broader community within a shared cultural landscape.

## 3.2 Discussion

### 3.2.1 The Symbolic Meaning of Menhirs in Representing Social Status in the Kalimbuang Bori Community, North Toraja

The erection of simbuang stones at Kalimbuang Bori signifies that an individual has been buried within the rante (ritual/mortuary ground). These simbuang stones vary in size in accordance with the lineage associated with the rante. According to Pasalli Aguesto Gidion (2025), the size and height of the stone are determined by the family’s economic capacity; when resources are insufficient, families may erect a smaller stone placed beside an ancestral menhir. In this sense, the menhir carries a profound symbolic meaning as a representation of social status rather than merely constituting a megalithic remnant. Menhir height functions as an indicator of a family’s position within the customary hierarchy. Menhirs measuring approximately 1–4 meters are typically erected by Tana’ Bassi (middle-ranked nobility), whereas menhirs measuring 5–9 meters are associated with Tana’ Bulaan (high-ranked nobility) who possess greater customary authority. These size distinctions serve as visible social markers recognized by the community and transmitted across generations.

Beyond height, customary regulations also prescribe the number of buffalo to be sacrificed during the erection ritual. Menhirs of 1–4 meters require a minimum of seven buffalo, while those of 5–9 meters require twenty-five or more. This requirement demonstrates that only economically advantaged families can undertake the construction of large menhirs. The presence of menhirs thus differentiates noble families from ordinary community members and publicly displays social status in a manner that is inherited by descendants. Mortuary ceremonies function not only as occasions to commemorate ancestors but also as arenas for reaffirming kinship values and social ranking. The more elaborate the funeral ritual, the higher the perceived social status of the deceased in the eyes of the community (Pasalli Aguesto Gidion, 2025).

### 3.2.2 The Role of Menhirs in Sustaining Cultural and Spiritual Values in the Kalimbuang Bori Community, North Toraja

The tradition of erecting menhirs at Kalimbuang Bori represents a megalithic cultural heritage that continues to be actively maintained. Menhirs symbolize the relationship among humans, ancestors, and the wider community, reflecting Torajan customary practice as a value system that structures social life, spiritual orientation, and cultural identity. Based on informant interviews, menhirs perform intertwined cultural, spiritual, and social roles within community life.

The practice of mangriu' batu (hauling the stone) embodies the close relationship between humans and the natural environment. Stone is regarded as an enduring element representing permanence and the continuity of the spirit after death. Stone is selected not only for its durability but also because it is believed to function as a medium connecting the human world and the spirit world (Pongpabia & Mangera, 2023). Menhirs are understood to sustain relationships with the ancestors (to dolo); as long as the menhir remains standing, the spiritual bond is believed to be preserved. Following the erection ritual, families commonly report feelings of calmness and reassurance that the ancestors continue to accompany them, positioning the menhir as an instrument that reinforces customary teachings and traditional belief.

Pasalli Aguesto Gidion (2025) further notes that simbuang stones were historically hauled collectively from the extraction site to the rante, a process that could take up to two days due to the stones' size. Both the hauling and erection phases were conducted through collective labor involving the broader community, kin groups, and neighbors. This practice strengthens social solidarity and demonstrates the centrality of communal cooperation in Torajan ritual life. The value of gotong royong (mutual assistance) is continuously transmitted and remains socially relevant in contemporary community practice.

## 3. Conclusion

The menhir (*simbuang*) at Kalimbuang Bori carries profound symbolic meanings as a marker of social status as well as of the cultural and spiritual life of the Torajan community. The menhir's size and height serve as key indicators of a family's position within the customary social structure, while also reflecting economic capacity through the number of buffalo sacrificed during the erection ceremony. The larger the menhir erected, the higher the family's standing; consequently, the menhir functions as a visual symbol that is not only understood by local society but is also inherited as a status marker for subsequent generations.

From cultural and spiritual perspectives, the menhir is regarded as a sacred medium that connects humans with their ancestors and the surrounding natural environment. The erection process, which involves broad community participation, demonstrates the strength of togetherness, mutual cooperation (gotong royong), and social solidarity in Torajan society. In addition to sustaining spiritual relationships with ancestors, the continued presence of menhirs reinforces a distinctive cultural identity that characterizes the Torajan people. Through this tradition, customary values are transmitted to younger generations and remain resilient amid social change and the challenges of modernization.

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