

The Symbolic Meaning of Traditional Woven Fabric Ulos as A Spiritual Expression in Batak Toba Rituals

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Abstract

Every society in the world has a certain ability to produce traditional woven cloth as a result of its culture. Likewise, for the Batak people, the traditional woven cloth is called ulos, it is accepted as a symbol of a Batak spiritual expression. In the Batak tradition, giving or receiving a ulos is done based on the rules and procedures generally accepted in society. Giving and receiving ulos also represents a number of ideal values from the people who adhere to it. In substance, these are the values that are symbolically conveyed to someone and it is hoped that they will be realized in the future, accompanied by hopes and prayers. Typically, giving ulos does not have to take into account the particular religion or belief of the person receiving it, and the person to whom the ulos is given receives it with joy. So, ulos itself is universal because it is able to strengthen the solidarity of Batak people of different religions, both personally and collectively. The theory used refers to Clifford Geertz's theory regarding religion as a symbol system found in every culture. In Sandra Niessen's perspective, ulos is an expression and spiritual image of the Toba Batak people. For this reason, it is necessary to carry out research through a study process to find out whether the traditional ulos woven cloth is closely related to the spiritual values that the Batak have had since ancient times.

Keywords: Ulos, Symbols, Spiritual, Culture, Religion, Batak

INTRODUCTION

The existence of traditional woven cloth as a cultural expression of a society is commonly found in various parts of the world, where it always has a certain strong and unique meaning for the community, and its existence cannot be replaced by other ordinary cloth. Each type of cloth usually has its own purpose. In substance, traditional woven cloth, in this case ulos, contains and at the same time represents the ideal values of a society. Traditional woven cloth records various events in human life itself. Referring to Clifford Geertz, it is stated that religion is a system of symbols, it is said: "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (Geertz, 1973).

In this case, the symbols are formed as part of a belief system. The symbol functions as a medium in manifesting a number of certain beliefs, images and ideal values that refer to certain moral qualities in a society. (Wahab, 2011). In practice, these symbols occupy a very important part in rituals, which function to help believers in living out their beliefs. Religion as a symbol system applies to all models of religion, both mainstream world religions and local religions, where each religion displays its own symbols which are accepted and trusted and have a certain place in the hearts of its adherents (Dewi, 2022).

Because each symbol always has a certain meaning for its adherents, these symbols represent a certain spirit related to the spirituality of the adherents in whom the symbols are expressed. Individually, these symbols also refer to certain beliefs lived by their adherents (Ahmed Fernanda Desky, Pujiati, Muba Simaniburuk, Rizabuana Ismail, Ria Manurung, 2017). As individuals and communities in the society in which they live, from birth to death, even when someone is still in their mother's womb. That is why a number of hopes and prayers are attached to the ideal values themselves. In fact, it consciously connects humans to a supernatural power to which prayers are addressed (Siagian, 2018). It is understandable that in its use, traditional woven cloth functions as a symbol.

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In a general sense, the symbol is representing something else (something else). Here the traditional woven cloth refers to the presentation of ideal values themselves. These values can be in the form of authority, kinship relations, hope, prayer, and so on. Regardless of the size of the hopes and prayers expressed, the fact is that this reality can be observed in the lives of Turkish people as individuals and collectively, as Adem Koç said (Koç, 2012). Related to the way culture works which is based on the idea of thinking on a number of certain values and trying to express these values so that the results can be enjoyed by other people as cultural works (Sumarto, 2019). So traditional woven cloth can also be understood as a work of art in the sense of being a result of human thought. This takes place in the hands of people who are experts in their field (Disele, 2011).

The work of art itself can be in the form of paintings or natural drawings about nature. These motifs usually represent the way humans think about the world, animals and plants and the environment in which they live. Through the fibers and shading, the motifs displayed on a woven cloth usually contain the history of the people's lives in a certain period. Usually the paintings and drawings are displayed using basic materials available in the community where the work is presented as a cultural work (Koç, 2012). So that through the shape and motifs and type of woven fabric, other people can easily identify its origin (Jenab Hamid, Dahlia D. Moelir, Andi Tenri Abeng, 2023). Traditional woven cloth also expresses a certain social status, this is done through the procedure for laying out traditional woven cloth which is presented in various forms.

