



# Embodied Motherhood: Material Culture in Tolaki's Oral Narrative and Sarapeana Tradition

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the embodiment of motherhood in the oral narrative and *sarapeana* tradition of the Tolaki people through the perspective of material culture. *Sarapeana*, a customary practice dedicated to honoring mothers, presents a rich intersection between tangible objects and intangible oral expressions. Material items such as the sarong, the basin used for bathing babies, the dipper, and the lamp as a nocturnal light serve not only practical functions but also act as cultural symbols that reinforce the mother's role as nurturer, caregiver, and protector. These objects embody values of warmth, care, and guidance that are central to the construction of motherhood in Tolaki society. In parallel, oral narratives accompanying the tradition articulate these values in *sara* language conveyed by *tolea* and *pabitara*, transmitting ethical lessons across generations. By analyzing the interplay between material and oral dimensions, this study argues that *sarapeana* represents a unique cultural articulation of motherhood that transcends biological function and emphasizes the ethical, social, and spiritual centrality of mothers. This approach highlights how indigenous traditions provide alternative frameworks to theorize motherhood, contributing to broader scholarly dialogues in cultural studies and literature.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, Oral Narrative, Sarapeana Tradition, Material Culture, Tolaki.

## 1 Introduction

Studies on motherhood within the social sciences and humanities have undergone a significant shift—from biological perspectives toward emotional and material domain [1]. Moreover, it came into cultural and symbolic interpretations. Within this framework, motherhood is not only understood as a personal experience or reproductive function but also as a social and cultural construction manifested through language, rituals, and material objects that represent particular values. An interdisciplinary approach allows for a richer understanding of how maternal identity is constructed and contested in contemporary society [2]. The material culture approach, for instance, provides a

lens for examining how material objects serve as media of representation and embodiment of social meanings related to motherhood, caregiving, and interpersonal relations within a community.

In the context of the Tolaki people of Southeast Sulawesi, the concept of motherhood is reflected in their cultural expressions, notably in the *Pasaeno* folktale [3], [4] and the *Sarapeana* customary tradition [5], [6]. Both share symbolic similarities through the presence of caregiving objects traditionally associated with maternal roles. The *Pasaeno* story tells of a child who receives life guidance and blessings from his mother and symbolic objects sent by his father—a god—such as a sarong, a basin, and a lamp, sent down from heaven by on a ship. All of these objects carry meanings of nurture and life continuity. Meanwhile, in the *Sarapeana* ritual, objects such as sarongs, dippers, baby basins, and oil lamps become integral parts of a customary wedding ceremonial tribute to mothers, reaffirming their position as the source of life, protection, and moral guidance.

The recurring symbolism of these objects across both *Pasaeno* oral narrative and *Sarapeana* tradition demonstrates how the Tolaki concept of motherhood is materially embodied through the interrelation of symbols, objects, and cultural values. This study therefore seeks to explore how motherhood is materialized in Tolaki culture through the interplay of oral narratives and ritual practices. It aims to enrich the understanding of motherhood as a cultural construct and to open new discussions on *indigenous motherhood* in Indonesia. To analyze how these objects mediate cultural values, this research adopts the maternal material culture approach which allows for an examination of the relationship between objects, meanings, and social practices.

The concept of motherhood among the Tolaki people is not merely symbolized through verbal expressions but also embodied in material forms that carry deep cultural significance as active participants in shaping and expressing social relations. Through this lens, motherhood is examined not only as an ethical and emotional value but also as a lived experience embedded in tangible and ritual objects within the *Sarapeana* tradition, and in the intangible one, the *Pasaeno* folktale.

This paper addresses the question: How do the meanings of objects in the *Pasaeno* folktale and *Sarapeana* ritual construct symbolic significance and shape the cultural conception of motherhood through the perspective of material culture approach?

