

# Ritual Batak Toba Martondi Hau: A Study of Revisiting the Extinct Toba Batak Culture

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**Abstract.** This descriptive qualitative study explores a traditional ritual from Toba Batak culture that is on the verge of disappearing, known as martondi hau. The research was carried out in Sianjur Mula Mula Village, Samosir District, using interviews, literature review, and observation as data collection methods. The interview involved a single resource person, approximately 80 years old. Findings from the interviews and literature review indicate that the ritual has faded due to technological advancements, which have encouraged a more systematic and logical way of thinking among the community. Additionally, the influence of religious practices has shifted the ritual into dance performances and oral storytelling. Although no direct physical evidence of the ritual remains, this study has sparked community awareness, prompting efforts to rediscover and preserve it.

**Keywords:** Ritual, Martondi Hau, A Study Of Revisiting Extinct

## 1 Introduction

Culture is a collection of values, customs, beliefs, habits, arts, languages, and practices shared by a group within a particular society. It encompasses various aspects, including traditional food, clothing, dances, rituals, language, and visual arts. Culture is not limited to physical or visible expressions but also includes perspectives and values that shape social life patterns. Local wisdom functions as a guide for actions aimed at fostering wise and prudent individuals. Passed down from generation to generation, it is preserved not only for its role as a practical guide but also because it holds truth from a cultural perspective. This truth gives it lasting value in creating and maintaining a harmonious society (Rasyid, 2021).

In North Sumatra, there are many ethnic groups, one of which is the Batak people. The Batak are divided into several sub-tribes: Karo, Simalungun, Pakpak, Toba, Angkola, and Mandailing (Koentjaraningrat, 2007). The Toba Batak, a prominent sub-tribe, are spread across Tapanuli, Simalungun, Dairi, and other regions, carrying with them their traditions, customs, and beliefs wherever they migrate.

Today, most members of the Toba Batak ethnic group adhere to Protestant Christianity, while others follow Catholicism, Islam, and other religions. However, in the past, they believed in Mula Jadi Nabolon, the Almighty Creator. In addition to this supreme deity, they also recognized other sources of spiritual power, such as banyan trees, springs, large rocks, mountains, and other natural elements, which were considered sacred and powerful according to their worldview at the time.

Culture and customs are essential elements in shaping the identity of an ethnic group, including the Toba Batak community. The Toba Batak, one of the most well-known ethnic groups firmly rooted in North Sumatra, are recognized for their rich and diverse cultural heritage—ranging from language, traditional arts, and music to ceremonial practices with profound philosophical meaning. For the Toba Batak people, cultural values are deeply respected and upheld, forming an integral part of their collective identity in both social and spiritual life.

However, over time, the forces of globalization and modernization have significantly impacted the Toba Batak community. The easy access to foreign cultures has facilitated their entry and influence, while the younger generation of Toba Batak often lacks adequate education about their own heritage, including language, customs, and traditional arts. As a result, many young people have begun to forget or neglect the traditions once practiced by their ancestors. One such tradition in decline is *martondi hau*, a cultural ritual rich in meaning and spiritual values. This ritual was once regarded as an important expression of respect for ancestors (*Habonaran ni Inganan*) and as a symbol of hope for growth and prosperity, likened to the growth of a strong and sturdy tree.

This research aims to reintroduce the *martondi hau* tradition to modern society, particularly the younger generation, who are increasingly influenced by easily accessible foreign cultures. The goal is to ensure that the noble values embedded in this tradition remain preserved. Using interviews and literature review methods, this study examines the meaning and practices of *martondi hau* in areas where it is still maintained. The findings are expected to contribute positively to the preservation of Toba Batak culture amid the challenges of modernization.

## 2 Method

This research employs two methods: interviews and literature review. The interview method involves direct communication between the researcher and respondents to obtain in-depth information on the topic. Its primary purpose is to explore the respondents' perspectives, experiences, feelings, and thoughts, providing a deeper understanding of the subject under study.