Several cultural community groups arrange traditional woven cloth shapes and place them on their heads in various shapes, or can also be placed on their shoulders as a shawl (Mamarajabov, 2021). Through the use of traditional woven cloth as part of the decoration, as is common in the tradition of the Rajputs, namely a section of the sect called "Kshatriyas," in India (Meenu Srivastava, Simerjeet Kour, 2010). The luxury and richness of traditional clothing is usually accompanied by the use of various accessories and trinkets such as earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and so on. Generally, the use of traditional woven fabric displays a number of values that are immediately visible from the appearance of the woven fabric, including: elegance, luxury, authenticity, and so on.

Referring to Berger, as an ancestral heritage that has been known for a long time by the people from generation to generation, the values inherent in the woven fabric itself have been internalized in the minds and conscious minds of the people (Berger, 1994). In Indonesia, there are basic materials for traditional woven cloth which have been packaged in the form of well-known traditional clothing, such as: baju kuning from Palembang, ulos from the land of Batak, North Sumatra whose shape is not much different in Malaysia (Efriyeni Chaniago, Tjetjep Rohendi Rahidi, Triyanto Triyanto, 2020). Maybe because both belong to the Malay family where the countries that are members of it include: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, so the traditional fabrics used also don't look much different.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper uses descriptive qualitative research methods. In this method, the data obtained is in the form of text. This is different from quantitative methods which tend to deal with numbers. In particular, this research aims primarily to explore the meaning contained in the subject under study (Creswell, 2010). That is why, one of the main characteristics of this research method is that it emphasizes the extent to which the data obtained is valid and in-depth, and therefore does not require a certain number of respondents.

The field data search method was carried out through an interview process with the ulos weavers themselves, also requiring interviews with traditional elders, cultural figures, sociologist researchers or anthropologists who live in the Toba and Samosir surrounding areas, North Sumatra, Indonesia. This data starts from a broad description and then narrows down to a specific description of the object being studied. The data is presented in as much detail as possible so that the reader feels like they are in that situation (Semiawan, 2010). However, this method is weak in terms of comparison because it only focuses on one context or situation. This is different from quantitative methods which usually examine several contexts or situations (Strauss, 1987).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Ulos as a Traditional Batak Woven Cloth

Ulos, a traditional Batak woven cloth, is a wealth of local Batak wisdom that has existed for a long time, long before Christianity arrived in Batak land. Batak itself is an ethnic group that lives on the island of Sumatra, the second largest island in Indonesia after Kalimantan, where the Batak people inhabit the Bukit Barisan plateau around Lake Toba (Sibeth, 1991). Like other traditional woven fabrics, ulos itself is a work that is woven for certain purposes and purposes. Basically, ulos is a symbol that is used to express certain spiritual meanings and values, to express its own meaning and purpose which is full of spiritual values. As is the origin of the Batak people, all Batak people are believed to come from the Sianjurmulamula huta. In its development due to several factors such as: the migration process of Batak people to the surrounding areas, also because of the natural conditions of the Pusuk Buhit mountains which are known as the first settlement of the Batak people around the sacred Mount Pusuk Buhit, which is known for its extreme cold, agricultural products are inadequate for their needs. everyday life (Sinaga, 1981).

The area is arid and rocky, with thin humus soil (Eijkemans, 1995). The area is hilly, trees are sparse and the erosion rate is quite high in this area (Nainggolan, 2012). All these factors encourage the Batak people to think about cultural ways to produce things that are necessary for their daily needs. The people try to explore other areas, survive and the solution is to move to another area, migrate. Batak communities also appear in various places, the name of the community is followed by the name of the place where they live, namely: Batak Toba, Batak Karo, Batak Simalungun, Batak Pakpak, Batak Angkola. What is especially important to note here is that each community group has models, motifs and names for ulos which are not always the same. Pakpak people call Oles; Karo, Uis; Simalungun, Hiou (Nu'man, 2017). From the motifs displayed by the weavers, it is easy to see the superior values of the Batak people around Toba Samosir.

