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Tourisms impact on Toba Batak ceremony


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Tourism’s Impact on Toba Batak Ceremony

[E]thnic tourism, that is, tourism where the main attraction is the cultural exoticism of the local population and its artifacts (clothing, architecture, theater, music, dance, plastic arts), constitutes an interesting special case of ethnic relations, and could, therefore, profitably be analyzed as ethnic relations’ (Keyes and Van den Berghe 1984:334).

The defining characteristic of ethnic tourism is tourism in which ethnic exoticism is sought, tourism in which the prime attraction is all that is ‘native’. More important, ‘in ethnic tourism, the native is not simply “there” to serve the needs of the tourist; he is himself “on show”, a living spectacle to be scrutinized, photographed, tape recorded, interacted with in particular ways’ (Keyes and Van den Berghe 1984:345).

In this article I discuss how ethnic tourism has developed among the Batak people and what impact tourism has had on Toba Batak ceremonies. I argue that tourism has helped to revive Toba Batak traditional ceremonial practice, particularly ceremonies specifically related to the indigenous religion, which had been declining under the impact of Christianity and Indonesian policies on religion.

The description and analysis presented here are based on first-hand observation among Toba Batak people in North Sumatra. In August 1991 I conducted an ethnographic study of Mangalahat Horbo Lae-laе (buffalo sacrificial ceremony), also called the Gondang Mandudu ceremony, in Limbong, a small village on Samosir Island in North Sumatra. The ceremony lasted four days, from 5 August until 8 August 1991. An unusual feature was that this ceremony was arranged by the Indonesian government for a festival called Pesta Danau Toba, or ‘Lake Toba Celebration’, in conjunction with ‘Visit Indonesia Year 1991’. This is a typical way of promoting tourism, as Smith points out: ‘Destination activities that stimulate tourism include visits to native homes and villages, observations of dances and ceremonies’ (Smith 1977:2).

My main argument in this article is that (Toba) Batak tradition reworked for tourists serves to situate the Batak (particularly the Toba Batak) as a ‘legitimate’ ethnic group within the framework of Indonesian nationalism. The discussion will focus on how the Indonesian government’s involvement in sponsoring the ceremony for the purpose of tourism has affected the response of Toba Batak members in presenting their ethnic culture as
part of Indonesian culture, and how it has altered the essence of the ceremony from its original context to a touristic context. In addition, I will examine how this promotion of ethnic tourism has created conflicts among the people involved in the ceremony over who does what and who makes decisions; these conflicts are related to issues of power. As Crick says, 'In studying tourism one can investigate in concrete detail the links between power and knowledge, the generation of images of the Other, the creation of “natives” and “authenticity”, the consumption of images' (Crick 1989:329-30).

Tourism in Indonesia: the case of Toba Batak

In Indonesia, the tourist industry is one on which the government has focused considerable attention in view of its potential contribution to the country’s economic development. It is above all the archipelago’s great cultural diversity that attracts foreign visitors. Since the New Order of 1965, tourism has received major attention in the Indonesian economic development programme; the goals of tourism are to spread job opportunities among Indonesians and to introduce Indonesian ethnic cultures to the outside world (Pendit 1986:64). To develop tourism in Indonesia, the government has been exploring traditional cultures and arts from all over the country to seek areas that can be developed into daerah tujuan wisata (tourist destination areas).

The Indonesian government also sees tourism as a way to promote and develop the Indonesian 'national culture'. Tourist promotion has been used to strengthen the sense of national integrity and love of the country, as clearly stated in the Pelita V (five-year development plan) of the 'Guidelines of State Policy' (Garis-garis Besar Haluan Negara or GBHN) 1988:

'Domestic tourism continues to be developed and focused to encourage a sense of love of the country and nation and to build feeling, spirit, and noble national values in order to strengthen a national persatuan [unity] and kesatuan [togetherness] and to develop the economy. The attempt to nurture and develop domestic tourism has also led to upgrading the quality of the national culture, to introducing the rich historical treasures and the beautiful scenery, including maritime regions, from various areas all over the country.'

