

The Possible Role of a Meta-Religious Symbolology in the Conversion of the Batak of North Sumatra

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Abstract

Underlying metaphysical doctrines and value systems upon which various religions are constructed, tribal or otherwise, act as primary pathways upon which religious conversion takes place. In other words, the initiate must recognize an underlying truth within the new sign system from the established system of signs comprising their own value paradigm, that is known as culture.

The focus of this study is the Batak people of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Formally, perhaps the only cannibalistic tribe having its own system of writing and divination, the Batak resisted conversion to Islam by Acehnese to the north for several hundred years, yet many were converted to Christianity quite willingly during the 19th century. This marked the beginning of a conversion process still going on to this day.

Today, most of the approximately 1.5 million Batak are either Catholic or Protestant. There are, however, still many who maintain practices from the old religion, *adat*, as well as a minority particularly in the southern Batak lands who have converted to Islam either from Christianity or from the original animist religion. Such conversions and shifts between religious and cultural paradigms still occur quite frequently in the region to this day. Therefore, the Batak region is an ideal place to study the inherent metaphysical mechanisms involved in the process of such paradigm shifts and conversion. Furthermore, in all Batak regions, elements of the *adat* are maintained simultaneously with the newer monotheistic religions.

Key Words : meta-religious symbolology, religious and cultural paradigms

1. Introduction

Although sociological and socio-psychological factors certainly play a role in conversion processes, the goal of the project is to discover what fundamental common metaphysical doctrines are necessary for conversion to occur beyond mere social concerns, pressures, etc. Why did many of the Batak become Christian after rejecting Islam and its missionaries for hundreds of years? How comfortable do they feel shifting between religions, how easily does it occur, and why? What, if anything is left of the old practices and post-conversion practices maintained in symbiosis with the new? If so, what makes them compatible? Are/were tribal practices and beliefs transposed onto (illuminated by) the new paradigm? Through an understanding of the core nature of conversion occurs to some extent along pathways of common value and metaphysical truth, we at the same time find a tool by which transcendent dialogue can take place. Such dialogue must be based in the kind of essential human values and core meta-religious, ultimately metaphysical doctrines concerning the nature of God, the creator, and other core religious symbolology, the meaning of which may become illuminated in the act of conversion, the process of crossing over into new sign systems.

The ultimate aim of this project is to find a specific community of people (Batak) among whom conversion is rich and ongoing. To establish what the proposed underlying meta- religious metaphysical belief structures are which allow this process to occur and how exactly they are active in the process of conversion. By taking a phenomenological approach to the ongoing conversion relationship between adat Batak and the monotheistic doctrines of Islam and Christianity perhaps we are able to understand something of the initial wave of conversion as it was experienced 150 years ago, when for example, the more extreme adat Batak practices such as cannibalism were abandoned.

2. The Batak

There are six main groups of Batak, which are classified together because of similarities in custom (adat) and language centered more or less around Lake Toba, Northern Sumatra. Bordering the northern edges of the lake are the Batak Pakpak, Batak Karo and Simalungun, the center and southern regions of the lake and extending west to the ocean are the largest group, the Batak Toba, to the south of this group are the Batak Angkola and Batak Mandailing.

The term 'Batak' seems to have been a derogatory term meaning 'pork-eater' given to the highland peoples of this region in interior north Sumatra by Malays several hundred years ago. For this reason many Muslim Batak in the southern regions of Angkola and Mandailing do not like to associate themselves with the term. The most central and almost entirely Christian group, Toba, associate themselves frequently with the term. The adat of these non-Muslim groups still centers around the eating and offering of pork for ceremonial purposes.