The literature review method involves collecting data by studying and analyzing various sources or references related to the research topic. In this study, the literature review focuses on previous findings and scholarly works that discuss Toba Batak culture.

## 3 Literature Review

In many cultures around the world, it is believed that the supernatural realm is inhabited by various beings and forces beyond human control, which are therefore often feared (Koentjaraningrat,

1981). Among the Batak people, forest protection is closely tied to such supernatural beliefs, with certain forests or trees considered the dwelling places of spiritual beings. These beliefs influence the way trees are harvested to avoid misfortune or spiritual retribution.

Before cutting down a selected tree, the Batak people traditionally perform *huhuasi*—a form of communication with the spirits—to seek permission. If it is believed that a supernatural entity resides in the tree, specific rituals are conducted. One practice involves embedding an axe into the tree's bark as a sign of selection. If the axe remains in place the next day, it is taken as approval to proceed. At that point, the spiritual presence is considered to have departed, ensuring no further disturbances will affect the community.

*Martondi hau* is a ritual performed to welcome a tree that is to be brought into the village. The tree is regarded as an elder brother to humans, destined to become building material for a house. This symbolic relationship ensures harmony between the house and its residents, protecting them from harmful external forces in the future.

As part of the ritual, an *ulos* (traditional cloth) or pandanus mat is wrapped around the tree trunk. After a few hours, the tree is then cut down. In Batak philosophy, every use of a natural resource carries the expectation of replacement, not merely in equal measure but with reproduction in mind. Thus, anyone who cuts down a tree without ensuring that replacement shoots or saplings will grow is considered to have broken a life cycle, causing loss for the future (Bangun, 2022).

The Toba Batak, following traditions inherited from the revered leader *Sisingamangaraja*, possess strong and profound cultural values that reflect their identity as a community deeply rooted in customs, spirituality, and solidarity. The following are key perspectives on the Toba Batak ethnicity based on the values passed down from *Sisingamangaraja*:

a. Customs and *Dalihan Na Toluer*

The Toba Batak, following traditions inherited from the revered leader *Sisingamangaraja*, possess strong and profound cultural values that reflect their identity as a community deeply rooted in customs, spirituality, and solidarity. The following are key perspectives on the Toba Batak ethnicity based on the values passed down from *Sisingamangaraja*:

1. *Somba Marhula-hula* (courtesy to the female giver),
2. *Manat Mardongan Tubu* (wise to fellow clans),
3. *Elek Marboru* (affection for the female recipient).

This principle emphasizes harmony and balance in human relationships.

b. Spiritualities

*Sisingamangaraja* is revered as a spiritual leader who embodied the strength of Toba Batak religion and tradition before the arrival of major religions such as Christianity. He is regarded as the guardian of the original Batak (*Parmalim*) beliefs, which honor the power of nature and the spirits of ancestors.

c. Spirit of Struggle

*Sisingamangaraja* is recognized as an Indonesian national hero who led the resistance against Dutch colonialism. His legacy embodies the values of courage, justice, and devotion to the homeland, which continue to be upheld by the Toba Batak people.

d. Belief in Ancestors

The Toba Batak people honor their ancestors through *Tugu* (monuments) and *Ulaon* (traditional rituals). These practices reinforce intergenerational bonds and play a vital role in preserving their cultural identity.

e. Hagabeon, Hamoraon, Hasangapon

These values are the life ideals of the Batak Toba people:

1. Hagabeon: Happiness and blessings through many descendants.
2. Hamoraon: Prosperity and material well-being.
3. Hasangapon: High honor and dignity.

The traditions and worldview inherited from Sisingamangaraja have become a strong foundation for the Toba Batak identity, continuing to shape their customary, social, and spiritual life to this day.

## 4 Result and Discussion

The Toba Batak people possess a rich variety of traditions and rituals, many of which are unique and not widely known outside their community. One such oral tradition is martondi hau. In the past, when the Toba Batak intended to cut wood for building a house or hombung, this ritual was an essential part of the process. Martondi hau represents a vital element of the community's local wisdom, reflecting a deep connection between humans, nature, and spirituality.

