
Characteristics of the Toba Batak Society from a Cultural Perspective and Its Relevance to the Formation of Character in the Lake Toba Region

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Abstract

This research is motivated by the increasingly limited understanding of the various positive characteristics of the Toba Batak society, leading to the emergence of a negative paradigm stating that the Toba Batak people are less friendly and less service-oriented. The purpose of this research is to understand the character of the Toba Batak society from a cultural perspective, which includes the character of family members in the Toba Batak society and efforts to shape the character of the community in the Lake Toba area. This research uses a qualitative method to understand social phenomena. The results show that the family is the smallest social unit that plays a crucial role in character formation. The formation of the community's character in the Lake Toba area has been passed down through generations. Character formation is carried out through private spaces within families as well as in public spaces within the wider community.

Keywords: Character, Toba Batak Society, Culture

Introduction

The existence of a nation is determined by the character of its people. A nation with strong character is capable of becoming a dignified and competitive nation among others. Being a nation with character is the aspiration of society in a country. The desire to become a nation with character is deeply rooted in Indonesian society and articulated in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution, which states, "to guide the people of Indonesia to the gateway of an independent Indonesian state that is independent, united, sovereign, just, and prosperous."

Character is the habits, psychological traits, morals, or virtues that differentiate one person from another (Pusat Bahasa Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2008). A person with character means someone who has personality, behaves, has qualities, habits, or traits. Based on the above understanding, character is synonymous with morality, ethics, and morals, thus character represents the universal human behavioral values that encompass all human activities, whether in relation to God, oneself, other humans, or the environment, manifested in thoughts, attitudes, feelings, words, and actions based on religious norms, laws, etiquette, culture, and customs (Samrin, 2016). The character of a person is not inherent from birth, but is formed gradually and influenced by the surrounding environment. Besides family and the surrounding environment, there are several elements that mutually influence each other to shape a person's character, namely emotions, attitudes, beliefs, habits, and will.

Character originates from the values regarding something. A value manifested in the form of a child's behavior is what is called character (Suyadi, 2013). Based on the study of religious values, social norms, regulations/laws, academic ethics, and principles of human rights, certain values have been identified and grouped into five main values. These are values of human behavior in relation to God Almighty, oneself, fellow human beings, and the environment as well as the nation. The main values of character are: 1). Character values in relation to God, which include religiosity; 2). Character values in relation to oneself, which include honesty, responsibility, living a healthy lifestyle, discipline, hard work, confidence, entrepreneurial spirit, critical thinking (logical, critical, creative, and innovative), independence, curiosity, love of knowledge; 3). Character values in relation to others, which include awareness of one's own rights and duties and those of others, compliance with social rules, appreciation of the work and achievements of others, politeness, and democracy; 4). Character values in relation to the environment, which include social and environmental care; 5). National values, which include nationalism and appreciation of diversity (Rohman, 2019).

The government through the Ministry of Education and Culture emphasizes that Strengthening Character Education (PPK) is a main axis in improving national education closely related to various government priority programs. The five main character values prioritized in PPK are closely related to various priority programs of the Ministry of Education and Culture in the fields of education and culture. These five main values are Religious, Nationalist, Independent, Integrity, and Cooperation. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, religious character encompasses values of respecting differences, orderliness, steadfastness, self-confidence, friendship, and love for the environment. Integrity character includes values of trustworthiness, exemplary behavior, fulfilling duties, and justice. Cooperation character includes values of collaboration, mutual assistance, volunteerism, anti-discrimination, and solidarity. Independent character includes values of collaboration, creativity, and courage. Nationalism character includes values of willingness to sacrifice, excellence and achievement, nationalism, law-abidingness, adherence to rules, and respect for ethnic, cultural,

and religious diversity (Fahira & Ramadan, 2021).

The strengthening of character education will succeed if the local character of every region is unearthed and cultivated within each community. The Toba Batak community is a part of the Indonesian society residing in the Lake Toba area, North Sumatra Province. The Toba Batak community possesses various positive characters derived from the noble cultural values. These positive characters serve as a foundation in responding to the rapid progress in the Lake Toba Region, following its designation as a special area through the National Tourism Strategic Area (KSPN) in 2011 by the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, a Super Priority Tourism Destination (DPSP) by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy in 2021, and the Toba Caldera UNESCO Global Geopark (Earth Park) by UNESCO in 2020.