1 Original text: 'Pariwisata dalam negeri terus dikembangkan dan diarahkan untuk memupuk rasa cinta tanah air dan bangsa serta menanamkan jiwa, semangat dan nilai-nilai luahir bangsa dalam rangka memperkohokan persatuan dan kesatuan nasional disamping untuk meningkatkan kegiatan ekonomi. Usaha pembinaan dan pengembangan kepariwisataan dalam negeri ditujukan pula untuk meningkatkan kualitas kebudayaan bangsa, memperkenalkan kekayaan peninggalan sejarah serta keindahan alam termasuk alam bahari di berbagai daerah di seluruh pelosok tanah air.' (Taken from 'Ketetapan Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Republik Indonesia nomor II/MPR/1988 tentang Garis-garis Besar Haluan Negara', in: UUD 1945, P-4,
The so-called Indonesian national culture is reflected in the national ideology of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity), which refers to the idea of many different cultures and ethnic groups integrated into one nation. Because of inter-ethnic contact and other influences from outside, Indonesian ethnic groups have been losing some of their old customs. As a response, the state has adopted a policy of pelestarian tradisi dan budaya (preserving tradition and culture) to maintain ethnic boundaries and diversity among all Indonesian ethnic groups. However, what is chosen to be preserved is not supposed to contradict Indonesian national ideology. ‘Diversity’ is thus encouraged to the extent that it does not conflict with ‘unity’. This policy goes along with the government’s aim to promote tourism, in which Indonesia’s ethnic and cultural diversity is the most important obyek turis (tourist object). As stated by the Minister of Culture, Post, and Telecommunication, the mission of his department is to give shape (mewujudkan) to the concept of archipelagic unity (wawasan Nusantara) and to strengthen (memantapkan) national defence (ketahanan national).

In the case of Batak3 areas tourism is not a new phenomenon. According to Sibeth, in the early twentieth century (1910s), Batak land was already exposed to tourists because of the missionaries in the south and the plantation workers, and the business community in the north, under the protection of the colonial government at Medan. ‘On the Karo plateau the first guest houses of the large plantation companies were built and by Lake Toba was built the first villa. [...] At that time, many Batak were already occupied in the tourist industry as house staff, gardeners, cooks, chamber maids and prostitutes’ (Sibeth 1991:227). After the independence of Indonesia, the Batak area continued to be an important place for tourism. Samosir Island, where most of the Toba Batak live, surrounded by Lake Toba, is ideally situated for tourism. Moreover, a few places in this area are historically important for the origin of Toba Batak culture; and some cultural activities are still carried on, such as traditional house building, crafts, weaving, and traditional music.

Since 1979, the Indonesian government has held a Lake Toba Celebration annually. It is a kind of ‘cultural festival’ displaying several aspects of

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2 Taken from Bahan Ceramah Menteri Parpostel pada Studium Generale Universitas Sumatera, 1994.

3 In general, the term Batak refers to six sub-ethnic groups; Toba, Mandailing, Angkola, Simalungun, Karo, and Pak-pak. However, the term Batak, among these six different Batak ethnic groups, usually refers exclusively to Toba Batak. Historically, the term Batak was an abusive term, associated with pork-eating highlanders, stereotypically unrefined non-Muslim people. Other Batak sub-ethnic groups, especially if they have converted to Islam, usually refer to themselves as Mandailing, and Angkola. They are ‘ashamed of the name Batak’ (Kipp and Kipp 1983:4).
Batak culture, including traditional music, arts, and dances of the six Batak sub-ethnic groups. One objective of the festival is to attract international and national tourism. Beyond that, the purpose of the festival is to encourage preservation of traditional cultural practices within every ethnic group. Recently various tourist events have been initiated to make this place more attractive as a tourist destination area. These include sporting events, both recreational and competitive, traditional costume shows, wood carving displays, and cultural performances by other North Sumatran ethnic groups (like Minangkabau and Acehnese), performance of Indonesian popular music, and even fireworks and laser beam shows. However, until 1991 it seems there was no attempt to include ceremonies related to the indigenous religion as part of these tourist attractions. As far as I know, the Mangalahat Horbo Lae-lae held in 1991 in the Limbong village on Samosir Island is the Indonesian government’s first attempt to promote Toba Batak religious ceremonies as a tourist attraction.

The buffalo sacrificial ceremony: historical background

In the pre-Christian era the Toba Batak practised rituals and ceremonies related to their indigenous beliefs, although these beliefs had apparently been exposed to earlier influences, particularly from Hinduism and later from Christianity. Even though starting in the 1860s most Toba Batak converted to Christianity, many of them still have a strong connection to their indigenous beliefs. On Samosir Island, especially, a few of these older rituals and ceremonies are still practised. However, because of restrictions by the Christian church, many of these rituals and ceremonies have been dropped or have lost much of their meaning.