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of motherhood studies in relation with material culture within the context of Indonesian local cultures. Practically, it strengthens the documentation of Tolaki cultural heritage and provides a foundation for the development of value-based education that honors the role of mothers.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–analytical approach to interpret the cultural meanings embedded in Tolaki oral narrative and traditional customary practice. The main focus is to trace how the concept of motherhood is manifested through cultural objects appearing in *Pasaeno* and *Sarapeana*. The data analyzed comprise two categories: (1) textual, in the form of the *Pasaeno* narrative as a mythological representation of maternal values, and (2) contextual, data in the form of ethnographic descriptions of the *Sarapeana* tradition.

Analysis is conducted through close reading of the *Pasaeno* story and the *Sarapeana* performance description to identify the symbolic meanings and social functions

of these objects. The findings from both analyses are then compared to uncover the continuity of meanings between oral narrative and ritual practice as forms of embodied motherhood—that is, motherhood materialized through objects and actions. The overall interpretation draws upon material culture theory, which views objects as social texts reflecting values of protection, affection, and moral guidance within Tolaki maternal practice.

## 2 From Material Culture To Embodied Motherhood

The material culture approach provides a critical framework for understanding how tangible objects embody and communicate cultural meanings. As O'Reilly notes, material culture is not merely a collection of physical artifacts but a system that mediates social values, identities, and human relationships [7]. Objects function as cultural texts—spaces where meanings are inscribed, negotiated, and transmitted across generations, thereby extending our understanding of human experience and social life that may not always be documented in textual sources. These objects are not passive tools; rather, they possess the capacity to shape and reflect human practices in reciprocal relationships. Within this framework, objects that appear in both ritual and everyday contexts can articulate the moral and emotional structures of a community, including notions of kinship, gender, and motherhood.

The relationship between people and objects—especially within rituals and folktales—forms part of the cultural and social identity processes. Objects serve as media and symbols representing meanings, norms, and power associated with motherhood [8]. Moreover, material culture constitutes one aspect of critical heritage that plays a vital role in motherhood due to preparation mastery and remembrance negotiated by mothers of their maternal roles through objects [9]. Becoming a mother has increasingly been recognized as a significant life-course transition in a woman's life. The experience of becoming a mother 'matrescence', is identified as a major phase by anthropologists, signified with the practice of cultural rite of passage (Raphael, 1975) in [9]. Part of this experience and the adoption of a maternal identity is mediated through the material world [9].

In the context of the Tolaki concept of motherhood, objects appearing in folktales that relate to the ritual practice of *sarapeana* tradition may be regarded as media linking cultural narratives and contemporary belief practices. Such objects function as "signs" containing symbolic meanings associated with motherhood and its centrality in ritual, allowing researchers to explore how these meanings are preserved, interpreted, and revitalized within community practices.

The subsequent sociological and anthropological turns repositioned objects as dynamic cultural agents. [10] observes that sociology and anthropology both engage with how material culture shapes power, morality, and social relations. Objects are not merely products of human action; they also "act back," influencing how people experience, interpret, and organize their worlds. This cross-disciplinary engagement has sparked enduring wherein objects are seen as mechanisms that stabilize social order,

transmit values, and materialize power and knowledge through their presence in daily and ritual life.

[8] extends material culture approach into the anthropology of motherhood, reframing *objectification* not as the reduction of people into things but as the process through which persons are made through things. Drawing on ethnographic research—from Slovakian au pairs to Filipino migrant mothers—Miller illustrates how objects mediate maternal subjectivity. Everyday items such as baby clothes, toys, or digital devices help mothers negotiate emotional bonds, autonomy, and responsibility. Through this interaction, material culture functions as a medium that both reflects and constructs the lived experience of mothering.

[9] introduces the concept of *maternal heritage*, emphasizing that motherhood is mediated, preserved, and memorialized through the material world. The consumption, curation, and preservation of maternal objects—such as baby items, care tools, or keepsakes—constitute forms of cultural remembering. These practices turn the intimate sphere of caregiving into a domain of historical and ethical meaning. Material culture, therefore, becomes central to the maternal experience: it allows mothers to embody, narrate, and transmit care, love, and identity across time.

