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MANGONGKAL HOLI AS A LEGACY OF THE ANCIENT BELIEF SYSTEM IN THE LAND OF BATAK

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ABSTRACT

This research is the result of observing and analyzing the traditional Batak ritual, namely Mangongkal Holi, in Lumban Sinantik, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra. This paper aims to explore and explain the social and cultural values contained in this traditional ritual and how it relates to today's belief systems. During the observation, the author found that this unique ritual has survived and remains deeply ingrained in the Toba Batak people, even though its implementation has been adjusted to the teachings of Christianity. The social and cultural values are still embedded in the ritual, which is why it continues to survive and hold a special meaning for the Toba Batak people. To approach this problem, a historical approach is used and analyzed with qualitative methods. The data was collected through literature studies, interviews, and direct observation of these traditional rituals in the Lumban Sinantik area and was analyzed qualitatively. This paper concludes that this traditional ritual instills solidarity among the descendants of the Batak ethnicity. It serves as a means of strengthening intergenerational relations in the Batak lands and as a historical legacy of the ancient belief system, which has been adapted to include elements of Christianity and Islam.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Batak are one of the most well-known ethnic groups in Indonesia, recognized for their rich diversity of customs and traditions. One of the cultural heritages that continues to be preserved is the *Mangongkal Holi* ritual. A practice of exhuming and relocating the bones of ancestors as a form of respect and a means of strengthening kinship ties (Aritonang et al., 2023). The Batak Toba people, in particular, uphold sacred, unique, and mystical customs and culture (Nainggolan, 2007). The Batak community considers these traditions to be meaningful, honorable, and essential to pass

down to future generations. Long before the arrival and spread of Christianity in the Batak region, there was a strong belief in ancestral veneration, which was manifested through the *Mangongkal Holi* ritual (Simanjuntak & Farida, 2021).

The term *Mangongkal Holi* in Indonesian is derived from “mangongkal” meaning “to dig up” and “holi” meaning “bones”(Lumban Clarita; Vioeza Niken, 2024). This ritual involves moving the ancestral bones (*saring-saring*) from the grave to the *batu na pir* (multi-level tomb) as a form of respect and an elevation of social status (Silalahi, Sibarani, Setia, & Takkari, 2020). This belief system has been maintained and passed down from generation to generation. In the *Mangongkal Holi* ceremony, all traditional communication must be delivered with the utmost politeness and proper decorum. This to maintain harmony, avoid any impression of rudeness, and show respect to all parties present (Silalahi, Sibarani, Setia, & Takari, 2020). This sacred tradition was originally integrated with the early belief system of the Batak people, known as Parmalim or Ugamo Malim (Gultom & Marbun, 2024).

Ugamo Malim is the traditional belief system of the Batak Toba people, centered on Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon which means The Almighty Creator (Anwar, 2024). The ritual often begins with the ancestral spirit appearing to a family member (within the same clan) through visions, spiritual possession (*siar-siaron*), or dreams (Purba et al., 2020). For example, in dreams, an ancestor may request to be moved and reburied in a more proper place, or united with other descendants (*pinompar*) a request that must be fulfilled immediately (Lumban Clarita; Vioeza Niken, 2024). Additionally, the ritual may also be preformed due to special circumstances within a family, such as a tragic event, infertility, or a severe illness that leads them to seek traditional healing through a *datu* (spiritual healer).

Despite entering the era of globalization, the *Mangongkal Holi* ritual continues to be practiced, although in forms that have undergone some adaptation. According to the community in Lumban Sinanti, these changes began to occur with the arrival of Christianity in the Batak lands. These changes stem from the perception that the *Mangongkal Holi* ritual contains elements of dynamism, animism, spiritism, and other traditional beliefs considered contradictory to Christian teachings.