The use of ulos in every ritual carried out by the Batak in Indonesia, especially the Batak community in North Sumatra, is a major factor in the process of maintaining the existence of the ulos itself, and a collective awareness is needed so that the ulos is not lost. As a cultural heritage from Batak ancestors, ulos can be owned by anyone, both individually and collectively from generation to generation, whose use is adapted to its use in accordance with the traditions prevailing in a particular region. Since its inception, ulos has been the result of cultural work primarily intended for private needs. This is related to the shape, type and motif of the ulos itself, ulos is used as a traditional Batak cloth to cover the body to keep it warm, so its function is more like a blanket (Batak: gobar). Furthermore, ulos also functions as clothing to cover the private parts. Ulos are also intended to be made into shirts or jackets, handehande, parompa, talitali, and so on (Sitanggang, 2014).

In the private realm, ulos is also used as everyday clothing (Sitompul, 2009). For men, ulos is worn on the arm, called handehande or tied around the head, called talitali, bulugbulang or detar. In the lower body, wrapped around the waist, it is called singkot, lopes, "marlopes". Meanwhile, women wear it by wrapping it around their chest, called abit or hain. There is another thing called hobahoba, where its use determines its name. When worn, it is called a shawl, and when worn on the top of the head it is called saong. When ulos is used to carry a baby, it is called ulos parompa. The process of weaving the traditional Batak cloth, ulos, itself has several stages, as obtained by research results in the Toba and Samosir areas (Simanjuntak, 2020), namely:

First: The cotton is dried so that it expands to a uniform size and is ready to be spun, using the kneading technique to produce thread, the tool used by sorha. This requires the work of 1-2 people, one of whom spins and the other spins the sorha. If you print, one person can do it at a time. Second: Coloring. After the cotton has been spun into white thread, the thread is colored/dyed before being formed into ulos with a certain motif. That motif is called gatip. Giving red color to the thread is called manubar and black is called mansop. Dyes are obtained from fermented leaves, then given a coloring agent called itom. The coloring process is carried out by a person called parsigira.

Third: Gatip. The series of graphics found in ulos when the thread is strung in standard sizes is called humpalan, called one lump, sagumpal for the number of threads used, or two humpals, and so on in multiples. The gatip is made before the coloring is done. The thread, which is expected to remain white, is tied with a binding

material consisting of fiber or lemongrass leaves. Fourth: Poultry is the process of yarn enlightenment. In general, threads that have been dyed or dyed will become slightly dull in color. This poultry process aims to brighten the threads that are dull due to the tubar or disop. The person who does this work is called pangunggas and the tools are called pangunggasan. The thread is smeared with melted rice and then rubbed with a round brush made from palm fiber. The melted rice is called indahan ni bonang (threaded rice). Yarn that has been steamed is more supple and breaks down more after being dried in the hot sun.

Fifth: Ani. The process of manipulating or stringing. The thread that was previously rolled into a ball is opened and stretched in a tool called anian. This anian tool has a length that is the size of the hand of the weaver or the ulos buyer. Determining the size of ulos is determined by the width of the hand span which is called sadupa or sadepa. If you want to make the woven ulos bigger, then you need your hands or the muscles that protrude on your lower and upper arms to be the reference point to make the ulos bigger than sadupa. Pangani's expertise in determining the size and number of strands of thread according to color composition greatly influences the final result. Sixth: Tonun. Tonun (weaving) is the process of forming thread that has been woven into a piece of ulos. People who perform this tonun are called partonun. In this tonun process there is a special skill in making tipping. This seesawing will produce jugia. The partonuns were given an honorary nickname other than partonun as parjugia. In this weaving process, ulos is still in the form of an oval roll or without an end. The ulos will remain shaped like this until the final stage of the manirat is completed. Seventh: Sirat. The final process is called sirat or manirat. The person who does this is called a panirat. Sirat is a decoration that ties ulos signs. Usually the sirat is in the form of a gorga motif. This sirat is placed at each end of the ulos. Next, the ulos is ready to be used.