Across these perspectives, material culture emerges as a vital domain through which moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of motherhood are articulated. Objects act as extensions of the body, mediating the physical and moral labour of mothering. Through daily gestures and ritual uses, they materialize abstract virtues—such as sacrifice, purity, and continuity—into tangible forms. Thus, material culture provides a framework for understanding motherhood not merely as an emotional or social identity but as a lived, embodied practice that unites the tangible and the intangible, the domestic and the sacred.

The approach of material culture provides a critical framework for understanding how tangible objects embody and communicate cultural meanings. As O'Reilly argues, material culture is not merely a collection of physical artifacts but a system through which social values, identities, and relationships are mediated. Objects serve as cultural texts—sites where meanings are inscribed, negotiated, and transmitted across generations. They are not passive tools; rather shaping and reflecting human practices in reciprocal relationships. In this view, objects in ritual or daily contexts can articulate a community's moral and emotional structures, including concepts of kinship, gender, and motherhood.

In the Tolaki cultural landscape, the *Sarapeana* tradition is a rich manifestation of the interconnection between material culture and moral–emotional values. Objects such as sarongs, dippers, lamps, and baby-bath basins in this tradition serve not only practical purposes but also symbolic ones. They represent affection, guidance, purity, and continuity—values that form the ethical dimension of motherhood. These objects can be read as “extensions of the body,” bridging the physical and moral dimensions of maternal practice. They materialize the acts of caregiving and moral responsibility of a mother, rendering invisible virtues such as love and devotion into tangible, visible forms.

The concept of *embodiment* emphasizes how cultural meanings are lived and enacted through bodily practices and material engagements. In this sense, motherhood is not

merely an emotional or relational identity but also an experience materialized through objects, gestures, and spaces. The physical interactions between mother and objects—such as bathing the baby, wrapping the child in a sarong, or lighting a lamp at night—constitute embodied expressions of care. These embodied practices transform ordinary objects into cultural signifiers laden with moral value, linking the domestic realm to the sacred domain.

When read alongside the *Pasaeno* oral narrative, the relationship between materiality and motherhood becomes even more apparent. The episode in which the divine father sends a boat filled with caregiving items parallels the symbolic assemblage found in *Sarapeana*. Through this correspondence, both narrative and ritual share a similar symbolic order: the moral responsibility of motherhood is enacted through caregiving acts mediated by material forms. This parallel to be interpreted as a manifestation material continuity—the way material practices sustain and reproduce cultural ideals across temporal and narrative boundaries.

### 3 Cultural and Ethnographic Background

This research is situated within the cultural context of the Tolaki ethnic group, an indigenous community inhabiting much of mainland Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Tolaki people possess distinctive cultural characteristics, customs, and belief systems. Their culture is unified through a central symbol known as *kalo* or *kalosara*—a circular object used in various ceremonial contexts, functioning as a symbol that embodies the Tolaki conception of humanity and the cosmos in its entirety. Tolaki culture plays a central role in shaping communal identity and values; it is not merely a collection of traditions, oral arts, or local knowledge, but a moral and philosophical framework that guides social behavior in everyday life [11], [12].

As one of the largest ethnic groups in Southeast Sulawesi, the Tolaki have a long history spanning the precolonial kingdom period to the post-independence era. Most Tolaki people are traditionally engaged in agriculture and swidden farming, cultivating rice fields and drylands through cooperative family labor [12]. For the Tolaki, the family constitutes a vital social unit. Kinship formed through marriage is not viewed as a merely personal matter but as a broader cultural process involving the extended lineage. This collective perspective is reflected in a tradition known as *mekuku* or *kukuaha*, a form of social interaction—formal or informal—wherein individuals orally recount their genealogies [13]. Through *mekuku*, genealogical lines are preserved orally across generations, illustrating the Tolaki commitment to maintaining intergenerational communication and kinship through narrative and speech.

