

# Toba Batak Progressivism and Language Maintenance

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## I. Introduction

Toba Batak people originate from Tapanuli, North Sumatra around Lake Toba. This tribe has their own language, which is TB language. Compared with other tribes, TB people started their contact with other cultures later. The eastern part of Indonesia, for example, had been having contact with the Portuguese since the sixteenth century, while the TB people only started in 1861.

Later, the TB also had contact with the Dutch, the British and the Germans which resulted in the spread of Christianity amongst TB people. It was the missionaries or the Batak mission who first encouraged education amongst the TB, because they wanted to encourage the TB to understand the Gospel. Thus, the formal education in the TB areas started after the arrival of Christianity. Meanwhile, education brought by the Christian mission gave rise to the TB ambition towards progress or what they called *Hamajuon Batak* or 'Batak Progressivism.' These missionaries not only gave education in the TB areas but also sent the TB members overseas.

Some researchers like Kruger and Pedersen believe that TB people were cannibals in the past, even after the penetration of Christianity began. They suspected that missionaries like Lyman and Munson were eaten by the TB (Pedersen, 1970).

TB people had eagerness towards modernity in various aspects of life spiritually as well as economically. Due to the hardship they faced in the past, especially during The Paderi War (1823-1837), they wanted advancement in knowledge that would lead them towards material progress. This has been the main ambition for TB people as a whole.

Although at the beginning Christian education emphasised theological studies, it also included practical reading, writing, and arithmetic (Cunningham, 1958: 51) which later became helpful for

the secular aspect. Aritonang (1988: 438) believes that education is an effective way to get rid of paganism and poverty.

The idea of 'progress' (what the TB people call *hamajuon*) has been the main ambition of the TB people, because as a whole they are very keen to develop themselves. Although the definition of progress or modernisation varies, generally the central focus is to change their life to what they think is a better one. Situmorang (1993:23) describes the cultural revolution process of the TB orientation as follows;

- a. Geographic orientation by moving from the western part of Sumatra to the eastern part of that island.
- b. People changed from their traditional beliefs to Christianity.
- c. The way of thinking is not influenced by myth, mysticism and magic any more.
- d. TB people are continually moving from agricultural life to industry.

It can be argued that basically the TB progressivism can be explained as:

- a. Change in what they believe
- b. Progressivism or development in education
- c. Urbanisation or migration

### 1. 1. Change in what they believe

Before the arrival of Christianity, the TB had a traditional belief in which people worshipped the spirit of their ancestors. For some time this traditional belief put them in isolation which kept them in poverty. However, the TB people who were conservatives by nature accepted modernity brought by Christianity because of its ability to liberate them from old-fashioned customs and bring them to progress. It was the arrival of Christianity that brought the Christian Batak to the new era or modernity. Being a Christian also meant leaving their old pagan life style. The conservatives remained *Palbegus* or adherents of traditional belief and

the modernists became Christians. Thus at that time, to the TB people, accepting Christianity was the only way for development.

→ The TB used to believe in *sahala* or *charisma*, which had an important role in their life. Having *sahala* was their aim. They were willing to sacrifice anything they had to achieve this ambition. It includes courage, riches, ability to become a good spokesman, justice, power, knowledge and even supernatural power.

Kraemer (1958) suspected that the TB was responsive to Christianity mainly because of their expectation of a better life. They were defeated by the Paderi from the Southern part and by the Dutch. As they had lived in poverty, Christianity was expected to be the answer to their need in that period.

Religion had become one of the main differences between the TB and the ethnic groups around them. The Acehnese and the Deli for example from the northern part of Tapanuli, have always been Moslems. In the southern part we can find the Minangkabau who had also been Moslems. Until today the TB people are known as the Christian minority amongst Indonesians, who are mainly Moslems.

### 1.2. Progressivism or development in education

Generally, the ambitions of the TB people consist of *hamoraon* or 'riches', *hasangapon* or 'honour' and *hagabeon* or 'happiness because of descendants', which is equivalent of *sahala*. All these, especially riches and honour, can only be achieved through education.