Mangalahat Horbo Lae-lae is one of the animal sacrificial ceremonies related to Toba Batak indigenous belief. Connected to supernatural spirits, it was a buffalo sacrificial ceremony lasting several days, held in one village by a community or a particular family. In every village, the animal sacrifice was controlled by a bius, the traditional sacrificial-offering organization. As described by Sherman:

'The bius sacrificial-offering communities were constituted at successively more encompassing levels of what might be termed ritual integration of the society within each territory. [...] The bius involved in the ceremony may vary. [For instance,] in order to hold a sacrificial feast at which either a cow, a buffalo, or a horse is slaughtered, a localized lineage must request the permission of the component subgroup of the overall bius to which it belongs.' (Sherman 1990:80.)

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4 Siahaan (1975) describes how in the animal sacrificial ceremony, people sometimes played music for seven days in a row to invite Sombaon Namartua Pusuk Buhit (spirits of Pusuk Buhit) to come down to the village to see the animal that would be sacrificed.
Usually, the first part of a ritual like the buffalo sacrifice was Mangelek Namartua Pusuk Buhit, which means asking permission and blessing from the principal Toba Batak god, named Mulajadi Nabolon (The Great Beginning of Being), and the dwelling spirit associated with Mount Pusuk Buhit. According to Toba Batak belief, Pusuk Buhit is the birthplace of their common ancestor. Most considered it to be the dwelling place of the most powerful of the sombaon (localized earth spirits). They sacrificed goats, or sometimes chickens, and offered several other kinds of food to the spirits.

The main buffalo sacrificial ceremony was held in the central yard of the village (alaman). The first day of the main ceremony, which was held inside the main house, started in the morning. Several activities were held there, including a ceremony of giving a first offering to the host, to the musicians, and to people who were in charge of searching for wood and leaves to build the slaughter place for the animal to be sacrificed.

During the first evening of the main ceremony, it was essential to play music, because music was considered crucial for mediating with the spirits. The type of music played during the buffalo sacrifice varied, according to the main purpose of the ceremony. One of the types of music, called Gondang Mandudu (or Gondang Dudu),5 was a part of the musical repertoire that was exclusively performed for Mulajadi Nabolon. This music was believed by Toba Batak to be their 'God's gondang' or 'God's music'. Gondang Mandudu consists of two parts, Gondang Dudu Borngin, or Evening Dudu, and Gondang Dudu Tiar Ni Ari, or Early Morning Dudu.

According to Sinaga, the term Mandudu means 'investigatory ceremony during the New Year Celebration. The sacrificial buffalo is an omen for the coming year' (1981:229). It sometimes used to be called Mandundang, which means 'ceremony of stirring the sacrificial buffalo with drumming to obtain a favourable omen. Lit.: to make noise to awaken' (Sinaga 1981: 229). According to Sinaga's analysis,

'In the Mandudu ceremony, man participates in the re-creation of the world. He takes the initiative by organizing the ceremony which is indispensable for the re-creation, he actively stirs the buffalo by the beating of the drums in order to cause the omens to be favourable. Man actively causes and determines the future in cooperation with God. The omen given by the buffalo is seen as the means by which God tells man about – and determines – the future of the Middleworld.' (Sinaga 1981:146.)

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5 The term gondang in Batak has several meanings; a ceremony, a musical ensemble, a musical piece, and also a musical instrument. In this way, Gondang Mandudu became the name of the musical repertoire and was also used to refer to the whole ceremony.
Traditionally, while Gondang Dudu was played, everybody had to sit down and listen quietly, and was not supposed to do anything else. This music should be performed in the dark. The music was specifically performed for the spirits, to invite them to come down and bless the ceremony. The spirits were invited to dance unseen in the middle of the ceremony. Usually one or two people became possessed by the spirits. After the musicians played Gondang Dudu, they would look at the buffalo in the stable to see what direction the buffalo was facing. If the buffalo was facing east (dompak purba or the direction of sunrise), it meant that good luck would come to the host (hasuhutan) and everybody in the village. It meant that the spirits had come down and danced in the middle of the ceremony. However, if the buffalo was facing another direction, it meant that the spirits had not blessed the ceremony, and this could mean bad luck for the host.

