

Research article

Batu Qulhu—The stone of death: Harmonizing traditional funerals in the Mandailing community of North Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

Death and funeral rituals hold significant cultural and spiritual importance in traditional communities worldwide, including within the Islamic faith. This study focuses on exploring the unique funeral ritual known as *Batu Qulhu* in the Muslim Mandailing community. Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilizes field observations and interviews with ulama and imams who have practical knowledge and understanding of this traditional ritual. The study reveals two origin stories of *Batu Qulhu*: one attributed to the first Imam in the Mandailing community and the other associated with parents, ulama, and village *malims* (religious teachers) without specifying an individual source. *Batu Qulhu* refers to the white river stones utilized by the congregation during the ritual to count the number of prayers offered. The procession of this tradition follows a strict protocol, encompassing prayers, recitation of the Quran, and seeking forgiveness for the deceased and their family. The efficacy of *Batu Qulhu* serves as a testament to the cultural values of spirituality, tradition, and the preservation of cultural identity. While *Batu Qulhu* remembrance is specific to the Mandailing community, similar cultural practices can be observed in other regions, highlighting the universal human need to honor and remember the deceased, find solace in collective rituals, and uphold cultural traditions as an integral part of identity and social cohesion.

1. Introduction

As a traditional aspect of culture, funeral practices serve as an initial stride towards fostering harmonious relations within multi-ethnic communities [1]. The manner in which individuals navigate the concept of death holds significance as it encompasses their cultural engagement and utilization, similar to how religion, an integral component of culture, provides a framework for comprehending, interpreting, and making sense of death, albeit without necessarily diminishing its inherent challenges for those experiencing

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grief [2]. Throughout various cultures, the commemoration of the deceased and the support offered to grieving families manifest through a multitude of ritualistic practices [3]. These rituals hold particular significance within religious frameworks as they are not only guided by religious doctrines but also serve as fundamental aspects of communal worship [4]. Within the Islamic tradition, the management of deceased bodies adheres to the teachings found in the Qur'an, specifically drawing attention to Surah Al Imran (QS 3:185). This verse underscores the universal nature of mortality, asserting that every individual is bound to experience death [5]. In his groundbreaking 1907 study, Robert Hertz skillfully intertwined three essential imperatives - moral, aesthetic, and sociological - to present a captivating conceptualization of death [6]. His intricate analysis portrays death as a profound transformative journey that transcends the boundaries of both the spiritual and physical realms.

In Indonesia, funeral rituals have been intricately intertwined with local cultural practices and ethnic traditions. Various communities, such as the Tana Toraja people [7], the traditional Javanese community [8,9], and the Balinese who perform the *ngaben* ceremony [10,11], express their funeral customs based on their specific cultural heritage. These burial practices and procedures provide profound insights into the community and society in which they are performed. In these traditions, feasts, animal sacrifices, and supplications are often conducted to honor the deceased and their family. Additionally, Islamic values and rituals significantly influence funeral practices across many regions in Indonesia. The practice of *tahlil* or *tahlilan*, which involves collective remembrance gatherings, is commonly observed [12], and the *azan* (call to prayer) is often performed during burial ceremonies [4]. Moreover, in certain regions of Sumatra, Islamic funeral practices have assimilated with local traditions. For example, the people of Minangkabau in Nagari Salayo incorporate the custom of placing attributes on the head of the deceased during the funeral procession [13]. While in Nagari Anduring, the Minang community also practices *bakayaik*, which takes place 100 days after someone's passing. *Bakayaik* vividly recounts the profound narrative of Prophet Muhammad pbuh,¹ beginning with his miraculous birth and chronicling his relentless efforts to uphold the principles of Islam. This ceremonial tradition blends the eloquence of Arabic and Minang languages, creating a captivating linguistic tapestry that enhances the overall richness of the performance. In Aceh, the *reuhab* tradition involves decorating the deceased person's bedroom for 40 days [14]. These practices exemplify the dynamic interplay between Islamic influences and local cultural expressions in funeral rituals across Indonesia.

Throughout history, archaeological evidence of ancient burials reveals a persistent pattern: human societies, since their inception, have convened to form social bonds and articulate emotions and intentions in response to the phenomenon of death [15]. This ritual also promotes social cohesion in many communities practiced in various belief systems [16–18]. Despite this, there is no clear description on concept of social cohesion [19], for the purpose of this study, social cohesion is defined by the interconnectedness of social networks and the customs, bonds, and values that uphold their unity [20]. The idea of social cohesion traces back to Emile Durkheim's theory. He proposed the notion of mechanical solidarity in society, suggesting its presence through the strength of influential individuals [21]. Hence, social cohesion emerges from socio-spatial factors that influence individuals within specific locations, representing a reflection of the classification of spaces [22,23]. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct thorough research into the rituals and traditions of specific communities within their local contexts to better understand and extract the factors contributing to social cohesion. This approach allows for a more nuanced analysis, considering the unique cultural and social dynamics that shape cohesion within distinct groups. Further, the traditional ceremony holds facilitates religious and spiritual practices as well as strengthening social bond and sense of identity [24].

This study aims to investigate the origin of *Batu Qulhu* rituals, exploring its contemporary practices and norms based on the social cohesion and identity in the Mandailing community of North Sumatra. The funeral rituals in this community are deeply rooted in a rich tapestry of cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions. By exploring the *Batu Qulhu* remembrance ceremonies, this research seeks to shed light on the significance and intricacies of these rituals, offering valuable insights into the broader context of funeral traditions among Muslims in Sumatra. Regarding the goals, the current article addresses the following research question the research question, what is the historical background of *Batu Qulhu* in the Mandailing community? How do the practices surround *Batu Qulhu* manifest in present-day Mandailing Muslim society? What are the norms associated with *Batu Qulhu* within the Mandailing community based on social cohesion and identity?

