

**How Batak Christians view honoring parents and veneration of ancestors
through the spectrum of the Scriptural Narratives¹
(Dr. Binsen Samuel Sidjabat²)**

A. Introduction.

The ancestors of the Toba Batak people of North Sumatra occupied regions around Lake Toba, Samosir Island and the Tapanuli, generally became Christians around the 19th century through the endeavors of the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* (RMG), a German Lutheran organization. The *Huria Kristen Batak Protestan* (HKBP) was the fruit the work of Dr. Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen's (1834-1918 more than fifty years of ministry. Other protestant Batak churches were established including the *Huria Kristen Indonesia* (HKI) and the *Gereja Kristen Protestan Indonesia* (GKPI). It should be noted that the Roman Catholic church is also very strong among the Batak people. In addition, many Bataks are members of the Methodist, Baptist, Pentacostal and Charismatic churches.³

The Toba Batak are strongly committed to observing the customs of their ancestral heritage, preserving cultural rites from womb to tomb. This is called *adat*. There is *adat* for the conception of a baby, *adat* for individual or family crises, *adat* for entering a new house or job, *adat* for marriage, *adat* for honoring older parents during and after life, and *adat* for the veneration of ancestors. In pre-Christian times, *adat* was believed to be given to ancestors by the High God or *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon* the creator and sustainer of the world as a social and cosmic orders. God reveals his blessings (*pasu-pasu*) for man through *adat*. Hence, for Batak people the High God is both transcendent and immanent.⁴

Primarily the nuclear family (*bona suhut*) is responsible for carrying out of the rites. However, *adat* is to carried out in the presence of the extended family which comprises: *hula-hula* and *tulang*, the family of the wives of the men; a relative of the surname (*dongan tubu*); and the daughters of the nuclear family (*boru*). Thus, these Toba Batak cultural rites of *dalihan na tolu*, which means literally "three furnaces", involve three parties playing specific

¹A paper presented in Asia Congress 2022, Bangkok, Thailand, 17-21 October 2022, in seminar on "Compatibility between Christian Faith and Cultural Rites in Asia Societies"

²Binsen Samuel Sidjabat, Ph.D., professor of Education and Theology at Tyranus Bible Seminary in Bandung; he is currently the principal of the Seminary; and the chairman of Association of Evangelical Theological Schools in Indonesia (PASTI).

³Pentacostal and Charismatic church leaders do not advise their congregations observing their ancestral cultural rites because they consider them as legacy of pagan life.

⁴Ph.O.L. Tobing. *The Structure of the Toba-Batak Belief in the High God*. Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1963). Anicetus B. Sinaga, *The Toba-Batak High God Transcendence and Immanence*. (St. Augustine: Anthropos Institute, 1981). For Tobing, the High God is transcendent, but for Sinaga, he is both transcendent and immanent.

roles. The *hula-hula* and *tulang* party receive honor and high respect from the nuclear family that performing the *adat*, while the *dongan tubu* party supports the family, and the *boru* party acts as servants.

B. Three important practices of *adat*.

Owing to time limits this paper will deal with only tribute to parents and veneration to ancestors. Its purpose is to briefly portray the compatibility between Christian faith and cultural rituals (*adat*) of honoring parents and veneration of ancestors among the Toba Batak protestant Christians.

1. Giving of food out of respect for elderly parents.

If all the sons and daughters of elderly parents are married and have grandchildren, then while they are still healthy, it is considered mandatory to provide special food on occasion. The event is to be conducted in the morning at about 10.00 to 11.00 AM. The parties representing *dalihan na tolu* are present in this cultural rite. Parents⁵ get a traditional diet, usually specially processed pork and golden fish, from all sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren in turn. The portion given is small so that the gifts of all descendants can be enjoyed. After the meal the parents give advice and prayers for the offspring.

In pre-Christian times, the Batak people viewed parents as representatives of the High God. Elderly parents are considered full of charisma (*sahala*), and a source of blessings. Therefore, the tributes were considered as a means of gaining blessings the parents, and protection from bad luck, sickness and loss from the High God. Through this activity, the descendants of the parents will also be respected by their extended family and honored by the community in which they live.