This research will elucidate the character of the Toba Batak community from a cultural perspective. There is strong indication that the decreasing understanding of the diverse positive characters within the Toba Batak community has given rise to a negative paradigm stating that the Toba Batak people are less friendly and less service-oriented, thus the designation of the Lake Toba area as a special region has had limited impact due to lack of support from the community. Addressing this phenomenon of the character of the Toba Batak community necessitates raising a major question: what is the character of the Toba Batak community from a cultural perspective? As for minor questions: what are the characters of family members within the Toba Batak community? and what efforts are made for character formation within the Batak community in the Lake Toba area?

Literature Review

1. Theory of Integration and Social Solidarity

Emile Durkheim's study of social solidarity is an effort to examine a phenomenon that is affecting society, namely the division of labor. Durkheim refers to this division of labor as solidarity. There are several terms closely related to the concept of social solidarity, including social integration and social cohesion. Social solidarity is a central concept in Durkheim's development of sociological theory. According to Durkheim, social solidarity is a sense of unity that denotes a state of relationships between individuals and/or groups based on shared moral feelings and beliefs strengthened by shared emotional experiences (Jones, 2009).

Durkheim analyzed the changes in the way social solidarity is formed, specifically how societies adapt and how their members perceive themselves as integral parts of it. These changes occur due to solidarity based on the division of labor, making it a vital condition for modern society. According to Durkheim, social solidarity is divided into two types: organic solidarity and mechanical solidarity.

Organic solidarity is a collective bond built on differences; indeed, it can endure precisely because of the diversity within it, as everyone has different roles and responsibilities (Ritzer & Douglas J. Goodman, 2011). These differences interact with each other and form a bond that is contingent in nature. Organic solidarity is typically found in heterogeneous societies. The relationships or bonds formed are usually based on material needs or work-related connections.

Mechanical solidarity is generally found in primitive societies. It is formed because individuals engage in the same activities, share similar responsibilities, and require physical involvement. Characteristics of societies with mechanical solidarity are marked by a strong collective consciousness, which refers to the totality of shared beliefs and sentiments. The sense of togetherness is formed through mutual concern among members. Mechanical solidarity is found in homogeneous societies, especially those residing in rural areas, where the sense of brotherhood and mutual concern among them is typically stronger than in urban communities (Ritzer & Douglas J. Goodman, 2011).

2. Cultural Values

Cultural values are the foundational level of ideal culture or customs. Cultural values represent the most abstract layer and the broadest scope. Thus, cultural values are something considered highly influential and serve as a guide for a society in determining one's humanity or lack thereof (Koentjaraningrat, 1984). Values, including cultural values, are the result of the transformation of human intellect's works upon the data, facts, situations, and natural occurrences they encounter. These values are in the form of immanent values which are then objectified into daily life arrangements. These daily life arrangements are symbols that serve as objects, actions, events, qualities, or relationships that function as vehicles for a concept (Firmando, 2022).

The cultural value system is the most abstract level of customs. A cultural value system consists of conceptions, which live in the minds of most members of society, about the things they should consider highly valuable in life. Therefore, a cultural value system usually serves as the highest guidance for human behavior. Other systems of human behavior arrangements that are more concrete, such as specific rules, laws, and norms, all also adhere to the cultural value system. As part of customs and the ideal manifestation of culture, the cultural value system seems to exist outside and above the individuals who are members of the respective society. Since childhood, these individuals have been imbued with cultural values that live within their society, so these conceptions have long been rooted in their souls. That's why those cultural values are difficult to replace with other cultural values in a short time (Koentjaraningrat, 2002).