From the olden times parents had insisted that their children get formal and informal education so that they could increase their *sahala*. Thus, it is not surprising that they were very responsive to Christianity that introduced them to education. Christianity might not have been interested in increasing TB's material progress, but the Batak mission needed to educate them so that they could understand the Gospel.

Later the TB are not satisfied with just having Christian education, but they will try their best to send their children to school. They are now well known as an ethnicity who regards formal education very important. Pardede, one of the richest TB man for example, encouraged his sons and sons-in-law to get overseas de-

grees, because he believed that wealth alone was not enough to fulfil his ambitions.

It is true that education can bring riches but many still prefer education to riches alone. Riches are necessary as an instrument that can help them to send the children to school, which is their main goal. This is reflected in TB famous song *Anakkonhi do hamoron di au* or 'For me my children are my riches' that says that *Hugogo pe mancari arian nang bodari, lao pasingkolahon gellenghi* 'I work night and day but I don't care, so that I can send my children to school.'

Nowadays we can hardly see a TB, even in villages, who do not finish high school. They consider high school is the minimum they have to achieve. A TB bus driver, for example, used to dream of getting a university degree before he finally gave up and took that profession. The bad side of this dream is that some students who leave their hometown to get further education abuse their parents by asking for the most money but not finishing their studies.

### 1.3. Urbanisation or migration

It is true that in the beginning, it was the Christianisation who promoted TB migration. Christianity believes that a Christian needs to spread the Gospel to those who have not heard the Gospel. Thus, the success of Christianisation amongst the TB encouraged individuals who wished to share Christianity with other people in other places. In 1907, for example, Hasibuan, a TB graduate from the HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestant or TB church) seminary, commenced his biblical work in Batavia (now called Jakarta) Kipp and Kipp (1983:73). Cunningham (1958) claims that by 1956 over 250,000 TB had migrated to the East Coast of Sumatra.

This migration is still continuing, though basically it is not only because of Christianity, but more for other reasons, such as economic and educational reasons. Life as a farmer in the rural area surrounding Lake Toba is difficult, and this is made worse by the scarcity of land. Thus, many young people leave their villages at Lake Toba to seek either their fortune or to further their education in the cities (or both).

The scarcity of land encouraged people to leave and work as government

employees or become business people. After Indonesian independence, some TB people migrated to join the Javanese who had been working in the copra and rubber plantation in the Eastern part of North Sumatra. The hardship they experienced in the past and their ambition towards progress have also been leading them towards material progress. Many believe that the fact that these people are highly intelligent, energetic, talented, ambitious and progressive has made them one of the most important and influential ethnic groups in Indonesia.

## II. Progressivism and the TB language

### 1. Christianity and the TB language

As mentioned earlier, the western missionaries who brought Christianity never imposed foreign languages on TB people. As mentioned before, when the TB people responded to Christianity, they abandoned their traditional beliefs and professed to Christianity. In order to be accepted, Western missionaries learnt the TB language and taught the Gospel in the tribal language. As a result, people continued to preserve their tribal language. Western missionaries considered that the language and the government system were not destroyed by paganism or old traditional belief. That is why those who brought Christianity to the TB areas never tried to impose another language on TB people. Although when Christianity arrived in Indonesia the Gospel they used was still written in Dutch, services and songs in the TB churches were conducted in the TB language.

Christianity also had an important role in the development of TB language. Burton, who arrived in Silindung in the hinterland of the TB area (Pedersen, 1970), translated the first few chapters of the Bible (a few chapters of *Genesis* from the Old Testament and the whole book of *John* from the New Testament) into the TB language. Nommensen, the famous missionary who sacrificed his life for TB people, had translated the New Testament into the TB language in 1878. Moreover, Neubronner van der Tuuk was sent by *Nederlandse Bijbelgenootschap* (the Dutch Bible association) to study the language in the TB area and was finally able to write the TB grammar and to translate some parts of the Bible.

The first educated TB had had their education in Christian missions, i.e. 1868 in Parusorat, and 1877 in Pansur na pitu. Although the Batak Mission at the beginning emphasised theological studies, it also included practical reading, writing, and arithmetic (Cunningham, 1958:51).