Tolaki culture is deeply philosophical, particularly through the symbolism of *kalosara*, which represents customary law imbued with sacred and supernatural dimensions. *Kalosara* occupies a central position in Tolaki socio-cultural life, functioning as a moral and ritual code that governs social, political, and economic relations. Within this system, *adat kalosara* emphasizes values of unity of belief, purity, justice, and collective welfare. These principles form the moral foundation of Tolaki social life and regulate the complex web of interpersonal and communal relationships [14], [15].

In the context of this research, the Tolaki people provide a compelling case for study due to their rich oral traditions and complex customary systems in which the concept of motherhood appears both explicitly and implicitly across various cultural expressions—including rituals, folktales, and daily practices. One tradition that reflects the Tolaki collective worldview regarding motherhood is the *Sarapeana* custom, which expresses profound reverence for the mother figure within the community's social structure. Thus, this study positions the Tolaki ethnic group as the focal point for exploring how the concept of motherhood is constructed, transmitted, and adapted within their distinctive cultural framework.

## 4 The Pasaeno Narrative

### 4.1 Synopsis

The story of *Pasaeno* begins in a peaceful village where a young woman named Wesande lived among her community. She spent her days crafting woven items from wild pandan leaves. One day, while gathering pandan leaves in the forest, Wesande felt thirsty and drank from a natural spring called *Toho* (or *Otoho*). Unexpectedly, after drinking the water, she became pregnant. Since she was unmarried, the villagers accused her of engaging in immoral conduct and cast her out from the community. In despair, Wesande uttered a curse upon herself: if the accusation was true, she would die in childbirth, but if it was false, she would survive, and her child would become a sacred being.

Some time later, Wesande gave birth safely in exile. Upon hearing the news, the villagers regretted their false accusations. Soon after, a boat descended from the sky carrying ceremonial objects used for bathing the newborn — including items such as a basin, a dipper, cloth, and a lamp. The boat was believed to have been sent by the baby's father, who came from the celestial realm.

After the ritual, the child was named *Pasaeno*. He was later believed to be a divine descendant and became the ancestor of the Tolaki people who were neither of noble nor servile status, but belonged to the common folk.

### 4.2 The Pasaeno Narrative and the Transmission of Maternal Values

The *Pasaeno* narrative occupies a central position in the transmission of maternal values within Tolaki society, as it presents the figure of Wesande as a representation of the “Primordial Mother” archetype. Through this story, maternal virtues—such as sacrifice, purity, and spiritual strength—are internalized into the community's collective consciousness.

First, Wesande's sacrifice in giving birth while in exile symbolizes unconditional love, a fundamental aspect of motherhood in Tolaki cultural philosophy. Second, the divine justification expressed through the descent of the celestial boat and the infant care objects signifies that the maternal role possesses cosmological legitimacy—it is not merely a biological function but a sacred entity guarded by transcendent forces.

The material symbols in the story—such as the basin, cloth, lamp, and water—are later embodied in the *sarapeana* ritual, transforming the mythological narrative into tangible cultural practice. Thus, *Pasaeno* functions as a symbolic origin narrative that bridges the mythical realm and lived tradition.

In the context of value transmission, this tale reinforces the understanding that the mother is the source of life and the center of moral, social, and spiritual balance. She is not only the subject of reverence but also a mediator between the human and the transcendent worlds. Through its continual retelling across generations, *Pasaeno* serves as a cultural pedagogical medium that instills an ethic of maternal reverence and strengthens social cohesion rooted in motherhood values.

## 5 The *Sarapeana* Tradition

In Tolaki traditional marriage, one of the most significant stages is *mowindahako*, a ritual involving the formal handover of customary objects from the groom's family to the bride's family as a requirement for the legitimacy of marriage under customary law. Among the symbolic elements of this ceremony is *sarapeana*, a specific set of ritual objects dedicated to the bride's mother. The *sarapeana* represents a customary obligation in which the groom's family presents and raised her daughter to adulthood [16], [17].