Method

Qualitative method is employed in this research to understand the phenomena experienced by the research subjects extensively, by describing words and language and utilizing various natural methods. Observation, interviews, document studies, and focus group discussions are used to collect data. The gathered data are then analyzed and interpreted qualitatively. Key informants are prominent figures in the community, such as traditional leaders who also serve as organizers of social organizations. Participants are determined in conjunction with the development of the review and analysis of research results during the research process, including young generations and the general public. The research is conducted in six districts in the Lake Toba area, namely: Sipoholon District and Tarutung District in North Tapanuli

Regency; Parmaksian District and Balige District in Toba Regency; as well as Sianjur Mulamula District and Pangururan District in Samosir Regency. These six districts are the hometowns of the Toba Batak community, so the people in these districts are knowledgeable about the character of the Toba Batak community from a cultural perspective and efforts for character formation within the Toba Batak community in the Lake Toba area.

Results and Discussion

Character of Family Members in the Toba Batak Community

Every community has guiding principles passed down through generations from their ancestors. Similarly, the Toba Batak community has a set of life principles known as the five basic principles of life (*poda sisia nalima ni habatahon*). These life principles are taught by Guru Tatea Bulan, the ancestors of the Batak community. The five principles or life principles of the Batak community are *Mardebata* (Godliness), *Marpatik* (Adhering to the Law), *Maruhum* (Judgment), *Maradat* (Custom), and *Martutur* (Kinship). After the arrival of Christian missionaries to the land of the Batak, a new characteristic emerged in the Batak community, which is full of love and peace.

The five guidelines have evolved into cultural values. These cultural values, which encompass all aspects of Toba Batak community life, are grouped into nine values, known as the main cultural values. These nine main cultural values are: *Kinship*, *Religion*, *Hagabeon*, *Hasangapon*, *Hamoraon*, *Hamajuon*, *Law*, *Security*, and *Conflict* (Harahap & Siahaan, 1987).

The nine main cultural values are the actualization of the life goals of the Toba Batak community. These life goals are *hamoraon* (wealth), *hagabeon* (having many descendants), and *hasangapon* (honor). These three elements of life goals are interconnected and mutually supportive, and when achieved, they enhance the social status of individuals or groups. *Hasangapon* is the result obtained after achieving success in the cultural missions of *hagabeon* and *hamoraon*. *Hasangapon* is the pinnacle result of the cultural missions of *hamoraon*, *hagabeon*, and *hasangapon* (Harahap & Siahaan, 1987).

Family is a small social group typically consisting of a father, mother, and children, where social relationships among family members are relatively stable and based on blood ties, marriage, or adoption. The relationships between family members are characterized by affection and a sense of responsibility, and they function to nurture, care for, and protect children in order to socialize them so they can develop self-control and social skills (Simbolon et al., 2021). Family is the smallest social unit that plays a crucial role in character formation.

The presence of a father within the family holds cultural authority. In family life, a father is not just a breadwinner. He is a protector, guardian, comforter, educator, and advisor to all family members. Therefore, the role and function of a father within the family can determine the moral and ethical values of society as a whole. The role and function of a father in family life are supported by his role and function in the cultural, social, and religious community that exists and grows within society.

The role and strategic position must be accompanied by the lifestyle, character, and behavior of a father figure. That's why, in the aspirations and hopes of Batak life, a father is described as; *sitiop hatian na so ra teleng* (unchangeable holder of the scales), *pamuro na so marbatahi* (guardian of the cargo without needing a staff), *hasahatan ni panungkunan* (place for various questions), *parsali ni pangidoan* (place for borrowing requests), *simemehon poda* (advisor), *sitiop habonaran* (holder of truth), *ulubalang ni harajaon* (king's commander). All of this can happen because in a father's life, there exists a character of truth, justice, love, and leadership spirit that protects all parties. Such a fatherly figure is what is meant by a father with authority (*ama na marsahala*) (Firmando, 2019).

