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How Does One Purchase a Woman?

The Status of Christian Batak Women in Wedding Traditions

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Abstract

This paper presents the encounter between two wedding traditions and cultures that mutually reinforce the internalization of women's status, the liturgical marriage in the church and the customary Toba Batak wedding. Both traditions originate from different worlds but are similar in their way of stereotyping and subordinating women. The commonly used scripture in the liturgical marriage exemplifies the stereotyping of women as her submission to the husband as a form of submission to God. This patriarchal text is present in the similarly patriarchal Batak community that strongly upholds customs. One such custom is the usage of *sinamot* at customary Toba Batak weddings, in other words, a payment arranged for the wedding. Many people equate *sinamot* with the term *tuhor ni boru*, which literally means 'money to buy women.' Women should not experience the treatment of *dituhor* or the state of being purchased.

Keywords: liturgical marriage, customary Toba Batak wedding, *sinamot*, *tuhor ni boru*.

Introduction

In most cases, Toba Batak women will celebrate their wedding with both religious and customary ceremonies of their own accord, or they will be forced to do so. The two traditions are viewed as indivisible since the union is regarded as incomplete if only one of the two ceremonies is held. A wedding with only a liturgical marriage in the church is deemed as disrespectful of Batak customs, but when it is only held according to Toba Batak customs, the marriage is regarded as incomplete since it has not been sanctified before the church. Couples getting married fear that they will be deprived of social standing and recognition from either one or both, the church and ethnic community, if they do not undergo either of the ceremonial

traditions, thus worsening their situation.

In the church community, documents indicating that the marriage is valid will be issued for the wedding ceremony. This is a prerequisite for the couple to be admitted by the community as a married couple. After the christianity of the Toba Batak people, there are hardly any more customary weddings that are not preceded by the liturgical marriage. However, there are still many who only conduct the liturgical marriage, without following up with the customary ceremony due to financial constraints or because such an event became unfeasible under tight schedules. There may also be another reason; they simply do not wish to hold a customary wedding. In the ethnic community, a married couple that has held the

customary wedding will be recognized and have a clear standing. They will be accepted as part of the ethnic community and have the right to be treated as a couple with a married status in all customary rituals following their wedding until their funerals.

The wedding ceremony sequence in the Christian Toba Batak community starts with Holy Matrimony conducted at church by a pastor or other ministers. It is then followed by a customary ceremony performed by traditional leaders who are part of the community's esteemed assembly of male elders. The two ceremonies go hand in hand in instilling values and positioning women for the course of her married life. Women are already positioned as subordinates at the onset of marriage.

Women in the Liturgical Marriage Tradition

The liturgical marriage is the essence of a Christian wedding ceremony, and it is described in the scripture of wedding processions. Even though on a superficial level the texts for the liturgical marriage seems to be highly adherent and influences the couple's view about their wedded life to come. The texts serves as the reference and guideline on how the couple positions their partner and themselves in their married life. The texts are internalized in the thoughts and actions of the two persons as well as of the family, surroundings and general public. Women are stereotyped and discriminated in many ways.

There are several biblical texts that are most often referred to as the basis of a Christian marriage. Amongst them are the books of Genesis 2:18, Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:22-25 which were clearly written for the interest of men by men in the tradition of a patriarchal society. In Genesis 2:18, women are called helpers, which in Hebrew is '*azar*' (to help). In the Old Testament, the word appears 118 times, with 55 of which referring to the help provided by God, and by men for 68 times (comprising of kings, commanders or someone strong). The helper is depicted as someone who is strong (Frommel, 2011: 44). This depiction should have given the same impression that women are strong, active beings who are given the utmost priority, and

who play the role of decision-makers. However, there has been a shift in meaning. Generally, in the context of marriage as a form of worship, people will interpret the word 'helper' as a companion, assistant and servant within the hierarchical and subordinate relation of women to men, as well as of a wife to a husband. It is set that men are family leaders the wives should respect and submit to. Oftentimes, descriptions of the texts are not complemented by word definitions in the original Hebrew. The explanation on how the teaching should be disseminated within the framework of equality is also not provided.

Another text is the book of Matthew 19:9 that says, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." This text is also written by men for men in a patriarchal society in the Jewish culture and Greco-Roman law, where both were equally strong in their patriarchal practices. The text reveals the mind of Jewish men that positions divorce as an action that only the husband reserves the power and rightful privilege of (Schäfer & Ross, 2013: 145). Conversely, the text does not mention that the wife also has the right to opt for divorce. Modern commonly accepted practices are cases of men divorcing their wives after the husbands commit adultery, which is contradictive to the previously mentioned texts. Many divorce cases filed by women are caused by domestic violence in the home, and not because the wives commit adultery. The text has not been read, interpreted, and applied using historical and contextual approach to critical feminism. Thus, it is as if only men hold the right to divorce his wife due to her wrongdoing. However, one questions whether the wrongdoing occurs on the man's part, for example when the husband unrepentantly commits violence, the wife should be allowed to divorce him when a solution cannot be achieved. This is for the well-being of women in the whole world, because one should not blindly accept violence as fate. However, struggle for divorce is often thwarted by the interpretation of another text that says, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate," (Matthew 19:6). Even though repeated acts of violence have made it no longer possible for the marriage to last, the

basis of this text and the couple's internalization of their position, forces the couple to defend the marriage's administrative status, whilst in reality the couple have long been separated.