1.1. Mandailing ethnic: historical context

The origin of the word "Mandailing" is linked to the Munda people of India, who experienced defeat in a war against the Aryan people. The term "Mandailing" is derived from either "Mandala Holing" [25,26] or "Mundailing," referring to the refugees from Munda [27]. It is believed that the Munda people originally inhabited the northern regions of India before the arrival of the Aryans [28]. The historical interaction between the Aryans and the Munda people has been examined through linguistic evidence [29]. Due to pressure from the Aryans, the Munda people migrated southward within India [29–31], and this Aryan occupation of the Munda people occurred around 1500-1200 BCE [32]. Eventually, the displaced Munda people migrated to Southeast Asia [31], although the specific country of their migration is not specified. It is likely that some of them reached North Sumatra through the Barus Port in Central Tapanuli, which was an international port at that time. Referred to "Negarakertagama" book from 1365, which mentions the presence of the Mandailing as one of the most significant ethnic groups in the archipelago [25,33]. The names mentioned include Mandailing,

¹ Peace be upon him.

Pane, and Padang Lawas. The mention of these names indicates that the name Mandailing has been known by outsiders since ancient dates. In addition, Tuanku Rao² suggests that the Mandailing people trace their origin back to the Bugis Makassar, who sailed to the Singkuang Port (now known as Natal), it is more commonly accepted that the Mandailing people are part of the Batak ethnic group.

The Mandailing community's ethnic origin is a subject of contention among scholars. While some argue that they are part of the Batak Toba ethnic group [34,35], this perspective faces opposition from Mandailing intellectuals and historians. However, an analysis of factors such as skin color, language, clan structure, and genealogy support the assertion that the Mandailing community is indeed a component of the broader Batak ethnic group [36,37]. To establish their identity as the Mandailing community, they refer to themselves as "*halak kita*" (referred to: our people) of South Tapanuli [38], rather than as "*halak batak*" (Batak people) [39,40]. Regarding religious affiliation, the majority of the contemporary Mandailing population follows Islam, with a minority of Christians found in specific locations like Pakantan in Upper Mandailing, Medan, and other cities in North Sumatra [25,41]. Before embracing Islam, the religious beliefs of the Mandailing people focused around ancestral spirits referred to as "*si pele begu*" [33], incorporating influences from Hinduism and Buddhism [42]. Recent field research conducted in the Mandailing region revealed remnants and artefacts associated with both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, particularly in the vicinity of Panyabungan within the Greater Mandailing area [43].

Padri wars has brought Islam to Mandailing around 1821 and the Dutch military breached and defeated this movement by 1835 [36,41,44]. The term '*padri*' has two possible origins. One explanation suggests that it stems from the Indonesian word '*padri*,' which referred to priests. It is important to emphasize that the notable figures associated with the Padri movement can be likened to 'Islamic priests' [45]. This movement emerged in the early 1800s as a reformist Islamic movement led by local scholars known as ulama. These ulama sought to purify and reform Islam in the region, criticizing what they perceived as syncretic practices and deviations from strict Islamic teachings [26,41]. They aimed to establish a more orthodox and conservative interpretation of Islam in Mandailing. Padri movement gained support from various segments of the population, including the rural communities, who were attracted to their message of religious purity and social justice [46]. The Padris' growing influence and power threatened the traditional rulers, known as penghulu, who feared losing their authority and control [41,45].

Before then, in the classical era, marked by the introduction of Hinduism preceding Islam into South Tapanuli, is substantiated by the presence of the Bahal temple in Portibi (now Padang Lawas), a relic of the Panai kingdom during the 12th and 13th centuries. Schnitger [47] documented that around 1000 AD, the Panai kingdom stood as the foremost realm of its time. Nevertheless, around 11th century, the Panai kingdom succumbed to Rajendrakola from India, an adherent of the Hindu faith. Despite the presence of Hindus within the Mandailing Sultanate, the Mandailing populace did not embrace Islam. This decision was influenced by the religion's veneration of numerous idols. Through a traditional lens, there exists a fusion of religion and culture, exemplified by customs such as *upah-upah*³ (gift) during weddings, rites marking childbirth, and housewarming ceremonies. Additionally, observances spanning 7, 40, 100, and 1000 days following the demise of parents are upheld.

The Mandailing Sultanate fell under the dominion of the Aru kingdom circa 1295 AD, spanning the 13th to 15th centuries AD. Subsequent to this period, the Pulungan kingdom emerged, followed by the ascendancy of the Nasution clan, which assumed control over the Mandailing Godang region (now Panyabungan), and the Lubis clan, which governed Mandailing Julu (now Kotanopan).

1.2. Mandailing philosophy

The values of the Mandailing ethnic philosophy of life called *Poda Na Lima*. *Poda* means advice, *na* means which/that/is, and *lima* means five. In short, *Poda Na Lima* consists of five pieces of advice, namely: i) *Paia Rohamu* (keeping your heart clean); ii) *Paia Pamatangmu* (keeping your body clean); iii) *Paia Parabitoimu* (keeping your clothes clean); iv) *Paia Bagasmu* (keeping your house clean); and v) *Paia Pakaranganmu* (keeping your yard clean) [34,48]. These five values are still firmly held by the Mandailing community and the Mandailing ethnicity in Indonesia and around the world. Despite the Madina people's reputation for being religious, their daily social lives are intertwined with various cultural practices that are imbued with religious significance. These rituals, such as *marhaban* (*barzanzi*),⁴ the use of plain flour, and *upah-upah*, are performed on joyful occasions such as weddings, recoveries from illness, and the attainment of new positions, as well as during significant life transitions such as the birth of a child and moving into a new home [38].

The Mandailing ethnic community has a value system, *Daliha Na Tolu* which means a forum used to organize life in carrying out *olong* (affection) between *mora*, *kahanggi* and *anak boru* [34,35,49,50]. *Daliha Na Tolu*, also referred to 'three stones' [37], is a cultural value, created by the Creator that guide Batakese attitude and behavior in the social lives and cultural relation [51]. The three stones encompass family, community, and spirituality. In Mandailing community, *Daliha Na Tolu* principles are deeply intertwined with

² Tuanku Rao is characterized as enigmatic figure and one of the two significant leaders of the Padri movement, shared this status alongside Imam Bonjol himself. Tuanku Rao's origins can be traced to *Huta na Godang* or *Huta Godang*, also known as *Tano Godang*, located in Mandailing Julu (Upper Mandailing) [25].