The ceremony normally continued with *manortor Hasuhutan* ('dance of the Hosts'). This was the time that people who participated in the ceremony danced according to their roles in the ceremonial structure. The music played was different from the Gondang Dudu for the spirits. This *manortor* was the last part of the first day of the ceremony. The ceremony was continued again (early in the morning, before sunrise) by playing Gondang Dudu Tiar Ni Ari (early morning Dudu). At this time, only the musicians went to the place where musical instruments were placed, and played the same musical repertoire as they had played in the Dudu ceremony in the evening. This was also played for the spirits, but unlike evening Dudu, nobody was around except for the musicians, the rest of the people remaining inside.

The slaughter of the sacrificial buffalo, which was centrally important for the ceremony, was usually performed the next day after playing gondang music. The sacrificial ceremony was conducted right in the middle of the alaman, with all the people gathered around. While the buffalo was in the process of being killed, people would dance. While directing the buffalo from the stable to the tree, they danced accompanied by music. They used string attached to the buffalo's nose and circled the borotan tree seven times. After that a lancer called *pamantom*, who was in charge of killing the animal, would kill the buffalo by repeatedly stabbing it with a spear until the buffalo died.

‘The lancer (*pamantom*) takes his lance and asks the people whether he is to pierce the buffalo. He then repeats the question three times and the people answer that the buffalo is still busy ploughing on a great hill. Finally, however, the people enthusiastically answer: "Pierce it", and the lancer violently strikes the sacrificial animal amid the applause and cheers of the people.’ (Sinaga 1981:137-8.)

After the buffalo was killed, the people returned home, leaving the sacrificed buffalo for the entire night. The Toba Batak believed that the
spirits first would ‘eat’ or ‘enjoy’ the buffalo during the night before the body parts were divided the next day for all the people.

Usually, the following day, the people returned to continue the ceremony with distribution of parts of the buffalo’s body (mambagi jambar). All the representatives who took part in the ceremony, such as the bias, the shaman, the musicians, the host, and the guests (visitors invited from outside the community), would get some according to their role in the ceremony. This was the last part of the main ceremony, and after getting some part of the buffalo’s body, each member of the ceremony could take it home.

The creation of ethnic tourism: the buffalo sacrificial ceremony in the context of tourism

In performing the buffalo sacrificial ceremony as a tourist attraction, having tourists among the audience and government representatives among the hosts, some changes were made in the ceremonial structures, meanings, and other practices, resulting in a ceremony different from the traditional ceremonies. I do not mean by this that Toba Batak tradition was static and unchanging before being revived in the tourist context. It was always, of course, a composite of diverse influences arising from Batak culture itself, as well as Hinduism, Christianity, and other sources. It is this fluid composite that I refer to as the tradition, in order to contrast it with the new form developed in the tourist context.

The following discussion analyses the impact of tourism on the buffalo sacrificial ceremony in Limbong Sagala village, when it was performed for the purpose of tourism and modified from its ‘traditional’ form. The discussion focuses on: the process of the creation of ethnic tourism, with emphasis on the role of mediators; changes in ceremonial structure and content as a consequence of the creation of ethnic tourism; and the impact of tourism on defining Toba Batak cultural identity within an Indonesian national culture.

The role of mediators: the elaboration of myth

The buffalo sacrificial ceremony as a tourist attraction was sponsored by P.T. Pahuta, a foundation consisting of urban Batak whose marga (clans) originate predominantly from Samosir Island. One of its objectives is to turn Lake Toba and surrounding areas into tourist destination areas. To do this, the foundation concentrates on the exploration and preservation of Batak traditional practices such as traditional music and dance.

The idea of reviving the buffalo sacrificial ceremony in Limbong Sagala village in conjunction with tourism and Indonesian national cultural policy
was first suggested by P.R. Limbong and R.M.K. Limbong to the P.T. Pahuta foundation as the organizer of the Lake Toba Celebration.