Another example is from the Book of Ephesians 5:22-25 that says, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord [...] Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church." There is a difference in the commandment given to the husband and wife. The command for the wife suggests that she submits to the power exercised over her while the command for the husband indicates that the power exercised over her is based on love. The historical context surrounding this text was the early movement of the Christian mission, and the text contained appeal and advice for Christians to not exhibit divergent behaviour towards the Greco-Roman patriarchal culture of the time. Relations in the household were traditionally governed in accordance with the culture that prevailed during that period. The marital relationship itself occurred within patriarchal boundaries, and the church attempted to theologially modify patriarchal social rules. Thus, structures of socio-cultural domination were strengthened and applied into Christian theology. The strategy that the early Christians used to defend themselves from Greco-Roman patriarchy has unintentionally turned into a patriarchal social ethos prevalent in the church, and its practice prevails. This ethos replaced the original early Christian vision of equality, which was the attraction factor for women and slaves to enter Christianity in the first place, and that vision was turned into a method to strengthen the hierarchy of relationships. (Fiorenza, 1995: 344-350).

Until today, the reading of the liturgical marriage is mostly literal, detached from its historical contexts and does not adopt critical feminism approach. This manner of reading and interpreting can thus strengthen the patriarchal domination-subordination relationship placed on women in the family, church, and community. Meanwhile, church documents have spoken about equality, equal rights and gender equality between men and women. Moreover, the relationship between a father and mother

is actually defined as a partnership, which was then made as the basis of *konfessi* or the Christian profession of faith. However, the basic documents of faith used in certain churches are still counterproductive in their ways of reading, interpreting, and applying the texts of liturgical marriage.

As a result of such readings, various forms of discrimination take place; from stereotyping, submission, domestication, double standards, to the many forms of violence against women. In every situation, women are demanded to submit to their husbands, but the opposite is not true where the husbands are not expected to submit to their wives. Submission applies only for the wives. The wives are made to internalize biblical texts without them having any critical-historical understanding of it. This is done by defining their submission to their husbands as a form of obedience to God, even if the husbands were to commit violence against them. A husband positions himself as the ruler, and so does his family and society by placing him in such position. Meanwhile, a wife positions herself, as well as is positioned by the family and society, to be a companion of the husband; a helper that is interpreted as the husband's servant. The wife internalises the idea that she is her husband's servant suited for submission and should be proud of her ability to endure the heavy burden of household matters. There is an assumption that the submission to her husband is tantamount to submission to God, and she is thus performing the will of God. Her ability in serving her husband is considered a form of serving God. All these conceptions were initiated by the texts of liturgical marriage.

Women in Toba Batak Customary Wedding

Sinamot is a familiar term in the practice of Toba Batak customary wedding. Despite its likeliness, it is different from dowry or *belis*. Dowry is not used for the cost of customary wedding. Meanwhile, *sinamot* is the wedding cost or payment of marriage which signifies that the obtaining of a wife will incur an expense, with the groom's family bearing the costs (Vergowen, 2004: 218). *Sinamot* is given by the groom's family to the bride's family.

Initially, *sinamot* is seen both as a way to honour the bride as well as her family that has brought and raised her. This is done because she will then experience *dipahuta* or being dispatched to the groom's village and become part of the groom's family. Although her relationship and communication to her own family will not be broken, the bride is no longer a member of her parents' clan of relatives and family. *Sinamot* becomes a sign of respect for the family and relatives of the bride for they have given their daughter to the groom's family and relatives. But then, *sinamot* is also called *tuhor ni boru*, which means "money to buy women", and it is then made into a tool to exercise power over women and subjugate them.

The word *sinamot* and *tuhor ni boru* are often used together. *Sinamot* is understood as property in the form of livestock or money that is handed by the groom's family while *tuhor ni boru* is the *sinamot* received by the bride's family. *Tuhor ni boru* is a compensation that the bride's relatives receive from the groom's relatives and is handed during the customary wedding ceremony (Vergowen, 2004: 218). When a Batak person is asked about the meaning of *sinamot*, generally he or she will answer that it is *tuhor ni boru*, that is to say, 'money to buy women.' There are also those who reject this notion, and others who bluntly state that *sinamot* is the same as *tuhor ni boru*. Batak people often use the word *sinamot* to euphemize *tuhor ni boru*. Hence, they actually consider that *sinamot* and *tuhor ni boru* refer to the same idea (Simanjuntak, 2002: 117). There are also people who use the term *boli* which is derived from the word *pangolihon* (to wed a son). *Boli* is an offering to the bride as payment for the marriage (Sihombing, 1986: 37-38). Considering the aforementioned terms, all of them are derived from men's patriarchal language and perspective. The word *tuhor* has been used from the time currency was recognized as a tool of exchange in the economic system of Batak community. After the Batak community started to widely use currency, payment of marriage comprised of livestock and a sum of money. Nowadays, *sinamot* is usually paid by cash.