One of the TB church characteristics as an ethnic church is the language. As mentioned before, western missionaries never tried to impose an other language in the church service. In the past since education was conducted in TB, the church service was conducted in TB, which was also their lingua franca, and thus the function of BI was very limited. TB people did not see the importance of BI. However, migration has increased the need for BI in secular as well as religious life. Outside of the TB area, a TB church is a place for TB people to meet people from their hometown and a place where they can be exposed to the language.

The liturgy and the hymns are still in TB even in the migrant areas. However, nowadays outside TB area some services are moving from the use of TB language to BI. The TB church provides three Sunday services, i.e. Sunday school for children, morning service for adults and evening service. In Jakarta it is almost impossible to find Sunday school using TB language. The morning service is still conducted in TB, but the evening service, which is mainly attended by the youth group, is always in BI. Certain Sunday schools in villages in the TB areas that belong to Methodist and Catholic churches are now using BI and TB during the service.

As mentioned before, western missionaries did not impose their language on TB people. On the contrary, they learnt the tribal language because their main aim was to share the Gospel. Since the native understood their tribal language better, it was easier for them to understand the Gospel given in their own language. Thus, their main objective was the TB members.

Nowadays in big cities such as Jakarta and Medan, the members of TB church can be divided into three types. The first group consists of those who were born in the TB area or those who can communicate in TB. The second group includes those who were born outside the TB area and have difficulty understanding the language. The third one consists of non-TB who are married to a TB. This group generally cannot communicate in TB.

Since the majority of the TB church members in big cities nowadays are TB migrants who were born outside the TB area and have less contact with the TB language than their parents, they do not have the ability to communicate in TB. Unlike their parents, for whom the service, the prayer and songs used to be in TB, many members of this new generation do not even understand TB and can only communicate in BI. As a result, if the objective of the church service is to share the Gospel, not to preserve the language or the culture, it will be better to conduct a service in Indonesian. Besides, the TB church also needs to consider the non-TB from the neighbourhood who participate in service.

Another reason for this change of language in the TB church service is that the TB church work, together with other Christian organisations whose members come from different ethnicities. Thus, for TB people religious teaching can be done in Indonesian, not only in TB as before. TB church works not only with other Indonesian ethnicities but also with foreigners who cannot speak TB. Therefore, the importance of the TB language for religious purposes is also decreasing.

Although Christianity is mainly concerned with spiritual things, it also helps people to understand their existence as human being and as a nation. GMKI (Gerakan Mahasiswa Kristen Indonesia), a Christian Students' Movement, for example, is involved in political life (Simatupang, 1991). TB students as well as students from other ethnic groups become members of GMKI. This organisation exposes TB students to a multicultural environment. As they relate with Christian students from other tribes, the importance of TB is declining.

## *II. 2. Education and the TB language*

The first school that reached the society was one in which Christian education was given in the TB language. The fact that it was a very popular education for a certain time made the presence of BI unnecessary. The TB language was not only the lingua franca but also the language of education because schools in the TB areas were mainly conducted in the tribal language. Common and educated people communicated in TB. Although it is true that some educated people who had contact with the Dutch

later also learnt Dutch, for many years TB language played an important role in education.

In the new era since after independence, education in Indonesia from primary school to university has mainly been given in BI. In the TB area the first three years of primary school is still given in TB. However schools encourage their students to use BI. People believe that, in order to acquire get knowledge, TB people have to be able to communicate in BI. Many parents encourage their family to use BI and familiarize to facilitate their children with the language so that their children will study better.

It is now a common phenomenon that even in the TB areas schools insist on the use of BI at school. Sometimes teachers from the older generation use TB to their pupils but the pupils will be penalized for replying in TB because they are expected to reply in BI. Thus, modern education seems to weaken of the TB language.

## *II. 3. Migration and the TB language*

Another way to get rid of poverty is migrating to get a better job. For that reason the number of TB migrants are increasing. They move not only to the eastern coast of Sumatra, but also to other big cities such as Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya. As the capital of Indonesia, Jakarta has more attraction than the rest. In this city people can get not only education, but also the opportunity to be involved in economy and politics. Thus, migration was another aspect of modernity.