A woman is a multifunctional and multi-talented individual. *Parsonduk bolon*, derived from the words *sonduk* (spoon) and *bolon* (big), meaning a housewife who serves meals for the family. *Ina Soripada*, derived from *ina* (mother, caregiver) and *sori* (fate, fortune, destiny), meaning a mother who nurtures, cares for, and educates children. *Pardibagas*, derived from *bagas* (house inhabited by the nuclear family), meaning a mother who organizes and nurtures the family. *Pardihuta*, derived from *huta* (village or place of residence), meaning a mother who lives and socializes in the community. *Tuan Boru*, derived from *tuan* (respected or venerable), meaning a woman respected/venerated within the nuclear family. *Boru ni Raja*, meaning the daughter of a King, signifies a woman who is respected; hence, an ideal wife possesses traits and behaviors that are polite, graceful, and able to uphold the honor of the family and parents. *Ina/Inang Siadopan*, derived from *adop* (face to face) and *ina/inang* (mother, housewife), meaning a woman who is always faced, always in face-to-face interactions. Thus, a wife is a companion for exchanging thoughts, a confidant, and a source of affection, a woman who is always cared for, and a woman who is always ready to do her best for her husband, like a mother to her child (Firmando, 2021b). All of this can happen because in a mother's life, she possesses gentle, graceful, honorable, and loving characteristics. Such a motherly figure is what is meant by a mother with authority (*soripada na marhuaso*).

The presence of children within the family holds its own value, where there are differing views on the value of sons and daughters. The presence of sons plays a significant role because the Batak ethnic group traces lineage patrilineally. Lineage is traced from the father and continued by sons, thus sons hold the continuity of generations. If someone does not have sons, they may be considered *napunu* (extinct generation) because they cannot continue the lineage.

The presence of sons and daughters indeed holds different levels of importance within Batak ethnic families, accompanied by different duties and rights. The duty of sons is to continue the family lineage, while their rights can be observed in daily life practices, where sons are not allowed to help daughters with household chores. Sons are only permitted to go to the fields to assist their parents.

In traditional ceremonies, even though a son is the younger sibling of his sister, he is not allowed to show respect to his sister; instead, the sister must show respect to her younger brother, as the younger brother is considered the ruler within the family. As for daughters, their duties are evident when they get married. Daughters must be able to give birth to many offspring, with both genders, for their husband, which is an honor for the woman's family if she can accomplish this. Regarding rights, women have the right to prohibit their husbands from marrying again if their duties as wives can be fulfilled as they should. One-way communication between husband and wife becomes an obstacle to making decisions for the family. That's why, in ancient times, divorces were not found in Batak ethnic families (Firmando, 2018). All of this

can happen because in a child's life, they understand their position, whether as a son or a daughter. Understanding of this position has been socialized by parents since childhood through the division of daily tasks at home. This division of tasks fosters an understanding of duties and rights in the future. A child's life is characterized by humility and being easily taught. Such a childlike figure is what is meant by a good child (*anak na burju/boru na burju*), so from such commendable character, a child is referred to as a prince/princess (*anak ni raja/boru ni raja*).

The cultural values of the Toba Batak community are actualized through various philosophical expressions. These philosophical expressions serve as guidelines for behavior, encompassing social interaction. The way one interacts with their social environment shapes their character. Toba Batak culture teaches good social interaction with others or with strangers. This interaction is specifically analogized when someone or a family receives guests into their home, depicted in various philosophical expressions. These expressions cultivate a serving character among the Toba Batak community.

Parbahulbahul na bolon. The meaning of this philosophical expression is the owner of a large basket filled with rice or grains. This expression symbolizes prosperity, where someone or a family willingly gives with sincere and patient hearts. *Paramak so balunon*. The meaning of this philosophical expression is the owner of a mat that is never rolled up. This expression symbolizes the openness of someone or a family to welcome everyone without regard to their ethnicity or origin. *Partataring so ra mintop/Parapi na so haitopan*. The meaning of this philosophical expression is the owner of an ever-burning cooking stove. This expression represents the characteristic or symbol of someone or a family who has economic ability, willingly helps, and feeds others. *Parsakkalan so ra mahiang*. The meaning of this philosophical expression is a wooden cutting board used as a base for cutting fish and meat. This expression represents the characteristic or symbol of someone or a family who enjoys hosting guests, has economic ability, and willingly helps and feeds others.