However, due to cultural changes and the influence of modernization, this tradition is now practiced less frequently, particularly as younger generations show less interest in preserving it. Martondi hau illustrates how traditional values can fade over time, highlighting the importance of preservation efforts to keep cultural heritage alive.

In practice, the ritual is led by a shaman or spiritual leader who offers prayers to seek permission from habonaran ni inganan and boras pati ni tano to determine an auspicious day for cutting wood in the forest. Once the date is approved, offerings are prepared, including miak-miak, pira ni ambalungan (chicken eggs), pangir (kaffir lime), and itak gurgur (a cake made from rice flour).

In the Martondi Hau ritual, the Toba Batak community, led by a shaman or spiritual expert, offers prayers to seek permission from habonaran ni inganan and boras pati ni tano in order to determine an auspicious day (maningkir ari) for cutting wood in the forest. Cutting wood is not done carelessly, as the Toba Batak believe that each tree has its own spirit. Therefore, before felling a tree, permission must first be obtained from the ancestors (Habonaran ni Inganan).

Several conditions must be met before a tree can be cut. The tree should not have andor (vines) wrapped around it. It must be swept clean to remove any animals attached to it, ensuring that no living beings are harmed in the process. The growth of new shoots to replace the tree is also considered essential to maintain the balance of nature.

Once permission is granted, offerings are placed at the cutting site, and ulos threads in three colors—red, black, and white—are tied to the tree. Each color carries a distinct meaning:

- a. Red: The red color on the ulos symbolizes courage, strength, and the spirit of life. It is also interpreted as a representation of good relations and brotherhood among people. Red is regarded as a unifying color, reflecting resilience and solidarity in facing challenges.
- b. Black: The black color on the ulos symbolizes a life filled with struggles. While it can represent sadness, it also conveys spiritual depth and inner strength in enduring life's challenges.

- c. White: The white color represents purity, peace, and balance in life. It is also seen as a symbol of hope and a life that is clean and free from sin.

The Toba Batak community is undergoing significant cultural changes, with traditional values increasingly displaced by modern lifestyles. Over time, many traditions have become endangered, and in the swift current of modernization, age-old practices such as Martondi Hau have begun to fade. The younger generation is more drawn to the digital world and global culture, often neglecting the ancestral heritage that was once closely guarded.

Modernization appears to present a stark choice: embrace new ways of life or risk being left behind with old traditions. Yet, Martondi Hau is more than just a ritual—it is a symbol of identity, a cultural root that provides strength and continuity for the Toba Batak people.

Although the Martondi Hau ritual may be less widely known to the public, it is a cultural phenomenon that merits examination through a sociological lens. Due to the limited availability of detailed information about the ritual, this analysis is necessarily hypothetical, drawing on general assumptions about customary practices and relevant sociological theoretical frameworks. The focus is to explore the potential social meanings, functions, and implications of Martondi Hau within the community that practices it.

The basic assumption underlying this analysis is that Martondi Hau is a ritual involving symbolic, repetitive, and structured practices designed to achieve specific social objectives. Studying this ritual holds important sociological significance, as understanding its functions, meanings, and dynamics can offer valuable insights into the community's social structure, belief systems, and processes of social change. These potential functions may include:

- a. Social Integration: Rituals play an important role in reinforcing social ties among community members. Shared participation fosters a sense of togetherness, solidarity, and collective identity. In the case of Martondi Hau, if the ritual involves the participation of most or all members of the community, it can function as a form of social glue, helping to maintain cohesion and stability within the group.
- b. Social Control: Rituals often embody the social norms and values upheld by a community. Through repeated performance, these norms and values are reinforced and passed down from generation to generation. In the context of *Martondi Hau*, any violation of the norms associated with the ritual may result in social sanctions. In this way, the ritual functions as a mechanism for maintaining social order and ensuring adherence to communal rules.
- c. Maintenance of the Belief System: Rituals are often closely connected to a community's belief system, whether religious or animistic. If Martondi Hau is rooted in spiritual or local beliefs, it may function to strengthen and preserve these belief systems. The ritual can serve as a medium for communicating with supernatural forces, seeking blessings, or warding off misfortune.
- d. Emotional Expression: Rituals provide a space for community members to express a range of emotions, including gratitude, sadness, fear, and hope. Martondi Hau may serve as a channel for the collective emotions of the community, fostering social catharsis and helping to alleviate psychological tension.
- e. Cultural Transmission: Rituals play a vital role in passing culture from one generation to the next. The practices, symbols, and narratives associated with Martondi Hau can be handed down over time, ensuring the preservation and continuity of the community's cultural heritage.

A comprehensive understanding of the symbolism within the Martondi Hau ritual requires thorough ethnographic research. Such research should include participant observation, in-depth interviews with community members, and the analysis of sacred texts or folklore related to the ritual. Social transformations—such as modernization, urbanization, and globalization—can significantly influence the survival of Martondi Hau. Modernization may reduce public interest in traditional rituals, while globalization can lead to cultural acculturation and changes in ritual practices.

However, rituals are not static; they can adapt and evolve alongside social change. The Martondi Hau ritual may be modified or reinterpreted to align with new social contexts, ensuring its continued relevance while maintaining its cultural essence.

Forests (harangan) are composed of various types of plants, including trees (hau), shrubs, and grasses (ramba). These plants grow naturally without direct human influence. Timber is also found in non-forest areas, cultivated by local communities. Whether sourced from forests or human-managed land, wood has always received special treatment to fulfill meaningful needs in human life.

In Batak mythology, plants are regarded as the elder brothers of humans, existing before Siraja Ihat Manisia was born. Like humans, plants—especially trees—depend on cyclical processes sustained by water. Timber plays a vital role in meeting housing needs, and the “tree of life” shares the same essential needs as humans. According to traditional belief, humans have inherited all that exists on earth with the responsibility to use it wisely. This respect for all living beings forms the moral foundation for how plants and wood are utilized.

The Batak people also hold beliefs regarding the control of forests by supernatural beings, who may choose certain forests or specific trees as their dwelling places. The principle of mutual respect in this context is not rooted in idolatry, but in acknowledging and honoring the prior “ownership” of these natural objects by other forces. Such practices are intended to prevent supernatural disturbances from following the wood into human spaces, such as homes, after it has been used.

Before a selected tree is cut down, several preparatory steps are taken, one of which is the Martondi Hau ritual. Martondi Hau serves as a ceremonial welcome for the tree that will be brought into the village. The tree is regarded as the elder brother of humans, destined to become parhau—the building materials for a new house. This symbolic act is intended to ensure harmony between the house and its future occupants, protecting them from harmful external forces.

As part of the welcome, an ulos (traditional cloth) or pandan mat is wrapped around the tree trunk. After a few hours, once the ritual is complete, the tree is then felled.

In agriculture, there is also a tradition known as Martondi Eme. When the rice has matured, women bring itak gurgur and sanggar to the rice fields in baskets. A handful of itak gurgur is placed in the field, and the sanggar is planted as part of the ritual. This practice is intended to ensure that the rice grows well and remains free from pests and diseases.

The remaining itak gurgur is distributed to anyone passing by, including buffalo herders near the fields. Those who receive it understand it as an unspoken promise to share responsibility for protecting the rice fields from disturbances caused by birds and livestock. Receiving itak gurgur carries a moral obligation to uphold this collective responsibility.

## **4.1 The Impact of Technological Advancement and Modernization**

The advancement of technology and the rapid pace of modernization have significantly affected the Toba Batak community, accelerating the decline of traditional practices such as Martondi Hau. Modern tools and machinery have made tree felling faster and more efficient, reducing dependence on traditional knowledge and skills. As a result, the community's mindset has gradually shifted, moving away from the deep reverence for nature and the spiritual beliefs that once shaped and guided their actions.