However, in the effort to spread Christian teachings, official church documents encourage the church to adopt a more contextual and grounded approach with the local community. One of the recommended approaches is inculturation, a process of adapting and integrating local cultures and beliefs that are deeply rooted in people's lives (Sirait, 2024). This inculturation is implemented through the proclamation of the Gospel in harmony with the development of local values and

cultural expressions (Sitanggang, 2023). For example, ritual processes are adjusted to align with church teachings, and burial forms have transformed from traditional sarcophagi to modern tombs marked with crosses (Pane et al., 2022).

Through this writing, the author directly observes how the *Mangongkal Holi* ritual is carried out in the midst of Christianity in the Batak land. The author attempts to understand the ritual through historical study and a qualitative approach, linking it with relevant theories that support the arguments in this paper, with the aim of producing a well-grounded and objective analysis.

II. METHODS

To study and observe the topic in the field, the researcher employed a qualitative research method (Sugiyono, 2015) as an appropriate approach to observe the *Mangongkal Holi* traditional ritual. According to the researcher, this method is suitable for analyzing traditional rituals and cultural practices. In the social sciences, which are essentially based on observing human life whether in specific regions or events qualitative methods help identify relevant aspects of human conditions, the world, actions, beliefs, and interests, with a focus on differences that yield diverse answers and meanings.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the ritual practice of Mangongkal Holi within the context of Christianity in Lumban Sinantik, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra Province. This area is home to a Batak Toba community where the majority of the population adheres to Christianity and Islam, yet continues to maintain several traditional customs, including the Mangongkal Holi ceremony—a ritual involving the exhumation and relocation of ancestral remains to a more proper and sacred place. To gain a deep understanding of the meaning and transformation of this ritual, the research was conducted through several methodological stages. The first stage involved a literature review to explore relevant theories on rituals, Batak culture, inculturation, and the dynamics between religion and local traditions.

Next, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, Christian religious figures, and community members involved in the ritual. These interviews were designed to uncover the perceptions, values, and symbolic meanings embedded in the practice of Mangongkal Holi, particularly as they relate to Christian teachings and practices.

In addition, the researcher conducted participant observation by directly engaging in the field during the ritual. This observation involved examining the ritual procession, the use of traditional symbols such as gondang (Batak traditional music), ulos (traditional cloth), prayers recited in the Batak language, and the community's responses. All data collected from the literature review, interviews, and observations were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach. This process included data reduction, organization based on key themes (such as

sacredness, transformation of meaning, and the integration of religious values), and contextual interpretation. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and objective understanding of how the Mangongkal Holi tradition endures, transforms, and dynamically interacts with Christian teachings in contemporary Batak Toba society.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Symbolic Meaning of *Mangongkal Holi*

The Mangongkal Holi is a traditional ritual that involves the exhumation of graves to collect and relocate ancestral bones to a new resting place (Pane et al., 2022). This ritual serves to strengthen kinship ties within the Batak community. According to Durkheim's theory of mechanical solidarity, this form of social cohesion united people based on shared beliefs and a collective consciousness. It creates a sense of mutual responsibility and joint activities. This includes a set of rules, moral obligations, and collective responsibilities that serve to unite and strengthen community (Ritzer, 2012).

Originally, Mangongkal Holi was practiced by ancestors who followed the Parmalim belief system, which centers on faith in Mulajadi Nabolon. Parmalim refers to the followers of Ugamo Malim, a traditional belief system that developed among the Batak people, particularly the Batak Toba (Simamora et al., 2024). This indigenous belief system is deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual values of the Batak Toba community and existed before the arrival of major world religions such as Christianity and Islam.

This belief system is deeply rooted in reverence for Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon, the Supreme God in Batak cosmology, and upholds the values of purity, truth, and moral integrity. Durkheim's concept of solidarity is inherently present in this ritual, which also reflects a sense of prestige tied to three core Batak cultural values: Hagabeon (having many offspring), Hamoraon (wealth), and Hasangapon (honor). These values are all deeply rooted in traditional Batak customs (Panjaitan, 2019).