The pre-conversion practices of the Batak seem to be an amalgam of diverse elements. There is much evidence of Indianization which occurred around 1000 years ago during the time of the great Indian empires in the region. This is evident in the language, mythology, and script used for divination and magical purposes. For example, the term 'raja' used for chiefs or the term 'debata' from Sanskrit 'devata' which is a term still used today for God/Allah. Underneath this Indianized layer of adat, however, there is evidence of a more ancient megalithic culture which can be seen particularly around Samosir in the form of great carved stone tombs where the skulls of kings were placed as well as a dolmen (rock formation) at Limbong. Skull cults, headhunting and sacrifices of all sorts; chickens form divining purposes by the priests (datu), water buffaloes (kerbau), as well as various forms of human sacrifice seem to have been practised by the pre-conversion Bataks. The Bataks were perhaps most renowned to be cannibals, a practice which seems to have persisted in some

areas as long as up until 100 years ago. During a five-month stay in Sumatra in 1290, Marco Polo in his *Travels* noted a now famous early account of this practice:

You must know that when one of them, male or female, falls sick, the kinfolk send for the magicians (datu) to find out whether he or she is due to recover... If they say that he or she is due to die, then the kinsfolk send for certain men who are especially appointed to put such persons to death. These men come and sieze the patient and put something over his or her mouth so as to suffocate him or her. When he or she is dead, they cook him or her. Then all his or her kinsfolk assemble and eat him or her whole.

3. Conversion

The initial wave of conversion among the Batak began in the early 1800s. It seems initial Islamic attempts to convert the Batak previous to that time were unsuccessful. The initial conversion to Islam occurred by force in the 1810-20s when many of the people in the southern Batak regions of Angkola and Mandailing were converted during the Padri Wars when the Islamic Minangkabau from Southern Sumatra came to 'convert or destroy'. This is quite in contrast to the stories of initial conversion among the Batak to Christianity when in the 1850s and 1860s Dutch and Christian Missionaries such as Nommensen who arrived in 1861 bearing only his violin and a bible succeeded in single handedly converting dozens of villages. Much of Nommensen's first converts to Christianity among the Toba were slaves or slave families, although he succeeded in converting several tribal chiefs. By 1876, through his work there were more than 2000 Batak converts to Christianity. He cultivated native church leaders, translated the Bible into Batak in 1878. His success was due in part that he never attempted to replace the native culture with a foreign one, but insted tried to harmonise the two.

During the 1960s many more tribal practitioners converted in mass to Christianity due to political reasons at the time. The Indonesian government did not and does not recognise tribal religions as being valid. Therefore, tribal practitioners were classified as 'non religious', thus, associating them with the atheist communist insurgency at the time. According to Mujiburrahman, 'Perhaps because Muslims were involved in killing the 'communists', most of the people who had no religion converted to Christianity', although there are some who were converted to Islam.

It is rare now to see converts from Islam to Christianity although the opposite occurs quite frequently. This is due in part by the patronage of Islam by the Indonesian government. In 1978, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Alamsjah Ratu Prawiranegara, signed a decree prohibiting any missionary activity directed at Muslims. While, at the same time, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has encouraged Islamization. This was evident to me on my visit to

Bukit Lawang in August 2005. The largely Christian Batak Karo community there was destroyed by flooding in November 2003. In 2005 the government had just finished building a new settlement which included a mosque, but no church. Also, during that stay I met more than one recent Karo converted from Christianity to Islam.

There are a number of various theories and approaches to conversion. Firstly, conversion occurs at many levels some or all of which can be occurring simultaneously in a context such as we find in the Batak lands. Conversion is often thought of as a sudden emotional experience. It is in this psychological sense primarily that William James speaks of conversion in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. However, conversion can also be a gradual experience on both a social and individual level. As James defines it,

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion (from Greek *re, ligio*. – to bind again [with one's source]), to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided...becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.

James views conversion as a religious experience and that will also be the focus here; conversion as fulfilling an essential human need for socio-religious experience, that is the need to inject static value structures forming a communal identity with fresh vitality. For as James puts it, “all we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystallize about it.

As seen, conversion can be an emotional response to the sense of an unhappy divided self, a sudden purging of old value paradigms for new. Conversion can also be ‘experimental’ in that the individual or group applies the new value system in their life in the hope that it will change their fortune, or reap a better result than the former. However, for example in the case of the Batak, the old system need not be abandoned. This brings us to another form of gradual conversion, which could be called ‘drifting’. In drifting conversion the individual or group may drift between the two paradigms, perhaps finding one system more appropriate in one situation the other system more appropriate in another. For example, it is common for Batak to say one prayer to God or Jesus asking for help, then say a second prayer to one's ancestral spirits. The Batak have a traditional wedding according to adat and then a second Christian or Muslim ceremony. Magical amulets are still worn for protection against evil spirits in some villages.

