



## The Transformation of Batak Toba Wedding Ceremonies: Navigating Tradition and Modernity

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### ABSTRACT

The Batak Toba traditional wedding ceremony is a significant cultural practice that reflects the social identity and kinship structure of the Batak Toba community. This study aims to analyze the transformation of Batak Toba wedding rituals in the modern context, particularly in Medan City, where urbanization, modernization, and globalization strongly influence traditional practices. Using Alexander Duranti's theoretical framework, this research explores the ideological, symbolic, and structural changes in key stages of the ceremony, such as *marhusip*, *marhata sinamot*, and *ulaon pesta*. A qualitative methodology was employed, incorporating in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that while core elements such as the exchange of ulos and the reinforcement of kinship ties remain intact, significant shifts have occurred, including a transition from communal preparations to catering services and the simplification of rituals due to economic pressures and modern lifestyles. This study lies in its specific focus on the Batak Toba community in an urban setting, highlighting how traditional ceremonies adapt to modern influences while retaining their cultural essence.

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### INTRODUCTION

The Batak Toba tribe is one of the major ethnic groups in Indonesia, comprising one of the six sub-tribes of the Batak people: Batak Toba, Batak Karo, Batak Simalungun, Batak Pakpak, Batak Angkola, and Mandailing. These groups reside primarily in the North Sumatra Province, with the Batak Toba people concentrated in North Tapanuli, Toba Samosir, Samosir, and Humbang Hasundutan. Each society possesses its own unique culture, a complex system that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs, and other habits acquired over generations. Within this diversity, the Batak Toba people stand out for their distinct

customs and traditions, particularly their cultural ceremonies, which reflect their identity and societal values (Siregar et al., 2024).

Among the key cultural rituals of the Batak Toba community is the wedding ceremony, or *ulaon pesta*. This ceremony plays a central role in reinforcing kinship ties, social hierarchy, and religious values, with practices such as the exchange of *ulos* (a traditional woven cloth), and the active involvement of *hulahula* (the bride's family) and *boru* (the groom's family). However, like other traditional practices around the globe, the Batak Toba wedding ceremony is not immune to the influences of modernization, urbanization, and globalization. Economic pressures, technological advancements, and shifting social norms have reshaped the structure and essence of this ceremony. For instance, simplifications in rituals and smaller gatherings are becoming increasingly common, raising concerns about the erosion of cultural authenticity (Sitinjak et al., 2023).

This transformation of wedding rituals is a global phenomenon. Studies from various cultures highlight the adaptability of communities in navigating the tension between tradition and modernity (Samosir & Adriel, 2023). For example, in Ghana, Krobo marriage rites blend Western influences with traditional practices to sustain cultural identity despite urbanization and legal reforms (Abbey & Nasidi, 2024). Similarly, in India, Banjara weddings have adopted Bollywood-inspired aesthetics while retaining folk traditions (Prakash & Chaudhari, 2024). In Indonesia, Madurese wedding ceremonies have shifted from communal to individualistic practices, reflecting broader societal changes toward efficiency and convenience (Khotijah et al., 2023).

These changes are not unique to Indonesia. Urbanization has driven professionalization and simplification in rituals among the K'Ho ethnic group in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2024), the Kalmyk community in Russia (Koltsov et al., 2024), and the Tsudahar Dargins in Dagestan (Seferbekov, 2023). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, communities like the Kashmiri have showcased resilience by incorporating virtual elements into traditional wedding ceremonies. Across these examples, core cultural values persist, underscoring the balance between preserving heritage and embracing modern influences.

The Batak Toba wedding ceremony exemplifies cultural resilience amidst these global trends. While traditional elements such as the *ulos* exchange and *marhata sinamot* negotiations remain, they are being reinterpreted to align with contemporary realities (Simarmata et al., 2024). This study employs Alexander Duranti's theoretical framework, which emphasizes the interplay between language, culture, and social practices, to analyze these transformations. Duranti's approach provides insights into how the symbolic, ideological, and structural aspects of *ulaon pesta* adapt to sociocultural changes.