Later, the use of ulos entered the public domain (Siregar, 1985). In the public domain, the use of ulos is adjusted to the traditional rituals carried out. Certain types of ulos can be used in different ceremonies, where the meaning of their use is also adjusted to the situation and ritual ceremony when the ulos is delivered. According to Monang Naipospos, the types of ulos used in the Toba Batak tradition are: seven ulos which are classified as yeast napitu, namely:

First: ulos tapoltua is received by a newborn baby which is presented to the baby's parents. ulos tapoltua is given by ompung bao (maternal grandparents) at the mamoholi or martutuaek event (a child's baptism ceremony at the age of 7 days after birth). If the ompung bao dies, it is replaced by a bone (the brother of the baby's mother who was born). This ulos tapoltua is in the form of ulos parompa or ulos mangiring. Giving ulos tapoltua means confirmation that the baby's parents are old or the blessing received by the baby's parents is realized through the birth of the baby. Here, tapoltapol means warm ulos, the aim is to provide warmth that will cover the baby both body and soul so that it is united with health, intelligence and honor throughout its life.



Figure 1. *Ulos Mangiring*

Second: Ulos Panghopol. Ulos panghopol is given by the bone (mother's brother) to someone who wants to go abroad. The shape of the pattern can be ulos mangiring or ulos star maratur. The word, panghopol comes from the word hopol which means wrap or wrap. Although there are also ulos given by the parents of people who want to go abroad, ulos made from bones are considered to have more meaning in Toba Batak tradition. Giving ulos is a symbol that emphasizes the love of bones for their bere (nephew). Toba Batak proverb; dangka do dumpang amak do rere, ama do bone anak do bere (a nephew is like a child to his uncle). Likewise, when a bere suffers from an illness, the bones will come and the bere will be manghopol (bandaged or wrapped) with a bribe (food) and usually given ulos. Therefore, the Batak expression, bone do sitopap sambubu manang pamupus (uncle who guides), namely mangiring in this case means life abroad accompanied by love and joy.



Figure 2 *Ulos Bintang Maratur*

Third: Ulos Sampetua. The recipients of the ulos sampetua are the bride and groom who are getting married. The bride's parents give ulos. The ulos sampetua motif is patterned with hotang yeast ulos which is then called ulos hela. The term "ulos sampetua" which has developed now is used as ulos namabalu or ulos mourning, which is the same type of ulos. But it can also be that when someone is old, their brothers come with food and give ulos sampetua. When the person who received the ulos dies, his body is placed with the ulos until the old age he received. That is why it is said that this ulos is also used in death rituals. The aim of giving ulos is for the bride and groom to be the same as the parents who gave the ulos. Ulos sampetua (to old age) means that the bride and groom are happy tu hatuaon (to reach spiritual maturity) by having children and a decent life. Ulos Sampetua usually uses hotang yeast ulos.

Also, Ulos Ragi Hotang, which is shaped like a rattan motif, is interpreted as a plant that spreads, creeps around and sometimes returns to its origin. Thus, this means life is like a rattan that goes around or wanders according to one's abilities and remembers one's origins. The flexibility and strength of rattan also describes rattan as a strong binder, not easily broken like humans who are strong and never give up to face challenges but are able to bind togetherness, kinship and friendship.