For the most part, the conversion of Batak has been gradual. Initially this conversion probably had an experimental phase, then a drifting phase. Now both systems are maintained

simultaneously. The adat has slowly lost its religious nature in many communities and taken on a more formal role in society. 'in the Muslim and Christian world, adat has shrunk from its formal status as an all-encompassing cognitive map of the human and cosmological world to what is now essentially a ceremonial system and set of kinship patterns.

Certain practices have fallen away while others joined together with the monotheistic traditions. In some Batak villages, Siregar notes that the people view adat and monotheistic tradition as incompatible while others such as Angkola Batak Muslims are constantly taking measures to reconcile the two. For example, more and more Arabic phrases are being inserted into adat speeches. "(In Angkola) the simple 'well then' opening in Batak has been supplanted by elaborate 'praise Allah' phrases in Arabic. These quite redirect the immediate Batak concerns with kinship and cheftancy relationship to a world of universal Islamic imagery.

At an earlier phase of this gradual conversion (about 100 years ago) the Christian ministers were often also the datu or the medicine men of the village. Siregar relates the story of a datu/minister Pandita Kondar, who could exercise the evil spirits using old adat ritual magic and then declare, 'in the name of Jesus Christ'.

One could take a psychological approach as James does or a more socio-anthropological approach as does Kipp-Smith. Socio-political concerns were no doubt the major catalysts for conversion in some contexts, for example, as seen earlier in the converts during the 1960's.

The approach could be 'phenomenological' in that it is the desire to understand the meaning and experience of the Batak conversion for the converts themselves. In particular, the initial converts who had still a deep understanding and belief in the traditional adat cosmology. The focus is on the meta-religious symbology embedded in the pre-conversion and post-conversion cosmologies. In other words, key concepts and practices such as we find in sacrifice, trial by water, healing, as well as other underlying metaphysical doctrines played an essential trans-illuminating role in catalyzing the religious experience which no doubt occurred in the first contacts with and acceptance of the new exterior sign system/value paradigm.

Furthermore, in that much of the adat is still maintained, such key concepts may still serve a similar illuminating function today, yet perhaps to a lesser degree. 'Trans-illuminating' means that not only is the new sign system necessarily held in the light of the old, but that these key meta-religious symbols have the effect of revitalizing and/or shedding

light upon the inner meaning of the old sign system and its rituals, i.e. behavior patterns which had become perhaps to some extent habitual.

‘The revitalization is brought about by the outside system of beliefs but it does not follow that former gradually becomes the latter simply because the former is static and the latter is dynamic.

Most important of these key concepts which aided conversion is the notion of a single creator God from which all else is derived. The Batak mythology (like the Indian which influenced it) contains both monotheistic and polytheistic elements. There is an androgenous (neither male nor female) creator God known as Mula Jati ni Bolon which means “He who has his beginning in himself”. This name points to a metaphysical monotheistic principle; of logical necessity God or Allah can only be that being which has its beginning within itself.

Mula Jati, it is said gave birth to three sons or demi-gods ruling over three realms of existence. Mula Jati links these three worlds and brings harmony between them. In the account of Burton and Ward from 1824, Mula Jati is referred to by the name ‘Debata Hasi Asi’. ‘Debata’ which comes from the sanskrit ‘dewata’ was the word the Dutch encouraged the Batak to use for God in their missions. Now, Christian Bataks use the word the Indonesian word ‘Tuhan’ while Muslims Bataks always refer to God as Allah.

There seems to be a metaphysical doctrine in the adat which sees all things in the world as being in balance through the complimentary force of polar opposites which manifest themselves in the world in life/death, male/female, good/evil, etc. In the act of adat ritual, the forces are momentarily joined together in their source, the creator God, Mula Jati or Debata. The experience of this joining assures the balance between them is restored.

One important place where this metaphysical doctrine of complimentary forces is manifested is in the Batak Angkola notions of anakboru and mora. Anakboru represents the bride-receiving clan, while mora represents the bride-giving clan. Once this relationship is established between the two clans it must always remain according to adat. There is a series of metaphors and analogies which paint a rather amazing picture of the intricate metaphysical cosmology underlying the adat.

