

Christianity, Colonization, and Gender Relations in North Sumatra

A Patrilineal Society in Flux

Sita T. van Bemmelen



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Christianity, Colonization, and Gender Relations in North Sumatra

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book tells the story of how kinship and marriage have influenced the lives of Toba Batak men and women during the colonial period in North Tapanuli, on the island of North Sumatra, Indonesia. The selection of this subject was based on historical treasures found in several archives which resonated with my fascination with gender studies in the domestic sphere and my personal experiences in a Dutch-Indonesian marriage.

The Toba Batak adhere to a patrilineal kinship system. The question that naturally arose was how the Toba Batak reproduced that system in the eighty years between 1861 and 1942. This research question led me beyond a functionalist approach, as historical developments took place as the result of dynamic interaction between the Toba Batak themselves and two other protagonists, German missionaries and Dutch colonial administrators. A large part of the discourse between them concerned Toba Batak customs and customary laws. In this process the Toba Batak male elite proved a formidable partner, who successfully defended the basic rules underpinning the kinship system, while accepting several adjustments advocated by their foreign partners and, in the last instance, by Toba Batak women. It has indeed been my purpose to bring Toba Batak men and women into the story as actors instead of submissive victims of colonial rule.

To make sense of the subject matter of this study I have made use of various strands in scholarship, using insights from global history, in particular the concept of modernity in colonial societies, which I found to be multifaceted, and studies on the impact of Christian missionization and legal change on colonized people. Dealing with a patrilineal society with very specific rules, insights from symbolic, functionalist, and legal anthropology proved illuminating. The influence of feminist scholarship in all these fields is evident throughout this book.

This book is an unabridged version of my Ph.D. thesis, defended in 2012. I want to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Heather Sutherland, for her always mind-joggling questions: her persistent probing over the years has forced me to go far beyond what I thought I was able to achieve. I am also grateful to Dr. Elsbeth Locher-Scholten. She urged me to write the thesis at a time when I had already given up and has faithfully and with admirable patience fulfilled her promise to assist me during the writing process. To Dr. Jur van Goor I am indebted as well: without his confidence in my capacity to become a researcher, I would never have enjoyed the intellectual challenge of writing this book, an endeavour which has tremendously enriched my life.

I like to thank Prof. T.O. Ihromi-Simatupang, my sponsor from the University of Indonesia, for her help in finding me suitable interviewees and for her interest in the research subject, and the late Prof. Adrian Lopian from Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI) Jakarta, for institutional support. As my research has drawn me into two fields that I was not familiar with—structural and legal anthropology—I thank Prof. Dr. Reimar Schefold, Prof. Dr. Keebet von Benda-Beckmann, and Dr. Freek Colombijn for their comments and suggestions on relevant chapters.

To the Toba Batak women I interviewed I am grateful, not only for their generosity in giving me their time but also for their patience explaining the intricacies of Toba Batak kinship rules, and above all for their sharing many personal stories. If I have misrepresented these in this thesis or infringed on their privacy, I sincerely apologize to them and their families. I would like to make special mention of the late Prof. Abbas-Manoppo in Medan and Mrs. A.S. boru Gultom and her husband in Tarutung who were so kind as to have me stay as a guest in their homes during the period I did research in 1985 in Medan and North Tapanuli. They have shown that Indonesian hospitality is deep and genuine. I thank the late Sitor Situmorang and Mrs. M.D. Tambunan for the uplift they gave me in believing that I had grasped the issues predominant in late colonial Toba Batak society, when they were young. I thank Mies Grijns for her feedback on my work and friendship during general tribulations in life, through long letters and occasional visits over the past quarter of a century.

Many others have helped and encouraged me in one way or another. I do not mention all of them here by name, but they can be assured of my appreciation. Most of them belong to one of the following feminist discussion fora: the Working Group on Indonesian Women Studies (wivs) in the Netherlands; colleagues at the University of Indonesia where I worked between 1991 and 1996 for a project strengthening gender and development studies; the members of the Association for Legal Aid Offices for women (LBH-APIK); and many other women scholars and activists in Indonesia whom I met during the many seminars and workshops I have been privileged to attend since 1991. They have provided me with research ideas and invaluable insight into the role of customary law and state regulations in determining the lives of Indonesian women and men. I would like to thank in particular Luh Putu Anggreni and Riniti Rahayu, my activist friends in Bali, for making me more aware of the importance of in-depth analysis of women's problems related to customs and customary law in Bali, a patrilineal society which has much in common with the Toba Batak one. Indirectly this has helped me to understand the trials and tribulations of Toba Batak women better.