³ *Upah-upah* refers to cultural practice or tradition of offering gifts or monetary compensation during significant events or ceremonies. The term "upah" itself can be translated as "wages" or "payment". *Upah-upah* is deeply rooted in the Mandailing culture and is often observed during various occasions such as weddings, funerals, or community gatherings.

⁴ The word *barzanzi* is associated with the name of Syekh Barzanji, a prominent scholar and Sufi poet from Kurdistan. His renowned work, titled "*Mawlid al-Barzanji*," is a poetic composition that narrates the birth and life of the Prophet Muhammad, often recited during religious gatherings and celebrations.

Islamic values and teachings. Mandailing Muslim communities incorporate these cultural principles into their daily lives, alongside their Islamic beliefs and practices [51,52]. This concept reinforces the importance of maintaining strong moral character, fostering harmonious relationships, and upholding social justice within the community [34,35,51].

2. Location settings

The Mandailing Natal region, often abbreviated as Madina, is situated in North Sumatra Province, spanning approximately between 0°10' and 1°50' N and 98°10' and 100°10' E. This region is located on the west coast of Sumatra, has a 170 km coastline, and is home to 24 islands, though only 4 of these islands are inhabited. In 2021, Madina has a population of over 478,000 people, and has a total area of 6134 km² [53]. Based on BPS-Statistics of Mandailing Natal Regency [53], during 2021, the predominant land use in this region comprises a mixed vegetation area, accounting for 39.15 % or 252.57 ha, while forested areas occupy 30.04 % of the region, followed by palm oil plantations at 27.79 %. Settlements in Madina cover 451.38 ha (0.7 %), while agriculture utilizes 2.17 % of the land. Additionally, water bodies such as lakes and dams encompass 0.14 % of the region's total area. This region is crossed by three river systems including Batang Pungkut, Batang Gadis, and Aek Pohan that represent upper, middle and lower part of the Batang Gadis watershed [54]. These rivers are beneficial for major population in Madina including for agriculture, plantation and industrial sectors. However, for years the rivers have also become threatened to illegal mining activities including sands, rocks and gold [55,56].

The majority of the population in Madina, around 95 %, is Muslim, while the remaining 5 % consists of Christians (including Catholics), Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of Confucianism. Madina has more than 800 mosques and 70 churches [57], to support the religious practices of its inhabitants, and the region is made up of 23 districts and over 370 villages. Muslim community in Madina, consisting of various ethnic groups, exhibits a rich diversity of cultural and religious practices. Mosques and Islamic schools, known as *madrrasah*, hold a prominent position in shaping the religious and cultural life of the community. Furthermore, active participation in significant cultural and religious traditions, such as the celebration of two major Islamic holidays like *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*, is observed among the Muslim population. A strong emphasis on social responsibility and assisting those in need, in alignment with Islamic principles, is evident through the engagement of the Muslim community in charitable and community service activities. The local government plays a supportive role by implementing policies and providing necessary infrastructure to promote Islamic education [58].

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the research

This study adopts qualitative research design, employing combination of phenomenological and ethnographic approaches. Both methodologies are characterized by their exploratory nature, utilizing the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection [59]. By intertwining the principles of phenomenological analysis and ethnography, this current study approach emphasizes a comprehensive exploration of human experiences within their natural settings. While phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of lived experiences, ethnography complements this by elucidating the cultural and social intricacies that contextualize these experiences within specific communities or groups. Additionally, they both underscore the importance of adopting a self-conscious approach to research, wherein researchers are attentive to their own perspectives, biases, and influences throughout the research process. It is worth to be noticed that the primary aim of qualitative research is to comprehend the distinctive characteristics and experiences of individual cases, rather than attempting to establish generalized patterns or trends [60]. This method emphasizes the comprehensive exploration of human behaviors and experiences as they unfold within natural settings [61,62]. Integral to this research is the integration of the subjects' knowledge with that of the researchers, which holds significant importance. This integration facilitates the recognition and documentation of outcomes from the local perspective inherent to the subjects themselves [7,63]. The current study employs an emic approach, which entails adopting the insider's perspective from within the culture where the research project is situated, as previously described in studies by Refs. [7,45,64–66]. By embracing an emic approach, the research acknowledges the critical importance of comprehending and interpreting the cultural context and subjective experiences of the subjects, thereby enriching both the research process and its findings.

Table 1

Pseudonym of subjects' information in the current study.

Informants	Initial	Age	Education Level	Occupation
1	P1	65	Bachelor degree	Teacher
2	P2	52	Bachelor degree	Teacher
3	P3	73	Bachelor degree	Ulama and local public figure
4	P4	65	Master degree	Public servant
5	P5	50	Master degree	Public servant
6	P6	45	Master degree	Teacher
7	P7	60	Senior high school and <i>pesantren</i>	Businessman
8	P8	55	Senior high school and <i>pesantren</i>	Teacher

3.2. Fieldwork and subjects

The research employed an observational and interview-based approach to collect data. The researchers assumed the roles of both observers and interviewers. The observation phase focused on the *Batu Qulhu* remembrance practice in the study area, the activities of the Imam during the ritual, and the placement of stones in the graveyard after the final day of remembrance. For the interviews, a systematic process was followed to select appropriate sources. Initial contact with the informants was established through various means, such as phone calls, emails, and WhatsApp messages, to effectively arrange and conduct the interviews.

In prior ethnographic studies, a limited number of subjects were involved. For instance, two studies centered on the practices of anesthesia within two British hospital [67]. Similarly, Baan et al. [7] conducted research on funeral rituals in Toraja with only two informants, while Lee et al. [68] examined the experience of depression among Chinese individuals with a sample size of five informants. In accordance with the present study, data collection encompassed interviews with a total of eight carefully selected subjects, as detailed in Table 1. The age range of the informants in this study was 45–73 years old.

The selection process for these subjects adhered to specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Firstly, the informants were required to hold the roles of imams or leaders of the *Batu Qulhu* dhikr (or remembrance) during funeral ceremonies within the Mandailing community. Secondly, they were expected to possess a profound understanding of the norms and values associated with *Batu Qulhu*. Lastly, the informants needed to be Ulama or respected Islamic spiritual leaders within the local community. Proficiency in the Mandailing language was also a prerequisite for informant selection. To identify suitable subjects, consultations were conducted with local authorities, such as the Indonesian Council of Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*) in Madina, as well as prominent local figures.