Influenced by church teaching and pastoral ministry, giving special food for elderly parent has been reframed and given a biblical interpretation in accordance with the command to honor one's father and mother (Ex. 20:12). They are also inspired by the narrative of Isaac asking for a special meal from his son Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27:1-29). Hence, after the meal like Isaac, parents pray for their offspring. Pastor or elder of the parents' church may be invited to lead prayer to start and end the event. There are also families who start activity with short worship time. The event is used as a means to express gratitude to God (1 Thess. 5:18; Eph. 5:20) for the long life and kindness of parent.

⁵Both parents may still alive until their old age. For many families they only have old mother of father.

2. Honoring deceased parents.

Parents who died at a very old age and when all their children married are called happy death (*saur matua*). Parents who died but still leave an unmarried son or daughter, are called *sari matua*. They cannot be categorized to have reached the stage of happy death because of responsibility still unfulfilled. However, their death should be celebrated with great joy. In the past the festive *adat* ritual was viewed as a means to make the spirits of deceased parent happy on the other side.

On the third or fourth day after death, the body is buried. Prior to the burial, a feast with beef or buffalo and fork meet is served. The main family members of the deceased parent must express honor to *hula-hula* and *tulang*⁶ of the deceased mother or father. They honor them by dancing with traditional music where the hands are in a worship position. They do so because both groups have significant roles, who put the body of parent in a coffin and cover it with *ulos*. The surviving spouse of the deceased was also received *ulos*. A pastor or church elder has neither a role nor the right to do the ceremony.

The *hula-hula* and *tulang* accompanied by music and dance bless the descendants standing beside the coffin of the deceased parent, with words of traditional wisdom and advice which may be taken from Bible. Finally, the bereaved are covered by with a special *ulos*. They consider themselves as mediators of God and the spirit of the deceased parent, to convey blessings. The giving of the *ulos* signifies that God's love and care will accompany the grieving family. In order to honor and thank the groups, a traditional dance is also performed accompanied by the giving of money as a thanksgiving.

At the festive tribute feast, the descendants of the deceased parent also dance around the coffin with their hands open as if receiving blessings. But faithful Christians who understand relationship of the living and the deaths, do not dance in that way. Some others still practice the tradition of dancing with open arms, to show respect to the party of *hula-hula* and *tulang*, or to simply demonstrate tolerance to the *adat* of honouring deceased parent.

Why do Batak Christians maintain the cultural rite? First, they want to preserve their ancestor *adat*. Second, to avoid dishonor to family, relatives and community. Third, to avoid feeling of guilty if descendent do not respect parents with a festive *adat*. Fourth, to reflect the example of people of God in the Bible. The biblical narratives of the burial of Sarah, the wife of Abraham (Gen. 23:1-20); the burial of Abraham by Isaac and Ismael (Gen. 25:7-11); the

⁶*Hula-hula* is the group of family of parents in law of sons of the deceased parent who conduct the *adat* ceremony. *Tulang* is the group of family from the mother of sons and daughters of the deceased parent. These two groups of party are considered equally of high status and roles in the ritual.

burial of Isaac by Jacob and Esau (Gen. 35:29); and the burial of Jacob in Egypt (Gen. 49:29-50:14), have become source of motivation for Batak Christians to continue conduct festive funerary party.⁷

3. Excavation and reburial of ancestral bones.

The Batak people honor their long-dead parents and ancestors by digging up their bones to be placed in new graves made of cemented stone. Reasons for excavation and removal vary. First, it demonstrates intimate relationship with parents and ancestor. Second, it seeks to get blessings from spirits (*tondi*) of the long-dead parents or ancestors. Third, it seeks to obtain honor from extended family and community. Fourth, it means that the ancestral bones will be located in the family graveyard, and therefore it is thought that their spirits will not wander and cry but find rest.

This activity certainly drains energy, time and funds. Often conflicts occur amongst families regarding financial supports. In addition, in the excavation of bones, there are descendants of parents who speak to the spirit of the deceased. They offer special food. Some family may feel obligated to first ask permission to the spirits of the ancestors by the help of mediators.