The *sarapeana* consists of five primary items symbolizing birth, affection, and the nurturing process. Each object carries deep philosophical and symbolic meanings related to motherhood and family values. These include *raneranemba'a* (a sarong used to care for or wean a baby), *boku mbebaho'a* (a basin for bathing a baby), *sandu-sandu* (a dipper), *likelike mata* (a damar-oil wick for night lighting), and *siku-sikuhulo* (a spoon used for grinding damar resin). These objects are not only ritual necessities but also cultural representations of reverence toward the mother as the bearer of life and moral foundation of the family [17].

As a cultural rite, *sarapeana* occupies a crucial position in the Tolaki social system. The Tolaki people recognize several forms of marriage, ranging from the most ideal—*mowawo niwule* (marriage preceded by formal proposal)—to non-ideal forms such as *mombolosuako* (elopement), *umoapi* (marriage by abduction), and *melanggahako* (marriage following pregnancy). Although the procedures differ among these types, the *sarapeana* ritual must always be performed in every marriage involving a maiden, regardless of the form of marriage. This underscores the indispensable role of *sarapeana* as a symbol of respect for women and motherhood within Tolaki culture [16], [18].

The symbolic significance of *sarapeana* extends beyond ceremonial practice. It reflects the synthesis of Tolaki customary values and Islamic teachings, both of which emphasize reverence toward mothers. In this sense, *sarapeana* embodies the cultural logic of the Tolaki people, who regard women as sacred beings deserving of honor and protection. The ritual serves as a moral reminder for men to respect, safeguard, and cherish the women who become their life partners [17].

## 6 Material Culture in Pasaeno Story and *Sarapeana* Tradition

The story of *Pasaeno* and the tradition of *Sarapeana* reveal that motherhood in Tolaki culture is not merely an abstract moral concept but an embodied experience manifested through actions, objects, and rituals. In *Pasaeno*, the figure of Wesande represents the ethical and spiritual dimensions of motherhood through her sacrifice and purity as the primordial mother. The material symbols appearing in the story, such as the basin, dipper, cloth, and lamp, are not merely infant-care utensils but representations of nurturing, protection, enlightenment, and purification. Meanwhile, in *Sarapeana*, similar objects reappear within ritual contexts as expressions of reverence for the mother and as tangible manifestations of gratitude for her nurturing care and affection.

**Table 1.** Material culture in Pasaeno story and *sarapeana* tradition.

| Pasaeno Story           | Sarapeana Tradition                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Boat                    | Ceremony equipment                                                                                                               |
| Bassin for baby bathing | <i>boku mbebaho 'a</i> (Bassin for baby bathing)                                                                                 |
| Dipper                  | Sandu-sandu (dipper)                                                                                                             |
| Cloth                   | <i>rane-rane mba 'a</i> (sarong for baby care)<br><i>tema-tema</i> (long dloth for carrying baby)                                |
| Lamp                    | <i>likelike mata</i> (lamp; in the past time is made from dammar)<br><i>siku-sikuhulo</i> (the spoon for cleaning dammar resin). |

In the *Pasaeno* story, the objects sent down from the heavens — described by Tarimana [11] as “a boat containing all the utensils for the baby’s bathing ceremony, including a stone used to bathe the infant and a large plate as the baby’s bath basin” — have parallels in the *Sarapeana* tradition, which continues to be practiced among the Tolaki people today. In *Sarapeana*, these same objects (with the addition of the *siku hulo* or spoon used to clean the residue of burning dammar resin) are formally presented by the *tolea* and *pabitara* as symbols of respect for the mother. The main difference lies in the mode of transmission: in *Pasaeno*, the objects are sent by boat from the celestial realm, whereas in *Sarapeana* they are presented through a formal ritual process — a performative mode of communication between humans and their social order.