In practice, the Mangongkal Holi ritual unites all descendants from a common ancestor, regardless of their current location (Hutagaol & P. Prayitno, 2020). Additionally, the ritual is performed with the aim of obtaining blessings of prosperity, longevity, and honor—known as *hamoraon*, *hagabeon*, and *hasangapon*—which are believed to be passed down from the ancestors to their descendants through the construction of monuments or tombs (Wiradnyana, 2017). This ritual highlights the enduring kinship ties among the Batak Toba people and strengthens lineage-based relationships (Nainggolan, 2007).

The ritual also serves as a gathering space for different generations of descendants, allowing them to reconnect and foster unity (Silalahi, Sibarani, Setia, & Takkari, 2020). When successfully performed, the ritual generates a sense of pride, satisfaction, and joy among the descendants, as it

symbolizes a collective effort to honor their ancestors (Simanjuntak et al., 2020). The success of the ritual strengthens both familial bonds and the local belief system.

Social status does not hinder community participation in the Mangongkal Holi ritual. Regardless of economic standing, all family members are encouraged to unite and contribute to the ritual, which is grounded in a shared identity and collective consciousness as Batak Toba people connected through a common ancestral lineage. This inclusivity is deeply rooted in the core principle of *daliha na tolu*, the foundational social structure and philosophy of Batak Toba society. This principle consists of three main components: *somba marhulahula* (showing respect to the wife-giver), *elek marboru* (showing affection to the wife-taker), and *manat mardongan tubu* (maintaining harmony among one's own kin) (Samosir & Pandian, 2023).

In the context of Mangongkal Holi, these three elements—*somba marhulahula*, *elek marboru*, and *manat mardongan tubu*—form the basis for collective participation, as the ritual involves relationships within and across clans. Every participant holds an important role, not based on wealth or position, but on genealogical and moral responsibilities to honor their ancestors (Sihotang, 2020). Thus, Mangongkal Holi serves not only as a means of preserving cultural heritage but also as a way to strengthen social solidarity and affirm Batak identity, which upholds familial values and mutual respect through the *daliha na tolu* framework.

Therefore, Mangongkal Holi plays a crucial role in maintaining solidarity and harmony among the Batak people, uniting them through lineage ties and encouraging cooperation and commitment to cultural traditions (M. Silalahi et al., 2019). Furthermore, the Mangongkal Holi tradition generally does not generate significant conflict with either Christianity or Islam, as it has undergone processes of adaptation and inculturation within modern Batak society. Although certain elements of the ritual are spiritual and considered sacred, most Batak Christians and Muslims interpret it as part of their cultural heritage rather than as an act of ancestral worship or a practice that contradicts religious teachings. In many cases, participation in the ritual is symbolic and ceremonial, without involving theological elements that conflict with their faith. Thus, this tradition continues to be preserved as a form of ancestral reverence and a marker of Batak identity, without creating serious tensions with the religious beliefs held by the community.

Religious Inculturation

The term *inculturation* was first introduced by P. Carlos (1893–1954) and J. Masson (1959). In the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, Masson wrote (Lyhempí, 1988:10; Hu Chun, 1996:16), “Today there is a greater need for a Catholic who is cultivated in various forms (*d'une façon polymorphe*).” The word *inculturation* refers to the concepts of *enculturation* and *acculturation* (in anthropology), as well as *incarnation* (in theology). It describes the encounter between two distinct cultures, resulting in a new, integrated culture.

In Christian theology, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church *inculturation* describes the assimilation of church teachings with non-Christian cultures and the influence of those cultures on the development of church teachings. It is the process of integrating religious knowledge into local cultures so that the experience of faith becomes not only a cultural expression but also a spiritual force that inspires, guides, and renews belief (Pane et al., 2022). Therefore, inculturation is the human process of reaching God by uniting the Gospel (Christian faith) with local cultures, making the Gospel a revitalizing force that leads and transforms those cultures (Manalu, 2020).

Mangongkal Holi is a sacred Batak ritual that involves exhumation and relocating the bones (*saring-saring*) of ancestors. This ritual not only includes exhumation and relocation but also the offering of prayers for the spirits of the deceased, based on the belief that the descendants will be blessed and protected from harm (Lumban Clarita; Vioresa Niken, 2024). This ritual cannot be performed by just anyone.