Both Limbongs are originally from this village but have spent much of their time in urban environments. Since the Indonesian government had begun to encourage cultural attractions for the purpose of tourism, these two Limbongs and the P.T. Pahuta foundation proposed to the government that the buffalo sacrificial ceremony become one of the attractions for the twelfth annual Lake Toba Celebration. Three months prior to the festivities, the two Limbongs started preparing. Since the buffalo sacrificial ceremony, especially with Gondang Mandudu music, has rarely been performed recently, not too many Toba Batak can still remember how to perform the ceremony, except for older people who have a stronger connection to their old beliefs. Therefore, P.R. Limbong and R.M.K. Limbong, in collecting the necessary information about how to perform a buffalo sacrifice, used the traditional method of interviewing elderly people in the village. At the same time, they also collected some important myths of the Toba Batak people, particularly the myths of Limbong village.

One attempt to make their village more interesting, not only for tourists but more importantly for the government, was by elaborating on a myth of the origin of Limbong village. P.R. Limbong and R.M.K. Limbong proposed using the myth of the ancestor of the Siregar clan (which is the clan of origin of the present governor of North Sumatra) who had married a woman from that village. The myth starts with the story of the origin of Batak people up until the story of the Siregar clan, who built a waterspout in Limbong village the water of which miraculously had seven different flavours. P.R. Limbong and R.M.K. Limbong 'elaborated' the myth by concluding that, because of the waterspout, the Siregar clan is the clan of the village's 'favourite' son-in-law.

This re-creation of the myth has at least two important goals. First, it
would make Limbong Sagala village important as a tourist site, because it would show its importance as the place of origin of the Toba Batak. And second, this version of the myth was used by P.R. Limbong and R.M.K. Limbong in inviting the governor of North Sumatra, Mr. Raja Inal Siregar, who is an Angkola Batak, not a Toba Batak, to serve as the host of the whole ceremony. This reconstructed myth in fact attracted the governor’s interest to come visit this village as well as to participate as host of the buffalo sacrificial ceremony.

Changes in ceremonial structure and content

In reviving the buffalo sacrificial ceremony, Toba Batak modified the ceremony to make it more like a theatrical performance, where the main attraction is some Limbong people conducting their traditional ceremony. This is typical of ethnic tourism, where local people become an important part of the attraction in the tourists’ search for authenticity and the exotic. The theatrical character was particularly evident in the gondang music performance and the buffalo slaughter, where government officials and tourists were present. There was a clear separation between the ‘audience’, which consisted of local and international tourists and government officials, and the ‘performers’, Limbong villagers involved in the ceremony. There was a place constructed specially for the audience, both tourists and government officials, to sit on chairs and watch the whole ceremony, even though the government representatives were invited to dance along and be involved in certain parts of the ceremony. Some of the local participants told me that they in fact had some kind of rehearsal prior to this event. Throughout the ceremony, P.R. Limbong, serving as ‘spokesman’ (parsinabul), emphasized the idea of ‘showing’ the Batak culture.

In the tourist performance context, in order to make the ceremony accessible and understandable to the audience, P.R. Limbong alternately used both the Toba Batak and Indonesian languages. The audience even received a synopsis written in Indonesian and English. Television crews and reporters were also present to cover the events. Moreover, all the expenses for the ceremony were financed by the government (in this case through P.T. Pahuta), such as buying the buffalo, and making costumes for

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10 It is important to notice that this elaborated myth could be analysed as a response to the motto promoted by the governor of North Sumatra; ‘Masipature Hutana Be’, which basically means ‘Each Individual Should Improve His/Her Own Village’. This motto has been used to encourage responsibility among urban Batak who are already successful in their educational and economic life to develop and improve Batak areas, particularly those which their clans belong to (see also Pelly 1994:291-306). Therefore, emphasizing the importance of the Siregar clan in the village was meant to strengthen the governor’s interest in promoting the ceremony as a tourist attraction, since the governor himself has been encouraging the Batak to improve their own villages.

11 This information was gained from R.M.K. Limbong, 7 August 1991.
the ‘natives’. Interestingly, all the local participants were paid by the P.T. Pahuta foundation.

During the preparation of the ceremony as well as during the ceremony itself, there were conflicts among the people involved. According to one of the P.T. Pahuta foundation members, the plan of performing the buffalo sacrificial ceremony for tourists and government representatives was initially objected to by Christian church authorities in the Limbong area. P.T. Pahuta had to negotiate several times both with the church authorities and the villagers. By emphasizing the idea of promoting tourist destination areas and also the aims of introducing and performing Batak culture, the ceremony finally was able to take place.