The current investigation involved the collection of data during a comprehensive six-month fieldwork period in 2022, specifically spanning from February to July. This fieldwork, which was coordinated by the first and second author, extended over a total of 90 days. The study targeted five specifically chosen districts, selected from a larger pool of 23 districts in the designated study area (refer to Fig. 1). The primary objective of the research was to obtain valuable insights into the cultural practices related to the *Batu Qulhu* ritual within the Mandailing community in the Madina region. The *Batu Qulhu* event occurring in July 2022 was meticulously observed and documented, employing a combination of photographs and videos for recording. Regarding the data collection process, individual interviews were conducted with each informant, with each session spanning approximately 2 h. These interviews took place at mutually agreed locations, such as the informant's residence, school office, or the household of the deceased individual where the *Batu Qulhu* ritual took place. Thorough and rigorous recording of all pertinent information was undertaken for subsequent analysis purposes.

3.3. Data analysis

The present study utilized a qualitative data analysis approach, encompassing three key stages: 1) data reduction; 2) data presentation; and 3) drawing conclusions. This analytical process unfolded iteratively throughout the research. Initially, during the early phases of data collection, the research maintained a broad and overarching focus, and the observations were comprehensive in nature. As the research progressed and the focus of the study became more apparent, the observations evolved to adopt a more structured approach, enabling the acquisition of specific and targeted data.

The data analysis commenced with data reduction, where the gathered information was streamlined and organized to facilitate a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Subsequently, the data were presented in a coherent and meaningful manner to facilitate effective interpretation. Finally, the study derived conclusions based on the analyzed data, allowing for the generation of valuable insights into the cultural practices surrounding the *Batu Qulhu* ritual within the Mandailing community in Madina. Throughout the research, this qualitative data analysis process occurred in a cyclical manner, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research topic and a nuanced understanding of the intricacies involved. By transitioning from broad and general observations to more structured and specific data collection, the study achieved a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the *Batu Qulhu* ritual's cultural significance and its relevance within the Mandailing community.

3.4. Ethical consideration

The present investigation was conducted under the auspices of Cluster Interdisciplinary Basic Research, adhering meticulously to stringent ethical guidelines. To ensure ethical compliance, the study received official approval from the Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian Masyarakat (LPPM) University of North Sumatera (UINSU) with the approval number: 0616615683, valid from 1-February-2022, to 31-October-2022. The utmost care was taken in handling the research data and records, which were securely stored on a password-protected computer housed within the Department of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Study Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Islamic Communication, UINSU. Access to these records was strictly restricted to the authors.

In adherence to established ethical standards for data collection and publication, prior to their inclusion in the research, explicit informed consent was acquired from all eight subjects involved, thereby safeguarding their voluntary and informed engagement in the study. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, a coding system was employed, wherein each subject was allocated an initial "P" followed by pertinent demographic particulars, such as age and current profession. Moreover, all photographic materials featured in this investigation were obtained with written consent from all participants in the native *Bahasa* (Indonesian language), thereby emphasizing the paramount importance of respecting their autonomy and privacy throughout the research process. All participants provided written consent to participate, for the data to be published and for inclusion of photographs. All guests at the ritual provided written consent. Permission was sought from the family representative, who was briefed on the study's objectives, note-

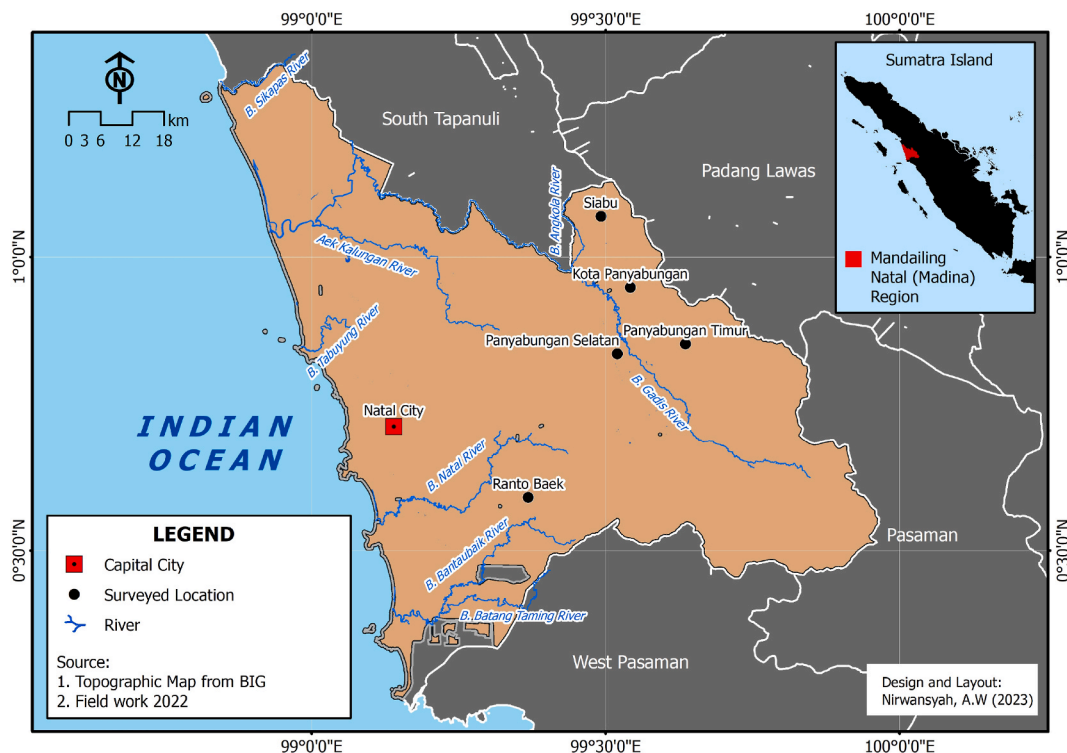


Fig. 1. Area of the current research.

taking, and photography. This unwavering commitment to ethical principles serves to underscore the rigor and integrity of the present inquiry, facilitating an ethically sound exploration of the cultural practices pertaining to the *Batu Qulhu* ritual within the Mandailing community in Madina.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Origin of the rituals

