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Toba-Batak matriliny: a deception?


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TOBA-BATAK MATRILINY: A DECEPTION?

During my fieldwork in the Toba country of North Sumatra, I learned how to weave “Toba-style” from an old woman, Ompung Si Sihol, boru Situmorang. She lived in an isolated village in the Harian Boho valley situated on the west shore of Lake Toba. In the course of my lessons I queried her on where she had obtained her weaving equipment. She answered that she had inherited it from her mother. When I asked her if this was regular procedure, she answered in the affirmative. Another detail for the anthropologist’s notebook, and an important detail upon further consideration. It yielded a new insight into the issue of Toba Batak matriline which has been controversial for almost 100 years.

The most recent noteworthy contribution to the controversy appeared in BKI 133 (1977) in the form of a Korte Mededeling by D. S. Moyer. It was entitled ‘Matriliny Among the Toba Batak?’ and contained an English translation of what Moyer called “one of the anthropologically most significant aspects” of Vergouwen’s Het Rechtsleven der Toba Bataks (1933), which had been omitted from the English version of Vergouwen’s book The Social Organisation and Customary Law of the Toba-Batak of Northern Sumatra.

The missing passages contain details about the hula\(^2\) - boru (wife-giver - wife-taker) relationship, which Vergouwen perceived as anomalous in a patrilineal society such as the Toba-Batak, and similar to features characteristic of matrilineal societies. The passages had been intentionally excluded by the editors of the English version because they were meant to illustrate theories about the evolutionary progress of society from matriarchy to patriarchy, and these theories had passed out of fashion in academic circles.

Moyer recovered the banished details because he deemed them significant if set in the appropriate theoretical framework. He had an old theme of the “Leidse Richting” in anthropology in mind, which received its inception when van Wouden (1935) and J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong (1935) demonstrated with the aid of a diagram (van Wouden 1968:91) that in a kinship system characterized by matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, matrilineal and patrilineal systems are both, theoretically, equally possible, and it is “absolutely immaterial” to the system which principle of genealogical grouping is chosen. Later, P. E. de Josselin de Jong (1951) showed how both modes of reckoning descent were utilised in Minangkabau, whose social structure rested upon an ideal of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage. He also suggested “that Minangkabau should not be considered as a matrilineal island in the midst of surrounding patrilineally organized societies, but the various Sumatran social systems may prove to be based on a double-unilateral organisation, which assumed a patrilineal stress in the Atjeh and Batak territories, and a matrilineal stress in Minangkabau, while the communities in South Sumatra show the slightest preponderance.
of one unilateral principle and the clearest form of double descent” (P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1980:91).

One can sense Moyer’s jubilation in his Korte Mededeling. Here he had stumbled across very valuable information to support the theory of double unilineality and P. E. de Josselin de Jong’s intuition about a “Sumatran type” of social organisation, and he had salvaged it from the fate of out-of-print Dutch books laid on dusty shelves: being entirely overlooked by the English-speaking world. Of course it is important that Vergouwen’s “missing passages” were rescued from such obscurity, but I am not in agreement with the theoretical framework in which Moyer envisioned them.

In his short but revealing article, ‘Exchange Versus Doublé Descent’ (1976), Moyer discusses how difficult it is for a strongly unilineal descent group to incorporate a wife from another strongly unilineal descent group simply because she never entirely loses her membership in her descent group of birth. It is easy, on the other hand, for her descent group of birth to “give” her in marriage because it does not have to relinquish her altogether. In other words, upon her marriage, possession of and responsibility for the woman becomes shared between two descent groups in a way that is advantageous for her descent group of birth, but difficult for her descent group of marriage. Moyer proposed two axioms to describe this phenomenon:

1) The Paradox of Unilineality, viz.: “the more unilineal a system is or becomes the less likely it is to remain unilineal”; and
2) “a strong unilineal principle is fundamentally antagonistic to exchange”. Evidently, according to Moyer, the ties that a woman maintains with her descent group of birth after her marriage express a “matrilineal principle”. The stronger the unilineality of the group, the more emphasis there is on these ties.

Vergouwen’s missing passages support Moyer’s theory.
1) Ibebere — this kin term for “sister’s child” means “that which was continually yielded or ceded”. It points to a “conscious ‘ceding’ of the woman and her offspring by her male relatives for whom she had always borne children to the man she married . . .”.
2) The magical support from the hula² (wife-giving lineage) is a remnant of the concern formerly shown by a woman’s clan so that their daughter would successfully perpetuate the clan.
3) Bona ni ari or the “Beginning of the Days”, is the wife-giving group which bestowed an ancestress approximately 5 generations back, it is still hailed by the wife-taking group as its progenitor.
4) Upa tulang is a ritual payment for the bride’s mother’s brother on the occasion of a wedding; this is a survival of an earlier “homage”. In the first three points above, aspects of the tie between a woman’s descent group of origin and her husband’s descent group are specified, and in point four, the same one step removed, viz. between the boru and the hula² of its hula².