Since this ceremony was held in Limbong village for the purpose of getting blessings for the whole village (after all, this was a bius sacrificial feast), the host should be the whole village represented by the raja bius (bius authorities, literally ‘kings’). More importantly, the raja bius are supposed to control the whole ceremony. However, in this ceremony, the role of the raja bius was ambiguous, since all of the decisions concerning the performance were in fact made by P.R. Limbong and R.M.K. Limbong. Based on my observation and interviews with some of the villagers present at this ceremony, I noticed that most of them were concerned about whether they were still doing the traditional ceremony or not. It seemed to me that they were confused and felt neglected by P.R. Limbong and R.M.K. Limbong. A group of reporters observing the ceremony once interviewed two elders from the raja bius about who was responsible for this ceremony, who was the host, and what actually was the role or position of the raja bius here. There was a disagreement between the two persons interviewed; one said that the raja bius, along with P.T. Pahuta and government representatives (first and second level) are all the suhut (host), while the other one considered that the raja bius and people in the Limbong village were not part of the host, they only ‘performed’.

In terms of the procedure of the ceremony, there were several parts that were changed. Ceremony initiators wanted to change some parts of the ceremony that they assumed would not be interesting to outsiders. For instance the Gondang Mandudu part, the spirits’ musical repertoire which was traditionally played in the dark, was planned to be performed without having to turn off the lights. This plan, however, contradicted the essence of the ceremonial purpose of this part. As mentioned earlier, in the traditional context this part was the most important ritual event because at this time the people who held the ceremony would be ‘informed’ by the spirits whether or not they would get a blessing. As a result, there were debates between the ceremony initiators and the local participants whether they needed to perform the Gondang Mandudu part in the dark or not. They finally did the Gondang Mandudu part in the dark, even though, for the convenience of the government officials and the tourists who came to the ceremony, they shortened the time. In the event, nobody in the
ceremony got possessed by the spirits. This adaptation was an attempt to avoid an uncontrolled, unpredictable, or even frightening situation.

Another change in ceremonial content was in the *manortor Hasuhuton* (dance of the Hosts) part, which is supposed to be performed right after the Gondang Dudu for the spirits. In the ceremony that night, they replaced that part with entertainment by a performance of wandering theatre famous among the Toba Batak, called ‘Opera Batak’. One of the reasons for this change is, according to written information in the proposal they gave to the government,

‘This part is supposed to be *manortor* [dance], named Tortor Hasuhuton [main host dance], but because this ceremony is being held as an exploration and preservation of culture, therefore tonight we will watch the Pagelaran Kebudayaan [cultural show] of an Opera [Batak] in its place.’

Opera Batak was certainly never found in any Toba Batak rituals or ceremonies in traditional practice. Opera Batak, which is now a dying art form, is only found in profane or entertainment contexts. Therefore, it is obvious that the initiators attempted to attract tourism by showing that Toba Batak also had a theatre entertainment form which could be performed as part of their cultural show, as another cultural tradition they wanted to preserve.

Another change was made during the climax of the buffalo slaughter, when a *pamantom* or lancer is supposed to kill the buffalo. As mentioned earlier, this was traditionally done by stabbing the buffalo until it died, ‘violently’ according to Sinaga’s description (1981). However, in the tourist performance, the *pamantom* did not kill the buffalo, but stabbed it just three times. While he was stabbing the buffalo he seemed to focus mostly on his dancing style. This situation, I assume, was because the Toba Batak initiators wanted to avoid the Batak stereotype of being ‘rough’ and even ‘cannibalist’, as some outsiders have emphasized in the past (Pederson 1970; Sibeth 1991). However, more information is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Traditionally, after the buffalo was killed, it would be left for one night. This was meant to give the spirits an opportunity to ‘eat’ the meat before it was distributed the next day to the whole community. In this tourist performance, however, the buffalo was killed in the Islamic way. This was done during the *mambagi jambar* (distributing meat) ceremony, which was held on the day following the sacrificial stabbing ceremony. P.R. Limbong explained to the villagers that the reason they killed the buffalo in the

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12 Original text: ‘Seyogianya diadakan acara manortor yaitu Tortor Hasuhuton, tetapi karena acara ini adalah dalam rangka menggali dan melestarikan kebudayaan, maka pada malam ini kita akan menyaksikan Pagelaran Kebudayaan Opera sebagai gantinya.’ (Taken from P.T. Pahuta’s proposal.)
The main shaman of the buffalo sacrificial ceremony in Limbong Sagala village. The head covering is black, white, and red. (August 1991)
Islamic way was that they would distribute or send the meat also to the minister and the governor, even though the minister and the governor were not present during this part of the ceremony. Again, this change was due to the minister’s and governor’s involvement in this ceremony, since both of them are Muslim.