The meaning of *Mora* is Sun Beyond Staring or Unplumbed deep pool. It is the bridge over which pass blessings (pasu), good fortune (tua), awesomeness and capabilities (hasanggapan) and luminous powerfulness (sahala) to its *anak boru*. *Anak boru* likewise receiving its strength from mora becomes the bearer of mora. That which carries mora forward (on its head) like a ‘central support beam holding up the roof’.

Such concepts of kinship relation are fundamental to the adat. They represent the way in which the social fabric is properly constructed. Yet, as we see above, this significance is deeper. These kinship relations known as *dalihan na tolu* are direct manifestations of deeper metaphysical truths, without them being present and in balance with one another the power of the adat disintegrates.

In the Toba and Karo adat, this social fabric is threefold. This was related to me by an official government guide at the stone chairs of the raja at Ambarita, Samosir and my private mentor in adat, Salmon Marpaung. The *dalihan na tolu* of the Batak Toba consists of (1) *tulang* (singular), *hulahula* (plural) – uncles (2) *kahanggi* – brothers (3) *boru* – daughters. This is the foundation of the adat. These concepts are represented in the three stones of the Batak cooking fire upon which the cooking pot is placed. The fire and pot represent the *sahala* (life-force, spiritual/magical energy) if one of the stones is not present or out of balance it is not possible to cook for, i.e. *sahala* will not be present. On a higher level these three stones represent the three domains ruled by the three demi-gods or sons of *debata mula jati na bolon* who through his *sahala* brings them into balance and harmony with one another. The image here is that the community itself plays a role in the ordering of the cosmos. Through their ordering *Debata Mula Jati Na Bolon* is invoked, is present and thus the balance of powers necessary for life.

In the traditional Batak Karo houses at Lingga we find four such cooking fires positioned in quadrants of the square house. Each fire having three stones each and a pot, eight families within the house share once cooking fore between them. The house becomes a model of the cosmos. The daily lives of the families within in playing an active responsible role in the cosmic order.

Before any ceremonial activity such as a wedding, funeral, reburial, or in former times a sacrifice, a *tongaraja* is conducted. This term literally means ‘meeting of the kings’ although besides the kings/clan cheiftans the entire *dalihan na tolu* for the *suhut* (the receiver of the ceremony) must be present. At the *tongaraja* today the details of the ceremony are discussed yet like in former times, the essence of the *tongaraja* is to insure the presence of *Debata mula jati na bolon* and thus *sahala* at the ceremony.

Roha represents a person’s mind centered at the heart, not the physical heart but their life center. This is also where the community is centered where it finds its life source. This was certainly a notion present in the original adat as well as a fundamental notion in both the Christian community and the Muslim ‘*umma*’. The word in fact is very similar to the arabic *ruh* meaning spirit. ‘*Roh*’ is also used in Batak to designate spirit. The difference according to

Salmon Marpaung is that only a living person can have roha whereas roh like spirit represents a spiritual essence carried beyond death.

This adat funeral was beyond a doubt a celebration of life of sorts. When someone dies their deceased/lingering spirit becomes a link to heaven, to the other world, a unique moment when the spirit world nears and is made apparent to this one. Therefore, it is an opportunity for the community to invoke that world (a world intrinsically linked to the source of life, good fortune, the balancing of powers). The opening and tearing asunder of the many individual hearts offers a unique opportunity for the members of the community to join their hearts together. Compassion is acted out. Similarly, it is one of the few times when tulang, kahanggi, and boru are joined. The underlying metaphysical significance of which was discussed earlier in the joining of complimentary forces in the invocation of spiritual force and the source and mediator Debata mula jadi na bolon.

The Batak funeral can last as long as a week. According to tradition the spirit of the deceased lingers in the realm of the earth for 7 days. There are six grades of or types of funeral as well depending on the status/nature of the deceased. However, at funerals among the Toba, particularly where a wealthy man had no offspring, a doll representing the deceased is made to dance. Previously, the skull of the dead man was placed on the headless puppet and the puppet dressed in the man's clothes. This is done so that the dead man's soul can once again enter the puppet, i.e. he is momentarily resurrected. Believing that the dead man's spirit is now in the puppet fashioned in his likeness the family may have one last celebration together.

