

The Way Batak People Decide Their Lives Preserving Their Old Customs Reshaped by Christianity

SM Parulian Tanjung¹, Bintang R. Simbolon², Demsy Jura³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Kristen Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: 2006190009@ms.uki.ac.id

Abstract

Batak tribe is one of many tribes known in Indonesia. Batak tribe is only a small tribe in Indonesia, but they are popular with many strengths and achievements. One of the main uniqueness is up to now mostly of them still preserve their old customs and tradition of their ancestors, whenever and wherever they are. Although in early days long ago Batak tribe lived in the animism ways or any other old beliefs, by the grace of The Lord, Christian mission was successful in Batak land. Then the very old tradition slowly transformed adopting the Christian faith. Every generation of Batak inherit the tradition well through good education from their parents. They are proud of their tradition. And since the custom tradition they have is including all aspect of life, they plunge their lives in line with this tradition. This writing specifies the life of Batak subtribe, Toba, and mainly the Christian Batak. The research method applies the library research, qualitative method. Through analysis, the conclusion is how in general Batak people decide their lives, they just follow what their old customs tradition pattern, since the tradition has included all phases of life.

Keywords: Batak, Dalihan na tolu, Hulahula, Dongan Tubu, Boru, Ulaon.

A. INTRODUCTION

Batak is the name of a tribe in Indonesia, known long ago lived in Sumatra Island of Indonesian archipelago, the Country of Indonesia. Yet there are millions of tribes in Indonesia living in more than 17 thousand islands in Indonesian archipelago, Batak people are unique. The way they talk, the characters they own and the way they live are interesting. Mostly they talk with loud voice with special dialect and strong intonations. They act prompt and straight. They still preserve their customs tradition and their culture. They like to sing, performing and cherish every moment of their lives. Mostly they are brave and usually full of initiatives. The way the preserve their old customs tradition is very interesting.

Batak people had lived hundreds or maybe thousand years ago in one of 6 big islands in Indonesia, called Sumatra and they lived at the Northern part of Sumatra. The place where Batak ancestors live up to now is also often called as *Tapanuli* (Situmorang, 1993). The origin land of Batak people is a beautiful area. Many mountains, hills and valleys making North Sumatra a very beautiful place to live. Interestingly in the middle of North Sumatra, lies a huge and very beautiful lake called *Toba Lake*, where at the centre of the lake there is an island called *Samosir*. The beautiful panorama around North Sumatra, has been known to many people around the world, because since long time ago the western beach of North Sumatra called *Barus* was the gate to Indonesia. Since long ago Batak have already had their alphabet

and language. Even they have some sub-tribe (*Toba, Simalungun, Mandailing, Pakpak and Nias*) with similar languages.

As a smaller number compared to other tribes, about 8,5 million people estimated, only 3,58% from total Indonesian people now (Nurhanisah, 2024). Batak is a prominent tribe. In their lives Batak people generally known as having high spirit of life struggle and brave. Many of them reach the successful life (Purba, 2015). Countless of Batak people has contributed to the history. They reached the apex of careers such as in military (usually back up with their braveness and big initiatives). They are deemed as best motivators, and leaders. They reach various kinds of highest positions such as great merchants, world acknowledged diplomats, international advocates and law scholars, sportsmen, and admirable singers and artists. They are also admired in growing up their children with strong family education. They produce traditional folk songs which are well-known all over the world and often translated to many languages, such as *Lissoi, Butet, Anakhonhi, Sing sing so, Siksik sibatumanikkam* and many more. These popular songs usually picturizes the life of Batak people, the love of parents and the children, love songs, their custom and the beauty of Batak land.

Meanwhile the braveness of Batak people hugely known in the history. Their patriotic character is very strong. King *Sisingamangaraja XII*, who in his hard fight against the conqueror (Dutch colonialism) shined the heart of braveness, building unity and good cooperation reported by Idris, (2023:124), and Qadariah (2025:2). *Sisingamangaraja XII's* war was very long (1878-1907). He never gave up and negotiate to the colonials. Forced to leave his palace, he continued fought at the jungle, until he died as a national hero (Napitupulu, 1971). The spirit of fighting and his never give-up struggle inspires all young generations of Batak people (Sidjabat, 2000).