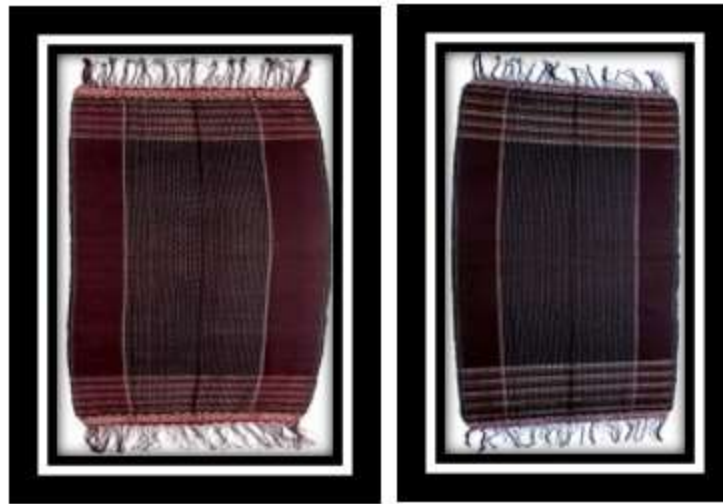


Figure 3. *Ulos Ragi Hotang*

Fourth: Ulos Sampuborna. The recipients are the bride and groom who are getting married. Given by the brothers of the bride's father (bapatua dohot bapauda). The type of ulos is hotang yeast ulos. The father's brother gives it with the aim that the bride and groom's living needs can be met, in the sense of pangabeian (gabe: to be, become something good), parhorasan (horas: prosperous, healthy, etc.) and good fortune.

Fifth: Ulos Sabinmaligas. The recipients of this ulos are the bride and groom who are getting married. The ulos giver is the bride's naboru (father's sister). This ulos does not include tied ulos. This is because it is more in the form of a gift or a type of present. Previously, they were given rantaranta, sengka, sadum or similar. Its relative nature has now turned into gifts such as blankets and other items besides ulos. Here, sabin was the daily clothing of the Toba Batak people in the past. The purpose of giving ulos sabinmaligas is a form of their participation in rejoicing like the joy of the bride and groom.



Figure 4. *Ulos Sadum Batak Toba*

Sixth: Ulos Hembangtua. The recipients of this ulos are the bride and groom who are getting married. Given by Bones (mother's brother) from the bride's side. The ulos used is a hotang yeast ulos pattern. Giving ulos hembang tua aims to ensure that the bride and groom's life develops with the hopes of the parents who have

mangampehon tua (give spiritual and physical maturity) to the bride and groom. In the form of the motif, rattan is interpreted the same as rattan which is strong and capable of uniting separate parts.

Seventh: Ulos Na So ra Bad. The recipients of this ulos are the bride and groom who are getting married. The ulos givers are the bride's parents. The types and patterns or motifs of ulos are given in the form of a rice field or piece of land (field). The aim of giving ulos na so rabad is to support the livelihood of newlyweds who have just started a family. Also so that he remembers returning to his hometown if he goes abroad. Ulos na sorabad cannot be sold without the consent of the giver, even if it has been given as a gift. Later, the use of ulos entered the public domain (Siregar, 1985). In the public domain, the use of ulos is adjusted to the traditional rituals carried out. Certain types of ulos can be used in different ceremonies, where the meaning of their use is also adjusted to the situation and ritual ceremony when the ulos is delivered.

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B. Batak Spirituality Related to the Creation of Ulos

In Batak spirituality, Si Boru Deak Parujar is the creator of ulos. The idea of creating ulos itself refers to the creation of the earth. That is why the creation of ulos is always associated with the idea of the creation of the earth which took place under the power of Mulajadi na Bolon, who is called Debata and God by the Batak people. The Batak confession clearly states that Mulajadi is: Creator of heaven and earth and everything in it in this world (Ibana do mulana dohot na manjadihon Langit dohot tano dohot nasa isina in clay portibion) (Tampubolon, 2012). This statement is also parallel to storytelling as found in Batak literary stories

Warneck's version of religious literature stored in Leiden, and written in Tobing's book, states: "What the Batak understand about the origins of humans and the earth, people say: Mulajadi has created everything..." (Tobing, 1963) This opinion is intended to emphasize the power Mulajadi na Bolon as Creator. In fact, in Batak spirituality, the earth and everything in it existed before humans were created.

Evidence of this can also be seen from Warneck's version in Tobing's book: "In the beginning, Banua Tonga was still full of water, once Sileangleang Mandi took a long walk to the lower level of heaven. He saw that there was nothing there yet, just emptiness. When he returned, he asked Mulajadi: "Does Ompung intend to create heavenly inhabitants under us? Because there is nothing there, as I saw myself when I visited it."