Asserting ethnic markers: emphasis on the ‘exotic’

Most studies of ethnic tourism give attention to what anthropologists call ‘ethnic markers’, such as clothes, crafts, dances, and music. All these can be used as markers to emphasize ethnic exoticism and boundaries (Keyes and Van den Berghe 1984; Crick 1989; Adam 1984; Volkman 1984). This tendency to emphasize ethnic markers as ‘exotic’ or as distinctive as possible also appeared in this ceremony, where it became an important aspect of the performance.

One example of emphasizing ethnic markers was that ceremony initiators exaggerated or reinterpreted the importance in Toba Batak society of the number three, which has a socio-religious significance in Batak culture. For example, the social structure of the Toba Batak is based on three subgroups – hula-hula (wife givers), anak boru (wife receivers), and dongan sabutuha (people who come from the same womb) – which form the basis for social interaction. Besides, Toba Batak believe in trinity, where their high god, Mulajadi Nabolon (The Great Beginning of Being), is reflected in his manifestation in three gods; these are called Batara Guru, Soripada, and Mangala Bulan. Moreover, Toba Batak also believe that there are three important places in their religion’s universe, Banua Toru (lower world), Banua Tonga (middle world), and Banua Ginjang (upper world).

This Toba Batak symbolic emphasis on the number ‘three’ was emphasized in many aspects of the performances as a symbolic marker of Toba Batak religious and cultural identity. Toba Batak participants in the ceremony wore traditional costumes imitating their old (‘traditional’) clothing, which is based on the three most important Toba Batak colours: black, white, and red. The three shamans and the musicians also wore clothing based on the three colours black, white, and red, which was not done previously. The initiators deliberately ordered uniform costumes for this event, which is something that was never done in the original context or in other Toba Batak ceremonies. They also added some accessories, such as leaves on top of the performers’ heads, to make them look more ‘authentic’.

More interestingly, the initiators used three shamans at the same time in the ceremony, and had those three lead the ceremony together (with one as the main shaman), which was unusual in traditional practice. It is true that gondang events traditionally involved the participation of more than one shaman, each having specific tasks; however, it was unusual that the three shamans would be present in the ceremony at the same time.
Batak ethnic, cultural, and religious identity in the context of Indonesian culture

The host of the ceremony was the Indonesian government represented by the Minister of Forestry, Hasjrup Harahap, and the Governor of North Sumatra, Raja Inal Siregar, both of whom belong to another Batak sub-ethnic group, namely Angkola Batak, who are Muslim. Their inclusion can be seen as an attempt to emphasize Batak ethnic identity in a more inclusive way. Interestingly, the Minister of Forestry and the Governor of North Sumatra, in their speeches at the ceremony, also presented themselves as part of the Batak ethnic group and as wanting to preserve the Batak culture and protect the Batak environment.

The Toba Batak, through the ceremony, presented their culture and ethnic identity as a single Batak unit, in the context of multi-ethnic Indonesian culture and society. This concept was emphasized by the ‘spokesman’ (parsinabul) through his invocations which were pronounced during the ceremony. He repeated several times, in his speech and invocations, that the purpose of this ceremony was to display the ‘culture’ of the Batak nation or ethnic group (bangso Batak) as part of the Indonesian nation (bangso Indonesia). As one example, during the invocation addressed to the spirit, through the musicians as the mediators, he said:

‘Our ancestor [grandparent, king], here we all are gathered together to establish this budaya [culture], so it will complete the glory, bless the rich [important] people. What has been done by people in early times will be followed by people in the following times. [...] We are] bringing back our culture, based on the Bhinneka Tunggal Ika of the Indonesian nation, to become one culture within the Indonesian nation. This sipir ni tondi will toughen the spirit of the Batak nation [ethnic group] within the Bhinneka Tunggal Ika of the Indonesian nation. This is all that I would like to propose to you, father musicians. We are presenting our culture to our “grandfather God” Mulajadi Nabolon. We will be great, we will be safe.”