From the perspective of material culture, these objects are not merely household tools but cultural artifacts that *embody* the values of motherhood. Each object represents a distinct dimension of maternal practice:

- The basin and dipper symbolize care and bodily nurture, affirming the mother’s role as guardian of cleanliness and life.
- The lamp or oil light signifies the mother’s presence as a source of illumination: a moral and spiritual guide for the family.
- The cloth functions as a symbol of protection and warmth, asserting the maternal role as comforter and protector.



- d. The spoon for cleaning dammar resin, which appears in the ritual version, adds the dimension of *maintenance work*, small yet meaningful acts that sustain the light (the flame of the lamp) in everyday life.

Thus, these objects manifest the intimate relationship between the ethics of care and tangible material forms. Within the framework of material culture, objects serve as mediators between the world of ideas (maternal values, reverence, and sanctity) and the world of practice (ritual, caregiving, and social life). Their presence in both mythological and ritual contexts demonstrates how the Tolaki community employs materiality as a medium for internalizing maternal values — transforming ancestral narratives into social actions transmitted across generations.

In this way, *Pasaeno* and *Sarapeana* not only convey moral messages but also reveal how Tolaki culture understands motherhood as a practice materialized through objects — an embodied cultural praxis in which materiality, ritual, and ethics converge within social and spiritual experience.

Through the interconnectedness of story and ritual, the concept of motherhood becomes *embodied* — manifested in concrete acts. Bathing the baby, lighting the lamp, or wrapping the child in cloth are all expressions of affection imbued with moral significance. In this context, the objects function as extensions of the mother's body, marking the intertwining of the physical and spiritual dimensions of maternal experience. The relationship between the *Pasaeno* narrative and the *Sarapeana* ritual illustrates the continuity between myth and cultural reality: that maternal values are transmitted not only through storytelling but also through actions and objects embedded in everyday life. Hence, Tolaki motherhood may be understood as a cultural praxis — a cultural practice that integrates ethics, affection, and spirituality into a unified experience.

This finding also opens a space for dialogue with global motherhood studies, particularly through the lenses of *material culture of care* and *maternal ethics*. In many Western discourses, motherhood is often understood as an emotional or social experience tied to gender constructions. However, from the Tolaki perspective, motherhood emerges as an integrated system of knowledge — combining morality, cosmology, and materiality. The *Sarapeana* tradition shows that a mother's love is not merely expressed in personal relationships but is institutionalized through rituals and symbolic objects. This indicates that local culture has long developed mechanisms to *embody* the values of caregiving and maternal reverence within its social and spiritual structures.

## 7 Conclusion

The study of *Pasaeno* and *Sarapeana* reveals that Tolaki motherhood is not merely a symbolic or emotional ideal but a lived and materialized practice. Motherhood in Tolaki society is a social construct that is actively shaped and reinforced through material practices and the continuous use of communication media. These cultural objects and media not only reflect maternal norms and identities, but also act as agents that shape and maintain social relationships and the meaning of motherhood in the lives of women in the community. Through the recurring presence of everyday objects—such as the *bas-*

*sin, dipper, likelike mata, sarong, and siku-sikuhulo*—the Tolaki people transform domestic tools into carriers of moral and spiritual meaning. These objects embody the ethics of care, purification, and guidance, linking the physical acts of nurturing to the cosmological and social values of the community.

By integrating the framework of material culture, this study demonstrates how myth and ritual jointly sustain the moral structure of Tolaki society, where motherhood operates as an *embodied cultural praxis*. The interplay between narrative and ritual shows that the values of love, respect, and responsibility are not only told but also *performed* and *materialized*. Hence, Tolaki traditions offer an epistemological contribution to global motherhood studies—showing that the moral dimensions of care and maternal ethics are inseparable from the material forms and ritual actions through which they are lived and transmitted across generations.

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