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Situmorang wrote an interesting book about Batak or *Tapanuli* comprise the history of *Tapanuli*, the legends of ancient Batak people, the way of their lives, some tribe's popular figures, law and custom, until the character of Batak people. Detailed to the differences of sub-tribes of Batak (Situmorang, 1993). Vergouwen completely wrote about almost all details of customs and traditions in Batak Toba time to time (Vergouwen, 2004). It explainin the life of Batak people since long ago, beliefs concept until the coming of Christianity to Batak land. Meanwhile Batara Sangti Simanjuntak wrote also completely about Batak people with the details more to philosophy of Batak's custom, and some archeology's proofs (Simanjuntak, 1977). Others also wrote about Batak and the culture (Napitupulu, 2008). Hutabarat did the same (Hutabarat, 2018). Writings also found about *Tarombo* the genealogy of Batak people, also by Hutagalung (1991:24), and Sinaga (2003:56). Sihombing wrote how to speak nicely and more attractive during *manghatai* (the meetings and conversations) (Sihombing, 1989). And Sinaga also wrote the usage of *Umpasa* (poetry) and *Umpama* (illustration) directly at the specific ceremonies performed (Sinaga, 2003). Then as Christianity enters the Batak lives, Simbolon tried to connect the philosophies of *Umpasa* and

Umpama to Christianity (Simbolon, 2019). Other writings explained about the very details of Batak custom. Such as *Parjambaron* (the pattern of distributing food in a ceremony, as a symbol of honouring all the distinguished guests) (Sitorus, 1976). Kozok researched and wrote many books about the alphabet and manuscripts of Batak and all the sub-tribe of Batak (Kozok, 1999). As many books wrote about Christianity in Batak, a recent book written to explain about God's mission in the era of Nommensen (a successful missionary to Batak land) and this eruption era (Pasaribu, 2018).

C. METHOD

The methodology used in this research is the library research of the qualitative method. Started searching collections of resources about the life of Batak ancestors from long ago, how they do their living, their beliefs, the tradition and their values. So, this method is a text analysis from credible sources (Zed, 2023). Then research continued to various literatures explaining the lives of Batak people time to time, the entrance of Christianity and how the lives of Batak people driven up to now. Discussions about custom practices strengthen the analysis and conclusion. And this text analysis and historical studies may bring many following progress of study about Batak people (Hamzah, 2022).

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

What is called as Batak custom tradition is actually the sequence of life that had been performed by their ancestors. From their childhood as their tradition ruled wisdom and skills must be transferred to the children. All children must know how to live as Batak. How they perform their roles in the *Dalihan na tolu* (the three supporting stones for cooking-make the stability). This is the basic principle in Batak life. The three stones comprise who is parents/brothers of their mother (called *Hulahula*). Who are in their father/brothers side and everybody who married the sisters of their mother (called *Dongan Tubu*) and who are the ones who married our father's sisters, or our sisters (called *Boru*). In all kind of life, the *Hulahula* are the ones who must be honoured, and their job is to give directions/highest decisions. The *Dongan Tubu* are the ones who manage together all things to do. *Boru* are the ones who is responsible to execute/operate and support the things to do. The things to do are everything to be performed in life, such as building house, opening the area and plantation, building ships, hunting, and all kinds of activities in life. Everywhere they go they must find who their *Hulahula*, *Dongan Tubu* and *Boru*. That means they always have to find another Batak people in their lives.

In all kind of *Dalihan na tolu* system, they do it with a discussion (*manghatai*) before execution. When someone would like to open an area/land for plantation, first he will call their *Dongan Tubu* (his father's brothers and his brothers) to discuss the desired new area to be opened, then he will call and ask their *Hulahula* (his father in law's brothers and his wife's brothers) to give the best advices about everything related. Then he will ask their *Boru* (whoever married his sisters or his daughters) to

execute the opening of the area. Those arrangement will be completed with the calling of the neighbours (*Dongan Sahuta*) of the man planned to open the area. The *Dongan Sahuta* will accompany the *Boru* at the execution. All the ceremonies to meet and discuss is called *Ulaon*. They do it in serious way and in standard conduct. It is the practice of giving respect to all of the families and all others.