Based on the interview, it is mentioned that Syekh Haji Mustafa Husein bin Husein Nasution bin Umar Nasution Al-Mandaili (or known as Syekh Mustafa Husein) (1886–1955), is credited as the first Imam to introduce the practice of *Batu Qulhu* remembrance at funeral ceremonies. In the beginning, was named by *Batu Balancing* based on the color of the stone used in this ritual. This insight was derived from interviews conducted with P1 (65), an ulama, and P2 (52), a teacher at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN) 1 Panyabungan. In addition, Syekh Musthafa Husein is also founder of the *Pondok Pesantren Musthafawiyah Purba Baru* (PPMPB)⁵ or Purba Baru Islamic boarding school. The practice of *Batu Qulhu* remembrance has been preserved and perpetuated by his students, who have established recitation congregations in various locations such as mosques, prayer rooms, and *surau*.⁶ Notably, the students and alumni of Musthafawiyah have played a significant role in its development and expansion beyond Madina region, with a presence in several other provinces across Indonesia. As the oldest *pesantren* (or boarding school) in North Sumatra, the influence of this practice extends widely, facilitated by the widespread distribution of its students and graduates.

An alternative explanation, provided by P3 (73) an ulama, diverges slightly from the previous informant. He has pointed out that the tradition of using *Batu Qulhu* or *Batu Balancing*⁷ as a medium for remembrance was explained with a slight variation, focusing on the customs upheld by elderly parents, ulama, village *malims* (religious teachers), without mentioning any specific individual. It was a means to alleviate the sorrow experienced by the bereaved and served as a form of support from family, relatives, neighbors, and friends. In addition to the customary acts of attending funerals and observing mourning rituals, the strategies employed to alleviate the profound grief experienced by individuals extended further. These encompassed multifaceted practices such as providing emotional

⁵ *Pondok Pesantren Musthafawiyah Purba Baru* (PPMPB), was founded in 1912 by Syekh Musthafa Husein Nasution. This Islamic boarding school is located in Purba Baru sub-district, Madina Regency, North Sumatra [73]. Further reference on this boarding school can be read in Khairurrijal [74].

⁶ *Surau* means a place of worship or a small mosque-like structure. The *surau* typically serves as a communal prayer space or a modest mosque, wherein Muslims congregate for congregational prayers, religious discourses, and other religious engagements.

⁷ Some community in Madina also use term of *Batu Bontar* to refer *Batu Qulhu*.

support, proffering words of guidance and solace to foster resilience and acceptance in the face of adversity. Moreover, individuals were invited to partake in collective prayer sessions, where the use of *Batu Qulhu* stones served as facilitative elements in creating a conducive environment for these spiritual gatherings. P3 further elucidated that this method, referred to as *alak na jolo martakziah*, involved family members, parents, spouses, children, relatives, and neighbors coming together for *tahlilan*.

“In the past people paid tribute to the homes of people who died; parents, wife, husband, children, siblings and neighbors are tahlilan, starting from reciting istighfar, al-Fatihah, tahlil, prayers and concluding selawat. To make the dhikr in congregation more solemn, they add media by using a Batu Balancing (white stone) within size of an adult’s big toe or larger than that. In the past, the white stone was said to be a Batu Balancing, now it is better known as the Batu Qulhu”.

Batu Qulhu ritual refers to the use of certain stone as a means of carrying out dhikr worship. In general, this type of stone is typically known as white pebble. It should be noticed that most of these white pebbles are predominantly comprised of marble, a rock formation characterized by its crystallized carbonates and can easily be found in the riparian zone. Here, the family of the deceased person collect these stones from the nearest river. As mentioned in the interview, this ritual chooses approximately the size of an adult’s thumb to enhance the solemnity of the remembrance (as can be seen in Fig. 2a). During the interview P4 (65), emphasized that in the past, people paid homage to the homes of the deceased, engaging in *tahlilan* rituals that encompassed prayers and concluding with ‘selawat’ (see Fig. 2b). To augment the collective remembrance, *Batu Qulhu*, the size of an adult’s big toe or larger, was employed. Over time, the *Batu Balancing* came to be recognized as the *Batu Qulhu*.

The utilization of *Batu Qulhu* in death ceremonies is also underpinned by the geographical sequences. Firstly, the abundance of rivers in Madina, notably the Batang Gadis River, Batang Natal River, Aek Kalungan River and Angkola River, facilitated the easy availability of these stones in the past. Nowadays, these rivers also threatened by illegal gold mining activities [55], and tend to pollute due to its waste [56]. Secondly, these stones possess distinct characteristics that contribute to their suitability for the purpose at hand. They exhibit a white hue, imparting a visually soothing effect, while their cool and clean appearance further enhances their appeal. Third, these stones demonstrate resilience in withstanding the rigors of varying weather conditions, including heat, cold, and rainfall. Furthermore, the recitation of *Batu Qulhu* rituals is believed by the community to alleviate the suffering endured by the deceased in the grave.

4.2. The contemporary practice of *Batu Qulhu* in the Mandailing community

In the past, Islamic practices in Sumatra have exhibited influences from mystical and shamanistic traditions e.g., Refs. [69,70]. However, it is important to note that the religious activities associated with the remembrance of *Batu Qulhu* are not influenced by shamanism, but rather stem solely from religious traditions previously followed by religious scholars, religious teachers, and traditional leaders. Currently, the contemporary practice of *Batu Qulhu* remembrance has been inherited and embraced by Muslim society in Madina. Based on interview with P4 (65), it is evident that in the past, the observance of *Batu Qulhu* remembrance adhered to strict protocols as mentioned in the following statement.

“The tradition of recalling the Batu Qulhu was once a highly regulated practice. It required seeking consent from both the village leader and the syekh. Mastery of the 20 essential attributes of Allah was necessary, alongside the ability to read the Quran and comprehend its teachings. The stones themselves had to possess a pure white hue. The recitation of Qulhu would take place during evening gatherings, where all the stones present had to be utilized fully, leaving no remnants behind before the congregation dispersed”.