Through qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, this research documents the traditional components of the

Batak Toba wedding ceremony, compares them with contemporary practices, and analyzes the implications of these transformations. By situating the Batak Toba experience within the broader discourse on cultural sustainability, this study highlights the dynamism and resilience of the Batak Toba community in maintaining their cultural identity amidst globalization.

Ultimately, this research aims to fill the gap in existing literature by focusing on how the *ulaon pesta* adapts to modern influences while retaining its cultural essence. By exploring the intersection of tradition and modernity, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural transformation and adaptation, not only within the Batak Toba community but also in the broader context of global cultural practices.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the transformation of Batak Toba wedding ceremonies over time, particularly in the urban context of Medan City. A qualitative approach is chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of the meanings behind the changes in rituals and traditions from the perspectives of individuals who have directly experienced them (Creswell, 2013). This research focuses on examining the experiences, perceptions, and views of Batak Toba elders, as custodians of tradition who possess deep knowledge of the original rituals, and married couples, who represent the modern generation and have firsthand experience of both traditional and contemporary wedding practices. Medan City, North Sumatra, is selected as the study site due to its significant level of urbanization, where the impacts of modernization and globalization are more pronounced compared to rural areas. This urban setting provides a valuable context for understanding how traditional practices adapt to modern influences.

Data collection is conducted using several methods. In-depth interviews are carried out with Batak Toba elders and married couples to gain insights into the traditional stages of the wedding ceremony, such as *marhusip*, *marhata sinamot*, and *ulaon pesta*, as well as the factors driving changes and their views on the relevance of these rituals in modern contexts. Participant observation is employed by attending Batak Toba wedding ceremonies in Medan to directly observe how traditions are practiced and adapted in contemporary settings. Additionally, documentation in the form of archives, photographs, videos, and other records of traditional and modern wedding ceremonies is gathered to provide supplementary data for analysis.

The data is analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves reading and understanding the interview transcripts and observational notes, identifying key themes such as the stages of traditional wedding ceremonies, changes that have occurred, and the factors influencing these transformations. Connections between these themes are then established to uncover patterns in the transformation of

Batak Toba wedding rituals. This analysis is guided by Alexander Duranti's theoretical framework, which emphasizes the interplay between language, culture, and social context. Duranti (1997) views cultural rituals like weddings as social practices that reflect and shape collective identity. Changes in these rituals are examined through three aspects: ideological, focusing on how the values and meanings embedded in the rituals have evolved; symbolic, analyzing the transformation of cultural symbols such as *ulos*; and structural, investigating changes in the stages or elements of the rituals, including *marhusip* and *marhata sinamot*. By applying this framework, the study seeks to reveal how the Batak Toba community negotiates between preserving traditional values and adapting to modern influences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of their wedding ceremonies in the face of urbanization and globalization.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **RESULTS**

This study explores the transformation of Batak Toba wedding ceremonies in Medan City, highlighting both continuity and changes in the traditional stages. Based on data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, several key findings emerge regarding the traditional structure and adaptations of these ceremonies.

The traditional Batak Toba wedding comprises several distinct stages, each imbued with cultural significance. These stages include *mangaririt* (searching for a suitable spouse), *mangalehon tanda* (symbolic gift exchange), *marhusip* (preliminary family negotiations), *marhata sinamot* (formal dowry discussions), and *ulaon pesta* (the grand wedding feast). Each stage reinforces kinship ties, social hierarchy, and cultural identity, serving as markers of life transitions.

Despite their continuity, significant transformations have been observed, especially in urban areas like Medan. The *mangaririt* stage, traditionally rooted in familial decisions, is now influenced by individual choice and modern social networks. Similarly, the *mangalehon tanda*, which once involved formal exchanges, has become more informal in urban settings. The *marhusip* and *marhata sinamot* stages, traditionally centered on detailed dowry negotiations, have been simplified due to economic constraints, with many families opting for reduced dowries and fewer ceremonial elements. The *ulaon pesta* has also adapted to modern realities, with smaller guest lists, reduced rituals, and a shift toward semi-formal settings due to financial and time limitations.