Batak people believe that this *Dalihan na tolu* is the key to life stability, because it ensures the final execution were built from integral discussions by many parties. And as the *Dalihan na tolu* is formed particularly based on a certain married composition, everyone else's *Dalihan na tolu* will be different from anyone to the other. It also means that if someone in one constellation has the role as the *Hulahula*, can be *Boru* in another constellation. This is the beautiful democracy resulted from the *Dalihan na tolu* believed by Batak people.

Meanwhile as a base of *Dalihan na tolu*, Batak people name their children with the family name the parents. If a *Panjaitan* father has a son, he would give *Panjaitan* family name to their sons, while for the daughters they would name *Boru Panjaitan* (the daughter of *Panjaitan*). All *Panjaitans* and *Boru Panjaitans* are called the *Panjaitan* family clan/brotherhood. Therefore, Batak people has many family clans (note that the famous King *Sisingamangaraja XII* from *Bakara* Kingdom is from the *Sinambela* clan). And in that community for any kind of constellations, they call everyone with the specific calling. The calling for father's relationship is different from the calling for mother's relationship.

The practice of *Dalihan na tolu* pattern is performed when a child born. They perform the acting tradition of the same baby born their ancestors did. Since long ago growing children had been done by their ancestors well by *Dalihan na tolu* pattern. When a marriage will be performed, all steps as their ancestors had done until a marriage celebration also repeated by coming generations. All done is *Dalihan na tolu* pattern. There are many ceremonies (around 7 ceremonies). When somebody died all the funeral procession will be performed with *Dalihan na tolu* pattern (procession can be in days long), processions are differentiated by how somebody died (died in young age, already married, married with or without children, married with grandchildren, and other conditions).

All Batak people hardly believe this *Dalihan na tolu* system, and they believe it as something very valuable. It ensures the goodness of family tradition, building respects to others, making good intension be finished well and in building up communities as entity to work together for future expectations. This a socio-cultural system for Batak people preserved up to now. By the practices of *Dalihan na tolu*, Batak people hold the ultimate goals for their lives which is called *Hamoraon*, *Hagabeon*, *Hasangapon* (Richness in life, Building successful family, Nobility in life). They will work hard to attain their dreams, they will neatly build up their family, they will build people respect for their good role to the community). Every parent teaches this to their children and grandchildren. Generation to generation (Guillot, 2008). They are taught to do their ancestor's tradition as perfect as can be (with proper improvisation in accordance to the modern life). Proudly they say and acclaim that Batak is their

identity. Moreover, they put it as a traditional law to be obeyed. They will see that if a Batak doing this identity, he is admired and if any Batak is not doing this identity, it is a fault. Many of them believe that failure to perform their custom is a shame.

The uniqueness of Batak people's living and their beautiful home land then has been well known by other people since long ago. People knew *Kapur Barus*/camphor came from Batak land since many years before (Guillpt, 2014). Many written news spread to the world, mentioning Batak.

This attracted the Christian missions to come to *Tapanuli*. Many prior missions failed due to difficulties from ship travelling, nature, and the encounters with local people. Many of missionaries died in their journeys to reach Batak people. Until Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen, sent by *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* (RMG) from Germany, successfully entered the beautiful *Silindung* valley around 1862. Also struggling against nature challenges, hatred, sometimes attacked or poisoned, eventually he brought many Batak people to be Christians. His love for Batak people (started when he was a young man in Europe, reading many Batak news) is everlasting until his death at May 23rd, 1918 in *Sigumpar*, North Sumatra.