Another practice by some groups of Batak such as Karo and Toba related to the metareligious symbology of resurrection is the practice of reburial. It is called; Manigaokkal holli or 'collecting the bones'. That this ceremony came to be associated with Christian imagery of the resurrection of Christ is certain as now the ceremony only takes place at Easter (the time of Christ's passion and resurrection). This was confirmed by my mentor in adat Salmon Marpaung, who says, 'There is a definite connection (of the reburial ceremony and the Christian symbology) for us'. He told me, 'the reburial occurs only at Easter and is conducted on three principles (1) to show respect (2) to remember (the deceased) dedication for us (3) to publicly show our status'. This last concept is linked to sahala in that a person's sahala comes through his lineage (marga) and has the significance that the present power of the Dalihan Na Tolu can only have come through the previous sacrifices and the sahala directly invoked by the personal sacrifices of the deceased. The invocation and remembrance of the sahala of the deceased is also a remembrance and invocation of Debata Mula Jati Na

Bolon. A time when spiritual force from the spiritual realm may manifest itself in the community, an opportunity for the two worlds to become joined and the balance of powers essential for life to be brought into harmony.

This practice or reburial is common along the Toba and Karo. In previous times, a sacrifice such as a pig or buffalo was made at the reburial. Now, however, apparently, because of conflict with the church these sacrifices have become private (in the home).

The hulahula/tulang have the special duty of opening this particular ceremony by reciting an invocation from the adat oratory tradition, which is of a sort of poetic/philosophical nature. The following is one such poem read at Toba and related to me by my guide.

*Pirmapokki Bahul-bahul Ma Passalo Ngan,
Pirmatondi Muna Sai Huhut Dapotan Passamotan.*
Strong like Ironwood placed in the woven-leaf basket
May you have strong spirit and good income

These days, in addition, passages are also read from the Bible by a priest. Then, the “tulang” of the deceased have the special duty of ‘collecting the bones’, digging several feet into the ground until the bones are reached. Secondly, the bones are publicly cleaned with a lemon juice mixture called anggir. This can only be done by the boru of the deceased (the daughters-in-law). Thirdly, a blow is given to the skull with an axe ‘as if it were a sacrifice’. This seems to play a role in the release of the spiritual power, sahala. The hulahula/tulang says the word, ‘manappim’. The bones are presented on a white cloth to the suhut (ceremony receiver), then placed in a basket. The boru (first daughter-in-law) then carries the bones balanced on her head to the final resting place raised above ground. In old times, the Toba tombs were carved from stone and called tambak. These days the tombs are of concrete and generally are smaller likenesses of a Batak house. This is a symbolic of one’s ‘eternal house in heaven’. Afterward, friends and relatives may return to place cigarettes or fruit at the grave for the deceased. In the Toba adat the bones are sealed forever into the tomb. In the Karo adat, however, the skull and bones of a Raja or ancestor is placed in a bone house, where they can be taken out again if the community needs to call on the sahala of the ancestor or deceased king.

4. Conclusion

This paper is a first stage to understanding the nature in its various forms of the religious experience (inherent in conversion) of Batak converts. Because this scope of this paper is limited, the basic way to study the adat itself was set out to discover what meta-

symbology may be derived from it that could aid in, act as a pathway for the religious experience of conversion to take place. The focus here was on conversion as a long ongoing process, both sign systems being present even today. The unique situation found here among the Batak maintaining parallel sign systems, may make it possible to retrace the stages of conversion to a point where the Christian sign system was entirely new and entirely cognized in terms of the adat. It may be entirely possible to ask “What then was the experience of the initial converts among the Batak to Christianity?”

Although there was also efforts to relate the discovered meta-religious symbology to Islam as well, the focus here has been on Christianity and adat for a number of reasons. The relation between adat and Islam is no less important however and there is evidence for a connection of conversion by means of meta-religious symbology here as well.

Although there are symbiotic cases of adat and Islam there seems to be a greater tendency from the Islamic community to replace the former system with the newer. The Christian missionaries such as Nommensen made sure that the adat could remain in addition to the Christian faith although there are exceptions.

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