Because of church teaching and pastoral ministry, the Batak Christians conduct the *adat* as to obey the command of God to honor their parents (Ex. 6:12) which are accepted by the relatives of long-died parents or ancestors. They justify the practice from the biblical account of Joseph's plea to his descendants to have his bones brought out of Egypt (Gen. 49:23-33; 50:22-26), which was fulfilled by Moses (Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:39-30). They also extrapolate from the story of Joshua's body buried in his desired place (Josh. 24:32-33). They also learn from the Gospel that the body of Jesus was placed in a new and expensive stone grave of Joseph Arimathea (Matt. 27:57-61).⁸

C. Tasks for the church.

Practices of *adat* of honoring parents and veneration of ancestors may be tempted to follow pagan rituals in the past. What do protestant church leaders still need to develop in pastoring their congregations? Some leaders (Schreiner, 1978; Aritonang, 2006; Boangmanalu, 2019)⁹ suggest development of positive, critical and constructive attitudes by

⁷Richard Sinaga, *Meninggal Adat Dalihan Natolu*. (Jakarta: Dian Utama, 1999), pp. 24-26.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Jan S. Aritonang (ed.). *Beberapa Pemikiran Menuju Teologi Dalihan Natolu* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2006); Jusen Boangmanalu. *Kristologi Lintas Budaya Batak* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2019); Lothar

modeling the way of Jesus in response to the Jews ancestral laws and traditions. Some other leaders propose relevant church liturgies that will help family in conducting veneration of their ancestors (Tobing, 2022).¹⁰

To find answers for the question I did a google survey, last 30 July-6 August 2022, which was responded by 290 informants representing 75.5 % protestant church members and leaders. Here are some important findings.

First, 82% respondents state strong commitment to preserve *adat* rituals as the results of parental examples, and to show their identity as Batak people.

Second, reasons for preserving *adat* vary, including to honor parents and ancestors (66.2%), to show gratitude to the Lord and to ask for his blessings (8.6%), to gain esteem from community (3.4%), to avoid guilty feeling (3.4%), and others.

Third, respondents view that their churches never provide teaching on veneration of ancestors (33.5%); some find it seldom (42.6%) or only one occasion (19.1%). By enlarge respondents maintain that pastoral teaching from church is greatly needed (81.7%) particularly in the area of relationship between the living and the dead.

Fourth, respondents suggest that teachings about *adat* rituals needs to be facilitated through Bible study (30%), seminars (27.3%), group discussion (21.4%), preaching (10%), and lectures (1.3%).

As an evangelical Toba Batak, I personally response to *adat* with the love and compassion of the Lord Jesus. I have commitment to critically maintain meaningful life in the midst of my cultural rites. With the wisdom of Christ and supported by relatives and leaders of *adat*, have conducted the wedding *adat* of my sons, the *adat* of honoring my parents, and the *adat* of burial of my deceased parents. Our whole family do not worship the spirits of our parents, neither we dance as to take blessings, but to respect our honorary guests.

I also see that Toba Batak Christians need church guidance to have intimate and individual relationship with Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit guides and teaches believers to live their faith in relation to their cultural rites (Jn. 14:16,17,26). They need to practice *adat* rituals with the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and through the guidance of the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Discipleship ministry is needed to help them

Schreiner. *Telah Kudengar dari Ayahku: Perjumpaan Adat dengan Iman Kristen di Tanah Batak*. (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1978).

¹⁰Dirgos Charles Lumbantobing. *Penghormatan Kepada Leluhur Dan Perannya Dalam Identitas Umat Percaya: Suatu Tinjauan Biblis Terhadap Praktik Penghormatan Kepada Leluhur di Dalam Perjanjian Lama dan Perannya dalam Identitas Umat Allah, serta Perbandingannya dengan Pemahaman dan Pengalaman Jemaat GKPI*. (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2022).

growing in the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18), that will enable them realizing their call to be light and salt (Matt. 5:13-16) in preserving cultural rites. The lordship of Christ and guidance of the Spirit will empower them to glorify God through *adat* of venerating ancestors.

D. Concluding words.

Churches among the Toba Batak people have brought significant impact for congregations to practice their ancestral *adat* of honoring their ancestors by worshiping God in Jesus Christ. However, forces and values of this world and the temptation of evils are very strong that may lead them into syncretistic attitudes and practices for the sake of individual and communal identity, honor and esteem. They therefore need continuous understanding of the teachings of the Bible for transformative ways of *adat* practices. []