At first, the TB moved from the western part to the eastern part of Sumatra. Although TB migration might have started before the 19th century, modern migration started around 1910 and the significant number happened in 1950 (Cunningham, 1958). In the new place they had contact with the non-TB or Malays who could not understand the TB language. Although the TB were conservative in certain aspect, such as adat or Eastern coast of Sumatra, but also to other big cities such as Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya. As the capital of Indonesia, Jakarta has more attraction than the rest. In this city people can get not only education, but also the opportunity to be involved in economy and politic. Thus, migration was another aspect of modernity.

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Jakarta and Medan, two main destinations for the TB people, are multicultural. In these cities although there are dominant ethnic groups, ethnic influence is not very significant. In Jakarta, for example, the Javanese are the majority. The 1990 population census (Indonesia, Central Bureau of Statistics, 1992) shows that out of 8,227,746 of the Jakarta population, 633,647 are Javanese, and other ethnic groups much fewer. However, it is hard to sense the dominance of this tribe. As a multicultural city, BI is the main lingua franca amongst inhabitants. As a consequence, the TB migrants cannot survive without the ability to communicate in BI.

It is true that the TB people are fervent supporters of their cultural. Wherever they go they preserve their culture and try to foster relationships amongst them. This can be seen in their effort to establish their ethnic church and clan association. The TB church (HKBP, Huria Kristen Batak Protestan) in the migration area is one organizational focus of TB life, while the urban clan association is meant to maintain TB ritual, to help clan members, and to provide welfare and also assist in time of crisis or important events in family life such as births, marriages and funerals (Bruner, 1972).

The following example is taken from a religious wedding ceremony in Jakarta indicating the declining use of the TB language. The situation represents a TB Christian Wedding in a TB church in Jakarta. The person who led the ceremony was a man of around 50 years of age who actually spoke TB better than BI. Although the service was meant to be a TB service, he alternately used TB and BI

during the service. The speaker addressed the parents in TB with insertion of some Indonesian words;

(1) *Alani i pinangido tu hamu Ama dohot Inanami molo tung ganjang saotik tapatorang tu anak dohot boru ni huria i ba ido songon modal tu nasida borhat-borhat tu Rumah Tangga ni hakristenon natargoar di gereja i. jadi diantusi lapatanna. Jadi molo marhata Indonesia pe hubaen nga gabe lumrah i.*

'As a consequence I have to apologise the parents because I need to give a longer explanation to the bride and bridegroom. This is because this advice will be useful in helping them to lead a Christian family life as expounded by the doctrine of our church. In this way they will understand the meaning better. So I hope you will not find it strange if I use Indonesian'.

Then before preaching, the speaker switched to BI when he addressed the bride and bridegroom.

(2) *Jadi buat saudara berdua... 'To both of you...'*

Then he preached in TB: *Pasahathon barita nauli pe tu huria i manang na piga halak Adong do napinatolhas ni si Apolos. Adong do napinatolhas ni si Kefas.* 'There are more than one person who share the Gospel here. Some are Apolos' disciples. Some are Kefas' disciples.'

(3) *He addressed the bride and bridegroom again in BI.*

Untuk mempelai berdua, biasanya bisa juga mengerti ya. Tapi boru Napitupulu barangkali agak kurang ya. Kalau itu yang dari Sidempuan itu saya rasa bisa tau.....

'For you the bride and bridegroom. I guess you can understand what I say, can't you? But maybe the daughter of Napitupulu (the bride) cannot understand me completely. Those who come from Sidempuan, I think, can understand...'

At the end he switched again to TB;

(4) *Songon i ma Amanta dohot Inanta nami...Antong ditangihon... sakkap dohot di anak ni huria. Tapasada anak dohot boruni huria i di bagasan holong na tajalo i. 'Finally, parents of the bride and bridegroom... Let us*

*listen to their covenant and bind them in God's love.'*

It is now a common practice to mix the TB services with BI, because the members who attend the service cannot understand TB.

### 3. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Batak Progressivism has encouraged some changes in TB people's life. This affects not only their belief, educational development, migration or urbanisation, but also the language. If the TB church service and education are mainly conducted in BI, and especially now that TB people are exposed move to a multicultural society, the role of TB language will be decreasing. This phenomenon will one day lead to disappearance of this language among the TB community.

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