These procedures include the following: 1) the procession necessitated obtaining permission from the head of the village⁸ and *tuan guru*⁹ (or *kulifah*); 2) the ritual leader was required to commit to memory and comprehend the twenty obligatory attributes of God, encompassing *nafsiyah* (self-related attributes) nature, *salbiyah* (attributes related to existence) nature, *ma’ani* (abstract attributes of God) nature, and *maknawiyah* (the essential nature and prevalence of *ma’ani*) nature; 3) the officiating Imam was expected to possess proficiency in both written and spoken Arabic-Malay; 4) the Imam leading the remembrance was required to proficiently recite the Qur’an and comprehend its meaning; 5) the *Batu Qulhu* utilized in the ritual had to be of a white hue; and 6) the remembrance of *Batu Qulhu* transpired during evening hours, and all the stones had to be completed within a single procession conducted in the presence of the congregation. Preceding the initiation of the ritual, it is customary for the priest to cleanse himself through the observance of ablution, mirroring the ritualistic cleansing process associated with prayer as mentioned by P7 (60).

Basically, this ritual has many similarities to *tahlilan* tradition especially in the context prayers and recitations. This practice generally has been carried out by many Nahdatul Ulama (NU) community in Sumatra [12,71]. However, in *Batu Qulhu* remembrance, there are five Imams that lead this procession with different assignment. These Imams are voluntarily appointed by the group and relatively flexible based on their own agreement. The priests then read several prayers that beneficial to seek forgiveness for the deceased, his/her family as well to congregation. The Imams also recite some verses from the Surat of the Quran (QS), and praise the God. In this *Batu Qulhu* ritual, the congregation are voluntarily attending the ritual without any formal invitation. The ritual is held in

⁸ One crucial determinant is obtaining authorization from the village leader. The village head holds a position akin to that of a revered monarch, embodying nobility and commanding profound respect.

⁹ *Tuan guru* or teacher serves as a religious authority, serving as an exemplar and establishing a benchmark for societal norms through their words and actions. Additionally, they are often revered as sacred individuals known for their healing abilities, and they serve as a source of supplication for various needs such as well-being, sustenance, companionship, agricultural prosperity, and attainment of blessings.



Fig. 2. a) White pebble collected for *Batu Qulhu* ritual in Mandailing, where each bucket contains 70 to 100 stones; and b) the congregation of the Mandailing Muslim community during this obituary ceremony. (Photography by Sahrul on July 22, 2022).

three consecutive days after the death, and organized by group manager, neighbors and the Imams, and commonly referred to *Serikat Tolong Menolong* (STM) or Union of Help. The Imams and the congregation are artfully arranged in a circular formation, tailored to the venue's conditions. This arrangement allows for the placement of stones in front of the congregation, effortlessly within reach for the worshippers' right hand. During the fieldwork in Panyabungan Kota district, it was noticed that there were more than 30 piles of stones in the congregation. As additional information that commonly they are sitting on the floor covered with *tikar* or mat, but some people also held the ritual with chairs. The priests hold the responsibility for overseeing the course of the *Batu Qulhu* ritual. The following Table 2 describes each Imams' responsibility in *Batu Qulhu* procession.

As presented in Table 2 that the five Imams stone remembrance fulfill distinct roles during funeral rituals. The first Imam recites *wasilah*, invoking blessings upon the prophets, companions, scholars, and deceased parents. The second Imam performs *takhtim*, while the third recites *dhikr tahlil*. The fourth Imam recites selected verses from the Qur'an. The fifth priest concludes with a closing prayer and religious guidance, including expressions of gratitude to Allah SWT and salutations to Prophet Muhammad SAW, supplications for the forgiveness of the deceased's sins, and prayers for the widening of their grave. The sermon includes an oath regarding the deceased's parents, beseeching acceptance of their worship, forgiveness of sins, and enlargement of their grave. Additionally, the imam delivers a sermon during this ritual (text written in Mandailing and the translation can be read in Supplementary file).

The current study also reveals that *Batu Qulhu* ritual in Madina is held in three consecutive days where.

- In the day 1, the remembrance is taken where the Imam start the ceremony. In the first meeting, the priests wear neat clothes, wear caps, turbans and sarongs. Reflecting the figure of a religious expert and placing his position is a person who is highly respected in society. Their sitting position is arranged in a special place, different from the congregation in general. Here, the Imam will also read out the order of the *Batu Qulhu* procession.
- For day 2, similar to the preceding event, the order of events for the first night procession remains unchanged. Prior to commencing the remembrance ceremony, the 'Imam pembaca takhtim' provided an explanation that after the recitation of the *takhtim*, the congregation would engage in the *dhikr* of *Batu Qulhu*, and were kindly requested to maintain their positions until the conclusion of the event. However, in contrast to the previous occasion, on the second night of recitation, *Qulhu* stones are made available to facilitate the *dhikr* and are arranged in a stacked formation in front of the congregation. Subsequently, the *Qulhu* remembrance stones are accumulated in the same location. The prescribed procedure entails the recitation of QS 112: 1–3, followed by the selection of a single stone. For each subsequent repetition, an additional stone is selected, such that two stones are chosen for a two-time reading, three stones for a three-time reading, four stones for a four-time reading, and so forth, in accordance with established practice.
- In day 3, *Batu Qulhu* procession replicates the format observed on the second meeting. However, a notable distinction lies in the extended duration of the *dhikr*, necessitated by the requirement to recite the prayer over each stone in the presence of the congregation. It is imperative to sustain the continuity of the *dhikr* until its completion, without interruption. Subsequent to the remembrance, a collective prayer and *salawat* are gathered. The *Batu Qulhu* employed as aids for remembrance are carefully placed within plastic burlap bags or buckets (as can be seen in Fig. 3a). The event concludes with a religious sermon or *tausiyyah*, wherein expressions of gratitude are articulated on behalf of the congregation and the afflicted families. The content of the religious sermon encompasses themes such as death, the retribution of the grave, and serves as a reminder for individuals to perpetually prepare themselves and enhance their devotion before the arrival of death. This is because all living beings are destined to experience mortality (QS 3: 185), and its arrival cannot be postponed, even if one seeks refuge within a lofty and robust fortress (QS 4: 78).