My research has been made possible by a generous research grant from the Foundation for Scientific Research of the Tropics (WOTRO) during the years 1984–1986. The Free University of Amsterdam gave me an additional grant in 2011, which has enabled me to finalize the thesis. Through the endeavour of Prof. Dr. Adriaan Bedner I received a grant from the foundation for Adat Law (Adatrechtsstichting) for the preparation of my thesis for publication. I thank him for this and for his endearing enthusiasm about the worth of this study. I would also like to express my gratitude for Dr. Roy Jordaan's initial corrections of the English of my thesis and Diana Darling who has painstakingly edited the manuscript for publication. I thank Julia Besten at the Archiv- & Museumsstiftung der UEM in Wuppertal and Jan van Rosmalen at KITLV, Leiden, for providing me with most of the illustrations. For their assistance and patience during the preparatory phase for publication of the manuscript I am grateful to Gert Jager, Nienke Bienen-Molenaar from Brill publication house and Pierke Bosschiet for making the index.

Funds make research and publication possible, but another requirement is essential as well: time. Domestic help has provided me with just that. I am particularly indebted to Kadek Wangi, who has assisted me taking care of the children and the household for more than fifteen years.

'Family matters' is the underlying theme of this book, and this also figures in its production. I thank both my late parents who have always been proud of me and my achievements, and my husband, Oka Pidada, because he never stopped urging me to finish the thesis and this book. Although understandably impatient because the work seemed un-ending, he has never made an issue of this. My daughters, Amba and Bika, both young adults, occasionally tell me that they are afraid of becoming just like me. I attribute this in part to my being engrossed in the work for this thesis. Therefore, I dedicate this book to them.

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Introduction

[Husband's uncle]: May all of us, family and friends, be blessed with happiness and prosperity. May lots of children, wealth, and prestige be ours in the future. Stars in the firmament, clouds gathering. [...] This is already the seventh daughter born to our son. And although we are happy with the daughter, our heart longs for the great joy, for a son, so there will be someone who can reign over his sisters. [...] Glad we are that you can bear this cross with patience. We hope that you will not lose heart, because the sun still stands high in the sky [= you are still young and can have many more children]. One day, we are sure of it, God will fulfil our wish.

[Mother of the baby girl, muses]: Slowly the joy evaporates—perhaps I will never learn to remain calm when hearing such words—indignation and disappointment take over. Little Elsa smiles at me, I try to get a grip on myself and smile back at her. Yes, my little darling, we don't care a bit that you are—again—a girl. Mother wouldn't even want to swap you for a son. [...] O, how I hate this pious, heathen talking.

SARUMPAET-HUTABARAT 1954c:8–9

Julia Sarumpaet-Hutabarat felt deeply hurt at the occasion of the common Toba Batak ritual celebration for a newborn, in this case her seventh daughter (ill. 1).¹ Her account of this event lays bare a fundamental incongruity between the two major sources of Toba Batak identity: their customs or *adat*, rooted in a society based on a patrilineal kinship system, and Christianity, a religion brought to the Toba Batak by German missionaries in 1861. For Julia Sarumpaet, the choice was clear: she believed *adat* was unjust to women, and argued for change, because “in Christ everything has become new” (Sarumpaet-Hutabarat 1954a:9).² But she

1 Julia Sarumpaet-Hutabarat was the daughter of Renatus Hutabarat, a *demang*, the highest office open to Toba Batak men in the colonial civil service. She was the first female Toba Batak graduate of the Christian teacher-training college in Solo, Java and became the first Toba Batak headmistress of a primary girls' school in 1936 in Pematang Siantar, but stopped teaching in 1940 when she married a pastor. After Indonesian independence she became the chairperson of a Christian women's organization affiliated with the Christian party *Parkindo* and the editor of the local Christian women's magazine *Melati*. Several of my informants acknowledged her as the most prominent spokesperson for Toba Batak women's emancipation.

2 The quote is taken from the article “The adat in the light of God's Word” consisting of a speech she gave for leaders of the church and the government in 1954. It was meant to enlist