### **DISCUSSION**

The transformation of Batak Toba wedding ceremonies reflects a broader negotiation between tradition and modernity, shaped by factors such as

urbanization, economic pressures, technological advancements, and globalization. Urbanization plays a central role, particularly in Medan, where modernization and access to modern services have reshaped traditional practices. Economic constraints, including the rising cost of living and the financial demands of urban lifestyles, have necessitated simpler and more cost-effective ceremonies (Abbey & Nasidi, 2024).

Technological advancements have further facilitated these changes, streamlining processes such as guest invitations and event organization. Digital platforms are now commonly used, reducing the need for traditional face-to-face communication and enhancing efficiency (Oktarin & Hastomo, 2023). Globalization has introduced external influences, such as Western wedding customs, into Batak Toba weddings, particularly in urban contexts. These influences manifest in elements like wedding attire, music, and entertainment, subtly altering the structure and symbolism of traditional rituals.

Using Alexander Duranti's theoretical framework, the observed transformations highlight the dynamic nature of cultural rituals (Duranti, 2015). Duranti's perspective underscores that rituals are not static; instead, they evolve as communities negotiate their identity within shifting social and cultural contexts. The ideological, symbolic, and structural changes in Batak Toba weddings reflect this negotiation. For instance, the reduction in the number of *ulos* exchanged during the *ulaon pesta* symbolizes an adaptation to economic realities while retaining its cultural significance as a blessing and unifying element.

Ultimately, the changes in Batak Toba wedding ceremonies illustrate the resilience of cultural traditions amidst modern pressures. Rather than viewing these transformations as a loss of tradition, they can be seen as evidence of the community's ability to adapt while maintaining the core values and identity embedded in their rituals. This ongoing negotiation between preserving heritage and embracing modernity underscores the dynamism of Batak Toba cultural practices in an urbanized, globalized world.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the transformation of the Batak Toba wedding ceremony, particularly in Medan City, where traditional practices have been reshaped by urbanization, economic pressures, and global influences. Through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, this research has documented both the continuity and change in the traditional stages of Batak Toba weddings, providing a deeper understanding of how these rituals evolve while retaining core cultural values.

The findings reveal that while the traditional stages of the Batak Toba wedding ceremony such as *mangaririt*, *mangalehon tanda*, *marhusip*, *marhata sinamot*, and *ulaon pesta* remain largely intact, several aspects of these rituals have

undergone significant transformations. Economic constraints, particularly in the urban context of Medan, have led to more streamlined, smaller-scale ceremonies, with some of the elaborate rituals being simplified or omitted. The shift from communal preparations to more individualistic and convenience-oriented practices, such as using catering services, reflects broader trends in modern society, where convenience and efficiency often take precedence over traditional values of communal harmony and cooperation.

Furthermore, the influence of modernity, globalization, and technology has shaped how Batak Toba weddings are planned and celebrated. The use of digital platforms for organizing events, the incorporation of Western wedding practices, and the increasing role of individual choice in the marriage process illustrate the adaptability of the Batak Toba community in negotiating between tradition and modernity. This transformation is not a rejection of tradition, but rather a response to the changing social, economic, and cultural landscape in which the community lives.

Using Alexander Duranti's theoretical framework, this research has highlighted how cultural practices like marriage rituals serve as dynamic, negotiated processes that reflect the intersection of language, culture, and society. The Batak Toba community's ability to adapt their wedding ceremonies while maintaining core cultural symbols and values such as the exchange of *ulos* demonstrates the community's resilience in preserving its identity in the face of modern pressures.

In conclusion, this research suggests that community leaders could integrate modern elements into traditional ceremonies to maintain cultural relevance while attracting younger generations. The Batak Toba wedding ceremony exemplifies how cultural practices evolve in response to societal change. The adaptation of these wedding rituals, while still grounded in tradition, underscores the community's capacity for innovation and cultural resilience. This study contributes to the broader discourse on cultural sustainability, offering valuable insights into the ways communities negotiate the balance between tradition and modernity in an increasingly interconnected world.

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