"There I will bring humans to inhabit it..." The word, "to inhabit it" here means that the earth, the cosmos itself already exists (Siagian, 2016). Several Batak mythologies have explained that the creation of the world took place by the will and power of Mulajadi na Bolon, God in Batak understanding. This view can also be paralleled with the views of adherents of other religions, that there is one God who is worshipped. This is also the same as the big idea contained in various folklore as part of the local wisdom of people in Indonesia (Kholiludin & Lattu (ed), 2020).

This was conveyed because there was a different view from what Angeler wrote about Si Boru Deak Parujar as the Creator of Earth (Angeler, 2016). In fact, even though the act of creation takes place through Si Boru Deak Parujar, the idea, the idea of creation itself is the authority of Mulajadi na Bolon (Siagian, 2016). Some Batak mythologies about the creation of the earth say that the world is a unified cosmos, consisting of three large parts, namely: "Upper Continent," "Middle Continent," and "Lower Continent." (Sangti, 1977). The 'Upper Continent' is usually where the saints, namely gods and goddesses, live, so this world is depicted in white, meaning holy, holy, holiness. Meanwhile, the 'Central Continent' is inhabited by humans who have to work hard to provide for themselves, so this world is depicted in red which indicates courage and great spirit. Furthermore, the 'Lower Continent' is the place of the priests (Batak: malim), the symbol of immortality and leadership is shown in black.

Furthermore, in Batak spirituality, when three threads with the three colors white, red and black are shaken, they will produce one rope with a combination of colors from the three, the combination of threads is called *bonang manalu*. According to Aliman Tua Limbong, a cultural expert and maestro of Mount Pusuk Buhit, who lives in Sianjurmulamula, it is said that if a person wears the *bonang manalu*, then within him there is a belief that the God of the universe who created the heavens and the earth will always preserve his life (Karisma Erikson Tarigan, Margaret Stevani, 2020). These three colors have become icons in all cultural works related to *habatahon*. According to Aliman Tua Limbong, a cultural expert and maestro of Mount Pusuk Buhit, who lives in Sianjurmulamula, it is said that the manifestation of the three main colors can be seen through the basic colors outlined in the *gorga motif* in the architecture of Batak houses, all types of Batak ulos, and so on. So the use of these three colors in Batak ulos is actually connecting the Batak people spiritually to their Creator, who has put together the creation of this world in such a beautiful way. Through the power of *Mulajadi na Bolon*, the first ulos in the world was woven by Si Boru Deak Parujar, the daughter of Batara Guru (Siagian, 2019).

Batak ideas related to the creation of the world, humans and everything by *Mulajadi na Bolon*, were then attempted to be visualized by experts as part of a work of art. Sandra Ann Niessen said that the idea of the creation of the world and humans was expressed in ulos motifs. The creation narrative was carried out using objects commonly known to the Batak, where the basic material for making ulos is cotton (Niessen, 1985). That is what is woven with very simple equipment to produce traditional Batak woven cloth that is beautiful, charming and amazing. Usually the tools used in working with human hands are called *godokan*. It's very simple, it even seems primitive and traditional. However, it is still maintained by the Batak people to this day. This is because the woven products displayed are much more beautiful, smoother, stronger and more durable.

And generally, people who know and understand ulos well will look for ulos that are woven with traditional knitting tools by the hands of skilled experts. It must be admitted that these tools are also increasingly difficult to find among the Batak community, except in procurement centers or ulos centers, such as: in Lumbanuhisuh village, Samosir. Although traditional woven ulos cloth woven using *godokan* is still found and is still produced for certain purposes today, in its development, the production of traditional woven cloth has mostly been carried out using modern techniques and using production machines. The difference in results is very obvious, where the results woven using machines are rougher and easily damaged (Siagian, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Here, ulos is a symbol of culture that is given a certain meaning and contains ideal values, and its delivery is intended for a specific purpose. Therefore, giving ulos in the Toba Batak ritual is always related to the daily life of the Toba Batak people from birth to death. Giving ulos and receiving ulos also displays and involves the social and religious sides of the Toba Batak community in all Toba Batak traditional rituals. That is the symbolic meaning of traditional Batak woven cloth, ulos is a spiritual expression in all social interactions of the Toba Batak community.

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