Previously Batak people believed in mixtures of animism, Hinduism and others. (Ricklefs, 2008). They worship many gods. The biggest god was called *Debata Asi-asi* (god of mercy) and *Debata Mulajadi na bolon* (god the source of all). The word *Debata* must have been came from *Dewata* (the way Hindus call a god). These gods was believed as the authors of the *Banua Ginjang* (upper world), *Banua Tonga* (the living world), and *Banua Toru* (the world underneath). Besides, ancient Batak people believed in some spirits and *begu* (spirits). They believed that any physics such as trees, stones, mounts, and others have a spirit. They worshipped them also and offer their sacrifices. In these, they really honoured their ancestor's spirit which they believed never vanished but haunting all the time. But then as Christian mission to Batak land was successful, slowly Christianity reshaped the old tradition to become a tradition which glorify God the Lord and all activities performed with the spirit of spreading God's love. Note, that because not all Batak people are Christian, but the spirit of maintaining their tradition is owned by all Batak people.

In principle Batak people conducts their custom carefully. They honour and proud to perform their identity and custom. They will not move from their family name (never to change his family name). From childhood a Batak person had already accustomed to their old tradition and fully aware to the brotherhood made up by their custom. They continuously perform the activities of life to fulfil their responsibilities according to the tradition and the actualize it everyday. All driven by the *Dalihan na tolu*.

Firstly, they feel secure in practicing this custom tradition, because they have known it from their childhood. *Secondly*, they feel their family ties never dismissed. Wherever, they met any family with his family name, means those they met are their brothers and sisters, or the others are might be their parent's family or their ancestor's family. This makes the passion of honouring parents as commanded by the 5th of Ten Commandments of Torah. *Thirdly* they never feel alone in doing their activities in life.

They live in good communities where solutions can be easily obtained and they practice democracy and respect of others everyday of their lives. *Fourthly* they are sharpened in various kinds of knowledges, attitudes and skills through interactions with people they know well. *Fifthly* they invent a renewed the practice of *Dalihan na tolu* enriched with the new principles from the Bible. They do everything not as a worship to any gods or devils anymore, but now they merely do everything as a worship and dedication only to God and loving each other. Every detail of custom tradition they do now will always be based on Christ love.

Sceptical question may arise to Batak people, weather these custom tradition conducts they perform from their ancestors up to now specified them as an exclusive people or people that will not open their lives to modern progress. The answer is no. Recent survey done by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Indonesia resulted that the Batak tribe is the highest tribe in producing university graduates (18,02%) in Indonesia. This is an outstanding record by a small tribe (3,58% of Indonesian population/284 million people/4th in world population). This means Batak people are educated people and they are up to date people.

As already mentioned above many Batak people has been well known as high calibre musicians from long ago. Their songs are highly artistic songs. Many of them are prominent doctors, engineers, advocates, writers, performers, painters, and all kinds of skills. Up to now they are the second tribe to serve as high country military commanders of the army (the first is Javanese/41% of Indonesian population). Some others have ever been appointed as prime minister, ministers of Indonesia and international calibre diplomats. One of Batak Priest (Dr. S.A.E Nababan) has ever been elected as the President of World Church Council (WCC).

In general Batak people still do their ancestor custom tradition up to now. To perform such activities which now include more and more people needs bigger venue. At the big cities they can't be performed in a house like in the villages. They have to perform mostly wedding ceremonies or any kind of celebrations in super big convention halls since invited persons might be 2000 people or more. To perform the mourning ceremony, need big mourning buildings that can be used for many days of mourning. Apparently now in big cities in Indonesia big buildings are constructed to accommodates such ceremonies. Mostly used for Batak ceremonies.

E. CONCLUSION

Batak people in general always live up to now with their ancestor's custom tradition. They are highly motivated to keep all the tradition in a more and more perfect conducts. They do it now based on the way to express their love to the parents and to their brothers and sisters. They worship all activities as if they do it to worship the Lord. The tradition they hold make them feel close one another in brotherhood every part of their lives. They feel secure to step up their lives because they are convinced that they are not working alone and they will get best solutions in doing these activities. They are proud as a good actor in their tradition. They claim it as their identity, an easy model of life without thinking too much about alternatives and

outcome. They decide what to do in life just following their old custom tradition they learnt from childhood, since their custom tradition has included the things to do in all phases of life. Doing their tradition for them is doing the good things in life which is now dedicated to the Lord and the love of each other.

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