Clearly, Vergouwen failed to realize that these features, which may resemble features of descent in matrilineal societies, are not anomalous in patrilineal Toba Batak society because they belong to the realm of
Moyer was confusing features of descent and exchange in the same way.

At this stage it is helpful to draw attention to a short exchange between G. J. Held (1935) and C. Lévi-Strauss (1969). Held stated that “bilineal characteristics are normal for primitive organization”. Lévi-Strauss responded to this with a single sentence, the meaning of which rules out Moyer’s first axiom: “If Held means then that no human society absolutely ignores one of the lines, this is nothing new. If, however, he means that all human groups trace descent through both lines in determining marriage rules, nothing is more incorrect, and numerous examples could be given of groups in which descent is (with regard to marriage) either entirely patrilineal or entirely matrilineal, and even of groups in which, where a precise rule of descent is lacking, a strictly unilateral theory of conception is invoked” (1969:408).

The above quote from Lévi-Strauss is borne out by Toba Batak ethnography as well. Marga or patrilineal descent groups are chauvinistic and proud of their independence and strength. The rule of marga exogamy curtails their independence, however. The marga are confronted with the paradox of being dependent on other wife-giving marga in order to maintain themselves. The conflict is not, as Moyer concludes, between descent and exchange, but between two descent groups which are exogamous and have agreed to exchange wives. A matrilineal principle — if it is present — plays absolutely no role in these relations.

Moyer’s second axiom correctly sums up the Toba situation, but the first could not be farther from the truth. In fact, the ties which a Toba woman maintains with her father’s descent group have nothing to do with matriliny. They are an expression of the emphasis which the Toba kinship structure places on the patrilineal descent principle. Toba descent groups never relinquish members (except under very extraordinary circumstances), be they male or female.

The tie between wife-givers and wife-takers, two patrilineal groups, is therefore the source of potential conflict. The antagonism is not between descent and exchange but between two equivalent descent groups. In Toba, the tension is partially defused by the institution of a complementary division of labour between the two groups, giving rise to mutually complementary relations. The hula or wife-giver provides life-giving sahala or spiritual strength to its boru or wife-taker. The latter reciprocates and supplicates the former with material support. The result is that the groups not only tolerate marital relations with each other, but seek them out and initiate them. They recognize them ritually — with gifts such as the upa tulang — and acclaim them if they have been particularly fruitful — e.g. the bona ni ari. There is no sign of a matrilineal principle, only socio-political and religious ties between patrigroups catalyzed by the exchange of women.

As Lévi-Strauss and Held agreed, “no human society absolutely ignores one of the [descent] lines”. In a much earlier article, ‘De Verbreiding van het Matriarchaat op Sumatra’. [The Distribution of
Matriarchy on Sumatra], Wilken contends as an evolutionist that women were once the heads of Batak clans instead of men. The term dongan sabutuha, meaning “womb companions”, refers to people belonging to the same marga or lineage. The term dongan - sada - ina, meaning “companions from a single mother”, refers to members of the sub-lineages which have split off from the original lineage (Wilken 1888:191). There is plenty of evidence to support the claim that the Toba recognize the woman's role in procreation or perpetuating the patriclans, but this is not to be confused with a matrilineal principle of social organisation. It merely draws attention to an aspect of the woman's position in the patrilineage.

The only real indication I have ever found of a matrilineal principle operating in Toba society is far removed from the domains of patrilineal descent and bride exchange. I heard it for the first time beside a textile loom from my old weaving teacher, Ompung Si Sihol. Weaving equipment and weavings are passed down from mother to daughter... in a direct matriline. When I tested her statement in other regions of Toba it was confirmed repeatedly. I have subsequently also found it in an indigenous book on Toba Adat (H. B. Situmorang, 1977:75,74): "Barang2 pusaka ni ama angka anakna do marbagai alai barang2 pusaka ni ina (ulos dohot bajuna) sebagian tu boru..." [Heirloom treasures of the father are divided amongst his sons but heirloom treasures of the mother (hand-woven textiles and clothing) are divided amongst the daughters ...]

The social division of labour between the two descent principles in Toba Batak remains to be explored — and this is my own self-assigned task. Exchange relations are not an area of shared responsibility for the two descent principles.

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