Traditionally, the Mangongkal Haji was led by a spiritual leader known as a *datu* or *natua-tua* (the most respected elder in the village), a person believed to possess magical powers and the ability to connect with the spirit world (Simanjuntak et al., 2020). In ancient times, *Mangongkal Holi* was considered highly sacred and could not be performed carelessly among the Batak Toba. It required a capable ritual leader to properly guide the ceremony (M. Silalahi et al., 2019). The timing and the family's readiness were crucial for performing the ceremony.

Historically, the datu served a role akin to a traditional chief or priest in pre-Christian Batak society. However, with the arrival of Christianity in the Batak lands, this leadership role was largely replaced by pastors, priests, or church elders (Manalu, 2020). This transition, from a traditional spiritual leader to a more institutionalized religious figure, aligns with Max Weber's theory on charismatic leadership in religion and ritual.

According to Weber, every religious practice, whether primitive or modern, relies on a ritual leader who understands the symbolic meanings and functions of the cult and its rituals. A ritual is defined as a way of relating to the sacred based on a shared collective consciousness (Hutagaol & Prayitno, 2020). In this context, a leader must guide the worship or ritual process. Weber distinguishes between leaders who possess magical powers and those who are religious leaders. In the context of Mangongkal Holi, the datu is seen as a Batak Toba "magical expert" who comprehends the symbolic elements and meanings of the ritual. (Putri Dinda et al., 2023).

With the spread of Christianity in the Batak region, ritual leadership transitioned to priests or pastors. These religious figures differ from traditional magical practitioners, as their approach is guided by church doctrine rather than ancient beliefs (Nainggolan, 2007). In this new context, pastors and priests have assumed pastoral roles in leading Mangongkal Holi, adapting the ritual to align with Christian teachings. This process allows the church to supervise the ceremony and ensure its conformity with religious doctrine (Sijabat, 2003).

The church strives to spread Christian teachings holistically, integrating them with the social and cultural structures of Batak society (Sinaga et al., 2025). This mission involves engaging with local traditions, culture, and customs. As a result, the pastor is positioned as a charismatic ritual leader who embodies the church's mission in a culturally sensitive and relevant way. In this regard, Mangongkal Holi can be viewed as a cultural practice that is integrated with Christian faith through a contextual theological approach. The church plays a crucial role in deepening the ritual's spiritual meaning, thereby serving as a means of both cultural preservation and faith strengthening (Simamora et al., 2024).

A semiotic study by Aritonang et al. (2023) found that the Mangongkal Holi has undergone symbolic adaptation, making it more relevant to contemporary contexts and moving it beyond its original understanding as a pre-religious practice. Similarly, research conducted by Clarita, Lumban, & Vioresa, N. (2024) notes that many Christian and Muslim youth interpret the ritual as a cultural heritage and an opportunity to strengthen familial bonds, rather than an act of ancestor worship. This demonstrates a successful form of inculturation that preserves their religious identity.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Batak are a well-known ethnic group in Indonesia, renowned for their rich and diverse cultural traditions, including the sacred ritual of Mangongkal Holi. The Batak community considers this ritual highly significant, worthy of respect, honor, and preservation across generations a belief that has been upheld since ancient times. According to the people of Lumban Sinantak, the Mangongkal Holi ritual has undergone a significant transformation since the arrival of Christianity in the Batak region. This shift was driven by the perception that the ritual contains elements of dynamism, animism, and spiritism beliefs that conflict with Christian teachings. Nevertheless, the community continues to perform the ritual by incorporating religious values, resulting in a syncretic practice. For instance, Christian prayers are now often integrated into the Mangongkal Holi ceremony as a form of religious adaptation. Therefore, religious institutions such as the church in the Batak region play a vital role in overseeing, guiding, and aligning the ritual's implementation with Christian doctrine, while also preserving its cultural heritage.

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