Efforts to Shape the Character of the Community in the Lake Toba Area **Efforts to Build Character within the Family**

The formation of character within the community in the Lake Toba area has been passed down through generations. Character formation takes place both in the private space of the family and in the public sphere of the general community. Character formation within the family involves assigning daily tasks to children. The Toba Batak community living in the Lake Toba area is an agrarian society relying on agriculture. The eldest son is usually tasked with herding buffalo, while the youngest son is tasked with housekeeping. Parents, both father and mother, work in the fields, while older or younger sisters prepare meals at home to be taken to the fields or eaten together at home. This division of tasks reflects the traditional division of labor in Toba Batak society, which is still practiced by the community in the Lake Toba area. From a sociological perspective, this division of labor represents the allocation of roles and functions within the family, which has an impact on social roles and functions in the future. An older sibling is responsible for herding or caring for their younger siblings, leading to the formation of a nurturing character. A younger sibling respects their older siblings and maintains family cohesion, fostering a sense of solidarity. Similarly, older and younger sisters show love towards their brothers, fostering a caring character, thus promoting harmony within the family.

Character formation within the family also occurs through communal worship, both in the morning before daily activities and in the evening after daily activities, usually after dinner. Communal worship fosters religious character within the family. Eating together (*rap marsipanganon*) is also an effort in character formation within the family. Traditional Toba Batak society has the custom of *mangan di sapa* (eating from a large plate). Four children eat from one large plate, symbolizing sharing and feeling the needs of others, as an older sibling will not be greedy in eating and will portion themselves, ensuring their younger siblings also get food, and vice versa. Eating together is still practiced by families in the Lake Toba area, although no longer from one large plate. Through communal meals, interactions occur, fostering a character of sharing.

Character formation within the family also occurs during casual discussions called *marsirarian*. In these light discussions, parents and children communicate and inquire about the progress of the children's education or the parents' work in the fields. This fosters a communicative character. During these discussions, parents also share folk tales called *turi-turian*. Folk tales teach positive local wisdom values, thereby instilling exemplary behavior. In these casual discussions, parents and children also express themselves through traditional arts such as poetry and regional songs that convey noble values, thus fostering various positive characters.

Efforts in Character Formation within the Community

Character formation within the general community occurs during communal play in the front yards of homes. Play is an initial effort to enhance socialization in children. The front yard serves as a public space where the community engages in activities such as weaving, carpentry, children and adolescent play areas, conducting youth activities such as *gondang naposo* (youth festivals) usually held at *bona taon* (new year) or during harvests, carrying out various traditional ceremonies, conducting village judiciary proceedings, discussing matters related to common interests, and making announcements. The front yard serves as a socialization hub for the Toba Batak community (Firmando, 2021a). Through play, a sportsmanlike character is formed, characterized by chivalry and honesty.

Character formation within the general community also takes place through various traditional ceremonies of the Toba Batak people. The Toba Batak community believes that character formation begins even before birth, while the baby is still in the mother's womb. When a pregnant woman reaches her seventh month of pregnancy, her parents will come to provide customary food and ulos (traditional Batak woven cloth) to their daughter. This ritual of giving food and ulos is called *pasahat ulos tondi/mambosuri*, which signifies that the giving of ulos will strengthen the spirit of the recipient, ensuring smooth delivery, and that the baby will be born healthy. This traditional ceremony creates a spiritual bond between the unborn baby and the relatives, thus shaping religious, kinship, and loving character traits.

Character formation within the community also occurs when a baby is born, where the parents of the newborn girl and extended family members bring customary food and provide ulos, which serves as a *parompa* (baby carrier). This traditional ceremony is called *mamboan aek ni unte* (bringing sour water). The "sour water" referred to here is a type of

vegetable dish made from *bangun-bangun* leaves, flavored with sour ingredients and coconut milk mixed with chicken meat to replenish the mother's strength and enhance breast milk production. This traditional ceremony is an expression of gratitude to God for a smooth delivery, the health of both mother and baby, and a request to relatives to continue praying for the newborn and her parents for health and blessings from God. This customary ceremony creates a spiritual bond between the baby and the relatives, thus shaping religious, kinship, and loving character traits.