In addition to the *Batu Qulhu* remembrance, on the fourth day following an individual's passing, *Batu Qulhu* stones are transported to the cemetery and carefully positioned above the burial site, as illustrated in Fig. 3b. The procedure involves the preparation of the grave bed, which includes the leveling off the ground in the designated area assigned for burial. Subsequently, these stones are poured in a manner that commences from the head of the deceased and extends towards their feet. Although typically performed by the

Table 2Construction of each Imam and their task in *Batu Qulhu* procession.

Imam	Local term	Assignment	Quran recitation
First Imam	<i>Imam pembaca silsilah</i>	– Reciting <i>istighfar</i> ^a three times; – Reciting <i>wasilah</i> to nabi (prophet Muhammad pbuh), his appostles, ulama and parents of the deceased person, all Muslim and the congregation	– QS 1: 1-6
Second Imam	<i>Imam pembaca takhtim</i>	– Reciting <i>takhtim</i> (known as “reading for the reward of the deceased” or “reciting for the benefit of the deceased)	– QS 112: 1-3 – QS 113: 1-5 – QS 114: 1-5 – QS 1: 1-7 – QS 2: 1–5; 255; 284-286 – QS 33: 56
Third Imam	<i>Imam pembaca tahlil</i>	– Reciting <i>tahlil</i> (compilation of dhikr) including: • <i>Istighfar</i> ; • Reciting ‘afdhahu dzikri’ followed by First <i>syahadat tauhid</i> ^b . The congregation then answer by ‘hayyun baqi’; • Reciting second <i>syahadat tauhid</i> . Then answered by the congregation with ‘hayyun maujud’; • Reciting the third <i>syahadat tauhid</i> . And answered by all attendance by ‘hayyun maqsud’. – Finally, reciting <i>syahadat tauhid</i> together with the congregation 100 times. Here the congregation gradually loud their praise and at same time shaking the head	
Fourth Imam	<i>Imam pembaca Al Baqarah</i>	– Reciting some verses from the Quran that contains concept and advise about calamities	– QS 2: 152-156 – QS 67: 1-2
Fifth Imam	<i>Imam pembaca doa</i>	– Reciting closing prayer, with the following structure: • <i>Basmallah</i> ^c ; • Praise to the Creator and His messenger (Muhammad pbuh); • Prayers for all Moslem (men and women); • Prayers for the deceased person and the family; • Prayers for attendance in the congregation;	

^a The act of attempting forgiveness from the Almighty God, commonly by saying ‘astağfirullāhu.

^b The *syahadat tauhid* contains declaration of belief in the oneness of God Almighty.

^c *Basmallah* is phrase mention to the God before beginning any action or speech. It spells ‘Bismillahi rāhmani rāhiim’. It means: in the name of Allah, The Most Gracious and The Most Merciful.

Source: compiled based on interview with P1 (65)



Fig. 3. *Batu Qulhu* remembrance by adult male where a) the organizer has collected and kept the stones back into the plastic sack for fourth day of casting procession; and b) where *Batu Qulhu* is finally poured on the grave of deceased person. (photographs of the ritual [a] held at P4 residence on July 22, 2022; and [b] white stone teeming in the day 4) (taken by Sahrul).

bereaved family, this task can also be undertaken by others, such as neighbors or relatives. During the placement of the stones on the grave, it is customary to recite the phrase “*Bismillahi milata ‘ala Rasulullah*,” which translates to “In the name of Allah and in the religion of the Prophet Muhammad pbuh.” The recitation performed during this act is identical to the prayer recitation conducted during the interment of the deceased’s body. It is noteworthy that the selection of this specific recitation lacks a distinct foundational basis but rather originates from established tradition.

Presently, *Batu Qulhu* dhikr has undergone significant transformations over time, likely influenced by environmental factors, evolving understandings within the community, and technological advance, as well as societal changes. Presently, the implementation of the ritual varies across different areas of Madina. Traditionally, some individuals engage in the *Batu Qulhu* practice following the *Maghrib* prayer (after sunset) or around 6.30 p.m.–7.00 p.m. local time and typically after the *Isya* prayer (7.30 p.m.–8.00 p.m.), collectively performed at the mosque during evening as mentioned by P8 (55). Among adult women, it takes place in the evening preceding *Maghrib*, while among the male youth (*naposo bulung*) and female youth (*nauli bulung*), it occurs in the afternoon (after *Asr* or

around 3.00 p.m.) as mentioned by P6 (45). Adult male worshipers partake in this practice during the evening after the *Isya* prayer on the first, second, and third days following a person’s demise. As mentioned earlier, the *Batu Qulhu* employed in this remembrance ritual is a stone recognized by the bereaved family, retrieved from the river. To ensure cleanliness, the stones are consistently washed and kept in a plastic sack or a large container. Nevertheless, owing to the evolving perspectives of individuals and the limited availability of such rocks in riverbeds, these stones are now obtainable from multiple outlets across the Madina region, as noted by P5 (50):

“*Batu Qulhu* are taken from the river by the family, if they are dirty, they are cleaned. Now, *Batu Qulhu* are easy to get and are sold in flower shops and building material store”).

4.3. Aspect of norms of *Batu Qulhu* ritual

The *Batu Qulhu* remembrance practice, introduced by Syeikh Mustafa Husein, holds significant cultural value in the Mandailing community of Madina. This ritual utilizes white pebbles from nearby rivers for dhikr worship and to alleviate the suffering of the deceased in the grave. It has been preserved and perpetuated by Syeikh Mustafa Husein’s students and alumni, who have established recitation congregations in the region. As the oldest pesantren in North Sumatra, the influence of *Batu Qulhu* remembrance extends widely beyond Madina, with its students and graduates playing a significant role in its development and expansion. Equivalent cultural customs, such as the *tahlilan* tradition observed within the NU community in Sumatra, are also prevalent in Java under the same name. In Java, the Muslim community holds *tahlilan* remembrances on many occasions, a tradition historically introduced by the *Wali Songo* (The Nine Saints of Islam) [12].