This invocation by the spokesman implies that Toba Batak people, more specifically the Toba Batak involved in the ceremony, are attempting to reunite all six Batak sub-ethnic groups under a single Batak bangso.
Tourism's Impact on Toba Batak Ceremony

(ethnic or national) identity. Moreover, it emphasizes the idea of bringing back Toba Batak cultural identity within the context of Indonesian society. Note the phrases in the above prayer such as 'to establish the culture', 'Indonesian nation', 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity)', all of which are drawn from Indonesian nationalist discourse, and were certainly never found or mentioned in the ritual's traditional context. Here we can see how Toba Batak people are attempting to redefine their cultural identity in the wider context of Indonesian national culture based on Unity in Diversity.

Toba Batak people have attempted to present their indigenous beliefs in order to fit in with, rather than contradict, Indonesian national culture. Presenting their indigenous Batak religious identity in the context of Indonesian culture is attempted by emphasizing the importance of the number 'three'. For instance, the master shaman, in one of his speeches in front of the whole audience, stated loudly that there are actually three names of God in the world: Muhammad (Islam), Baginda Jesus Christus (Christian), and Ompunta Mulajadi Nabolon (Toba Batak). He continued by mentioning the three political parties in Indonesia: PDI, PPP, and Golkar. I would argue that in making these statements the shaman tried to present Toba Batak religion in the context of Indonesian ideology, by manipulating the concept of trinity that already existed in his Batak religious beliefs. The significance of doing this, I think, is based on a Toba Batak attempt to present their indigenous belief as equal with other 'great' religions, and prevent others from looking down upon Batak traditional religion.

Conclusion

Tourism has contributed to reviving Batak ceremonial practice. Before this revival, Toba Batak had been discouraged from continuing their old religious practices, first by Christian missionaries, and later because of not belonging to one of the five officially recognized religions in Indonesia. Here, in the contexts of tourism and of what in Indonesian national discourse is called pesta budaya (culture celebration) or menggali kebudayaan (culture exploration), Toba Batak have a chance to practise as well as promote their ceremonies without fear of being banned from the Christian church or being made to feel ashamed in the larger society.

Reference:

14 In the Indonesian constitution, there are five religions accepted as state religions (based on Indonesian ideology, Pancasila): Islam, Christian Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, and Buddhist. However, there are other various local beliefs of Indonesians some of which are recognized by the Indonesian government as aliran kepercayaan ('mainstream belief'). Among Toba-Batak local religious sects, Parmalim Hutatinggi is the only religious sect recognized by the government as an aliran kepercayaan. However it is recognized under the Indonesian Department of Education and Culture, and not under the Indonesian Department of Religion. (See Kipp and Rodgers 1993 for a detailed analysis of the politics of religion in Indonesia.)
However, to successfully promote the buffalo sacrificial ceremony in its new context, the Toba Batak had to give up some of the religious and supernatural essence of the ceremony.

Throughout the presentation of their ceremony, Toba Batak attempted to adhere as closely as possible to the 'old way' of doing the whole ceremony, as an attraction for people outside of Batak. These international as well as national tourists (other Indonesian ethnic groups), in the eyes of Batak people, want to view their most 'authentic' and 'exotic' culture. The tendency was to create as 'authentic' and as 'exotic' a performance as possible, even though this sometimes meant presenting something that was not part of the tradition it claimed to represent. Contradictions like this are bound to occur in any attempt at 'authenticity' that is intended to satisfy outsiders as well as insiders.

There is an interplay between the interest of the government on the one hand, and the interest of the Toba Batak on the other hand, which affects how these two sides present themselves. The interest of the government is to stimulate traditional ceremonial practice not only for the benefit of tourism, but also to promote the Unity and Diversity of the national culture. In response, the interest of the Toba Batak is to present their cultural identity in the context of Indonesian culture. Therefore, tourist attractions are presented not only for outsiders, or Westerners, but also for Indonesian people from other parts of the country. This is part of the way the people of the country speak for themselves, part of imagining themselves as a nation. The new touristic context provided an opportunity for the ceremonial participants to assert their Batak identity and tradition while redefining them as Indonesian. Finally, I conclude that this whole process reflects the complexity and ambiguity of the process of constructing and reconstructing identity in situations where traditions and ethnic relations are undergoing change.

15 Benedict Anderson has proposed the definition of the nation as 'an imagined political community [...]'. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.' (Anderson 1983:6.)

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