The growing accessibility of information and communication technologies has also shaped how the younger generation perceives and engages with their culture. The appeal of modern entertainment, combined with the constant influx of information from the outside world, has overshadowed the value of preserving traditional knowledge and practices.

### ***4.1.1 Theoretical Study of Ancestor Respect in the Bible***

#### **A. The Bible's View of Ancestor Respect**

In the 19th century, studies on ancestor veneration in the Bible became prominent. Anthropologists and biblical scholars held differing views: some argued that ancestor worship influenced Israelite religion, while others maintained that the Bible reflected only respect for ancestors, not worship. In the Old Testament, there is evidence of honoring ancestors through family burial rituals, but no indication of direct worship.

#### **B. Ancestor Reverence in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, ancestors were honored as a matter of tradition and identity, not as objects of worship. For the Israelites, proper burial was a deeply significant practice, which could include the transfer of ancestral remains, such as the return of Joseph's bones from Egypt to Canaan. Honoring ancestors was also reflected in the burial of kings and the commemoration of figures like Abraham. However, these acts of respect did not diminish God's central role in the salvation and spiritual life of the people of Israel.

#### **C. Ancestor Honoring in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, references to ancestor veneration are minimal. Nevertheless, it remains recognized as part of tradition and cultural identity. Paul, for instance, showed openness to local customs in places like Antioch and Rome, although he did not explicitly present ancestor veneration as a central element of Christian teaching.

#### **4.1.2 Ancestor Reverence is a Major Pillar of Toba Batak Culture, Reflected in Various Aspects of their Lives**

- A. Religion and Belief
  - a. Animism and Dynamism: Believing that ancestral spirits still affect life and can provide protection or punishment.
  - b. Rituals and Ceremonies: Includes Mangaradophon, Manortor, and Mangiring to honor ancestors.
  - c. Parmalim: A religion that emphasizes the importance of respecting ancestors and moral values.
- B. Social Structure
  - a. Kinship System: A patrilineal lineage that determines social status and land ownership.
  - b. Huta: A social unit that prioritizes unity and solidarity based on respect for ancestors.
  - c. Surname: An identity symbol that indicates a genealogical relationship.
- C. Values and Morals
  - a. Martondi Hau: Emphasizing the importance of preserving the heritage of ancestors.
  - b. Hata Sihaholongan: Maintaining harmonious relationships in the family and society.
  - c. Ulaon: A custom that reflects respect for ancestors.
- D. Arts and Culture:
  - a. Music and Dance: Tells stories of ancestors and history.
  - b. Architecture: Toba Batak traditional houses reflect the belief in ancestors.
  - c. Folklore: Contains moral messages related to ancestor reverence.
- E. The Impact of Ancestor Honor :
  - a. Identity Awareness: Forming cultural identity and pride.
  - b. Cultural Continuity: Preserving ancestral traditions and values.
  - c. Community Solidarity: Strengthening family and community ties.

## **5 Conclusion**

Based on the results of the study, several conclusions can be drawn, namely as follows:

- a. The people of Sianjur Mula Mula practice the Martondi Hau tradition as a way to maintain harmony between humans, ancestors, and nature. Through this ritual, participants are believed to receive protection, strength, and encouragement from their ancestors, as well as safeguarding against danger or undesirable events.
- b. At that time, the people of Sianjur Mula Mula Village had not yet embraced formal religions. They still held mystical beliefs and, in activities such as building houses, sought blessings for welfare and prosperity from supernatural spirits.

- c. Martondi Hau is now an extinct tradition within the Batak community. Its practice has become increasingly rare and is largely abandoned, particularly in the modern era and amid globalization. Social transformations driven by changing times have caused many to forget Batak Toba customs that are nearing extinction. Batak people who live in cities or have migrated often lose access and connection to this ancestral heritage. Furthermore, the lack of documentation and the perception that traditional rituals are outdated have contributed to the marginalization of Martondi Hau.

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