Strict protocols surround the observance of *Batu Qulhu* remembrance. Prior permission from village and religious leaders, referred to as *Tuan Guru*, is required. The officiating Imam must possess proficiency in Arabic-Malay language. These protocols ensure the solemnity and authenticity of the ritual, aligning with the importance placed on established rituals and cultural heritage. The *tahlilan* tradition within the NU community also follows specific rituals, emphasizing the shared values of upholding traditions and seeking solace in times of mourning. As previously mentioned, obtaining permission from both village and religious leaders is necessary, as indicated by P2 (52):

‘*mangido izin Parjolo tu Tuan Guru*’ (English: Ask permission from *Tuan Guru* first). Commonly answered by the teacher with ‘*olo silahken acara dilanjut*’ (English: Okay, please continue the ritual), ‘*marimom mau au*’ (English: I will follow).

Batu Qulhu remembrance serves as a form of communal support, uniting family members, relatives, neighbors, and friends in times of sorrow. This fosters a sense of unity and solidarity within the Mandailing community, reflecting the value placed on collective resilience. Similar communal support can be found in other practices, such as the collective remembrance gatherings associated with the *tahlilan* tradition, reinforcing the cultural value of community bonds and support networks. The significance of *Batu Qulhu* remembrance extends beyond its cultural and spiritual aspects. It represents a cherished cultural heritage embraced by the Muslim society in Madina, highlighting the cultural values of spirituality, tradition, and the preservation of identity. This ritual also plays crucial role in fostering social cohesion through different ways, including community participation, shared religious practices, as well transmission of values and traditions. This study also highlights solidarity aspect as other form of social cohesion in the societal level [20]. While specific to the Mandailing community, similar practices can be observed in other regions in Indonesia, especially in the traditional Islam community [4,72]. They are still fulfilling the shared human need to honor the deceased, find solace in collective rituals, and preserve cultural traditions as integral elements of identity and social cohesion. For a comprehensive overview of the norm aspects in the tradition of *Batu Qulhu* in the Mandailing community, please refer to Table 3.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Batu Qulhu* remembrance ritual stands as a significant cultural and religious practice within the Mandailing community’s funeral ceremonies. This tradition, which involves using stones for dhikr worship, holds deep historical and spiritual

Table 3
Identified aspect of norms in the practice of *Batu Qulhu* Remembrance.

Aspect of norm	Description
Preservation of traditions	The culture emphasizes the preservation and perpetuation of rituals and practices, such as the <i>Batu Qulhu</i> remembrance, which was introduced by Syeikh Mustafa Husein and continued by his students and alumni. The students and graduates of Musthafawiyah Islamic boarding school play a significant role in preserving and expanding this practice.
Community support	The culture values community support during times of grief and mourning. The tradition of using <i>Batu Qulhu</i> serves as a means of support from family, relatives, neighbors, and friends, helping to alleviate sorrow and foster resilience.
Spiritual gatherings	Collective prayer sessions and remembrance gatherings are highly valued in the culture. The use of the stones during these gatherings creates a conducive environment for spiritual practices and collective remembrance.
Respect for the deceased	The culture emphasizes respect and care for the deceased. The ritual of collecting white pebbles, predominantly marble, from nearby rivers to be used in <i>Batu Qulhu</i> remembrance shows reverence for the departed.
Connection to nature	The culture maintains a connection with nature, as the stones used in <i>Batu Qulhu</i> rituals are collected from rivers. The easy availability of these stones in the past and their resilience in varying weather conditions highlight the importance of nature in the culture.
Alleviation of suffering	The recitation of <i>Batu Qulhu</i> rituals is believed to alleviate the suffering endured by the deceased in the grave. This demonstrates a value of compassion and empathy within the culture.

roots. While its origins can be traced back to Syekh Mustafa Husein, who introduced the ritual, variations in accounts highlight the complex nature of its origin. Over time, the procession of *Batu Qulhu* has undergone modifications to streamline its organization, exemplifying the adaptive nature of cultural practices while maintaining their essence. Although *Batu Qulhu* remembrance is specific to the Mandailing community, similar commemorative practices can be found in other regions. These rituals reflect the universal human need to honor and remember the deceased, seeking solace through collective ceremonies, and preserving cultural traditions as integral components of identity and social cohesion. *Batu Qulhu* ritual serves as a testament to the rich cultural and religious heritage of the Mandailing community in North Sumatra, encapsulating collective mourning, spiritual devotion, and the preservation of cultural identity. By adhering to these rituals, individuals reaffirm their cultural identity and strengthen their sense of belonging within the community. Shared cultural practices during funeral ceremonies serve as markers of group identity, fostering a sense of solidarity among participants. As funeral ceremonies continue to play a pivotal role in communities worldwide, understanding and appreciating the significance of these rituals contributes to our broader knowledge of human beliefs, traditions, and the ways in which we commemorate and honor the departed. The employed methods in this study allows for an in-depth exploration of the cultural, social, and emotional dimensions surrounding funeral practices within specific communities. This approach provides nuanced insights into the significance, symbolism, and evolving meanings attributed to funeral rituals, thereby enriching scholarly discourse and bridging gaps in understanding of this complex phenomenon.

While this study presents a preliminary investigation into the *Batu Qulhu* ritual, it acknowledges certain limitations. The absence of historical documentation detailing the ritual within the Mandailing community necessitates a proposed historical approach through extensive literature review, drawing upon the writings of earlier ulama. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the limited number of informants and the specific observed processions may not fully capture the diverse procedural variations of the *Batu Qulhu* ritual across the entire Madina region. Recognizing the modifications made by different communities based on the guidance of their Imams or practical considerations further adds to the complexity of the ritual. Given these findings, the study recommends the cultural preservation and educational promotion of the *Batu Qulhu* ritual for the benefit of future generations. The creation of appropriate documentation, such as books and videos, accessible through various platforms including social media, can contribute to the wider dissemination of knowledge and understanding of the ritual. These efforts support the cultural preservation of the *Batu Qulhu* tradition and foster greater appreciation among the Mandailing community and beyond.

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Data availability statement

Data included in article/supplementary material/referenced in article.

Ethics statement

This study was ethically reviewed and approved by Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian Masyarakat (LPPM) at the University of North Sumatera (UINSU) under approval number 0616615683. All participants, including those photographed, provided informed consent to participate in the study.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sahrul: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Anang Widhi Nirwansyah:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Software, Formal analysis. **Seyithan Demirdag:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Resources. **Afrahul Fadhila Daulai:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e33363>.

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