Character formation within the community also occurs when someone is considered an adult by religious institutions such as the Church in the Christian community. For Christians, an individual is deemed an adult upon making a declaration of faith, known as confirmation. Confirmation can take place once a person has completed catechesis (*marguru malua*), which is basic Christian instruction conducted over the course of one year. After the confirmation ceremony conducted by the Church, a traditional ceremony is held at home, where relatives bring customary food and ulos. This customary ceremony is an expression of gratitude to God for the individual's transition into adulthood, and a request to relatives to continue praying for the newly confirmed individual and their parents for health, success in education, and blessings from God. This customary ceremony fosters familial bonds, thus shaping religious, kinship, and loving character traits.

Character formation within the community also occurs when a young man intends to marry. The ideal marriage for the Batak Toba community is a union between a man and his *pariban* (cousin, specifically the daughter of a maternal uncle). If this cannot be arranged, and it turns out that a man is not destined to marry his cousin, a customary ceremony called "*parmisi tu tulang*" (asking permission from the maternal uncle) is held. This customary ceremony is a form of respect towards the maternal uncle for not proceeding with the marriage to his daughter, and a plea to relatives for health and blessings from God as the individual embarks on a new journey in marriage. This customary ceremony fosters familial bonds, thus shaping religious, kinship, loving, and respectful character traits.

Character formation within the community also occurs when a child participates in a youth event called "*gondang naposo*." *Gondang naposo* is a youth festival in a village or a combination of several villages, which signifies gratitude for God's blessings upon the younger generation, including good health, smooth education, and success in their careers, akin to a bountiful harvest. *Gondang naposo* also serves as a platform to foster relationships among the youth, often leading to romantic connections between them after the event. Parents also attend *gondang naposo*, during which the youth seek blessings from their parents for continued health, educational success, and sustenance from God. Thorough organization and preparation precede and accompany the execution of *gondang naposo*, ensuring that each aspect of the event is meticulously planned and all necessary materials are readily available. This customary ceremony embodies togetherness, thus shaping religious, kinship, loving, leadership, and communal spirit character traits.

Character formation within the community also occurs when a child participates in a harvest festival known as "*marpariama*" or "*gotilon*." *Marpariama/gotilon* is a celebration of the harvest in a village or several villages, signifying gratitude for God's blessings that have resulted in a satisfactory agricultural yield. It also entails prayers for continued prosperity in future agricultural endeavors. The *marpariama/gotilon* festival is coordinated by social institutions such as customary councils in a region or church organizations, which form a committee assigning tasks to individuals according to the needs of the festival. In preparing for and executing the *marpariama/gotilon* festival, the involvement of the younger generation is always emphasized. The engagement of the youth represents an effort in character formation within the community, as the festival embodies a sense of unity that is well-organized. Consequently, this fosters religious, kinship, loving, leadership, and communal spirit character traits.

Conclusions

The relationships among family members are nurtured by affection and a sense of responsibility, serving to nurture, care for, and protect children in their socialization process so they can develop self-control and a social spirit. The family is the smallest social unit that plays a crucial role in character formation. A father's life is characterized by truth, justice, love, and leadership qualities that protect all parties. Such a father figure embodies authority and respect (*ama na marsahala*). A mother's life is characterized by gentleness, grace, upholding honor, and compassion. Such a mother figure embodies power and authority (*soripada na marhuaso*). A child's life is characterized by humility and teachability. Such a child figure represents goodness, hence, from these commendable traits, a child is called a royal child (*anak ni raja/boru ni raja*).

The character formation of the community in the Lake Toba region has been passed down through generations. Character formation takes place both in the private space of the family and in the public space of the wider community. In the family, character formation occurs through the division of everyday tasks among children, communal worship, communal meals, light discussions (*marsirarian*), sharing folk tales known as *turi-turian*, and expressing oneself through traditional arts such as poetry and regional songs that uphold noble values. In the broader community, character formation occurs during collective play in the household yard and through various Batak Toba traditional ceremonies. Character formation in the community through traditional ceremonies includes *pasahat ulos tondi/mambosuri*, *mamboan aek ni unte*, *peneguhan sidi*, *parmisi tu tulang*, *gondang naposo*, and *marpariama/gotilon*. Character formation in both private and public spaces leads to the realization of social harmony in the Lake Toba region.

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