The amount of *sinamot* handed over by the groom depends on the bride's level of

education and occupation. It also depends on the market exchange rate of rupiah and which side of the family organizes the customary wedding ceremony. If it is the bride's family that organizes the wedding, the amount of *sinamot* paid will be larger than if it is organized by the groom's family. During an event called *marhori hori dinding* (or whispers) held prior to the customary wedding, a bargaining of *sinamot* occurs between the groom and bride's relatives. Education and employment status of the bride are integral factors of the bargain, along with current exchange value of rupiah and the wedding costs.

Is it true that *sinamot* is the same as *tuhor ni boru* and that the cost of Toba Batak wedding is a form of payment to buy a bride? Regarding the person bearing the economic cost of the wedding, the fact is *sinamot* is different from *tuhor ni boru* or the money to buy women. Nowadays, there are practices where the bride actually bears a part or even most of the wedding costs, and some even bear the entire cost of the Toba Batak wedding. Some others are only in charge of the cost of wedding attire, venue, and decorative ornaments, which seem to only make up a small part of the wedding. However, the accumulated costs of these items are still expensive. In some cases, the bride even covers her own *sinamot*, which is then submitted by the groom's parents to her parents as if the *sinamot* came from the groom's side. Such practice is concealed from the public by the couple in order to preserve the dignity of the groom and his family as the side supposed to finance the customary wedding. The question then remains on the dignity of the bride. When a bride finances her own *tuhor*, it is clear that she should be freed from the condition of being bought or *dituhor*. She is not supposed to be under a certain power due to materialistic reasons. She has her own economic power. Moreover, the *sinamot* that is considered as marriage payment is used to finance the wedding. In an urban setting, *sinamot* will be used to cover for the venue, catering, *ulos* or traditional garments, carp dish as a symbolic offering, money in envelopes that will be distributed for the relatives, wedding attire, snacks, wedding souvenirs, and other costs. In

essence, the spending of *sinamot* throughout the wedding procession is done for everyone from both sides of the family. When the source from which *sinamot* comes from and how the fund is spent are taken into account, it is then apparent that *sinamot* is not *tuhor ni boru*. It is not a transaction paid to the bride's parents.

Unfortunately, *sinamot* often gets treated as *tuhor ni boru*, which is interpreted as the buying and selling of women. This is apparent in how the family and community view and treat women who were married in Toba Batak customary wedding and have completed the handover procession of *sinamot*, or what they often call *tuhor ni boru*. Women are no longer entitled to position themselves as a part of their own parents' family. She becomes the "property" of her husband's family and relatives. It is as if she has been "purchased" to be a proprietor and successor of the husband's family lineage. *Sinamot* no longer serves as a token of respect for the bride's family and relatives. It becomes a tool to exercise power over women, her offspring and the family name of her offspring. In reality, women are exchanged with *sinamot*; her parents and relatives hand her over to the husband's side of the family, and the male side hands *sinamot* in return to her parents.

The effects of *sinamot* and *tuhor ni boru* are inferiorization, labelling, definition of women, and the transfer of authority over her from the father to her husband and her husband's father. In this way, her life is controlled. Her production in the form of her work output, whether of money-making or not, is also controlled. Both her body and offspring as components of her reproduction are similarly controlled. In the community, a woman has a predefined role as a companion and line-backer of her husband as well as successor of the husband's lineage. There are husbands who demand submission of his wife on the grounds that she had been *dituhor* (purchased) with *sinamot*.

There is social, financial and political harm that *sinamot* poses to the bride and her parents. In regards to their social standing, parents are stereotyped as the "seller" of their daughter. They no longer have the right over her, and the bride is stereotyped as an "object of trade."

Hence, social control of women is in the hands of men. In terms of finances, women tend to bear the costs if the man refuses to organize the wedding party. From a patriarchal perspective, this burden is taken up to preserve the dignity of both the bride and groom, but it is actually more for the sake of the groom's dignity. This practice is carried out without any recognition and appreciation from the groom's family and the ethnic community of the effort put out by the bride's family. Meanwhile, there is a tendency caused by political pressures for the bride's family to succumb, 'willingly sacrifice,' 'willingly suffer losses,' and 'lose power' over the bride's self and role. Although, I opine that beneath her 'willingness' to sacrifice, there remains an effort on the part of the bride to maintain her dignity as a woman who honours customary procedures by adhering to them, but nonetheless within the logic of patriarchy, the marriage payment is seen as something that the male gives to the female.

Batak women has internalized the belief that if the groom does not pay her *sinamot* or *tuhor ni boru*, the act will strip her of all dignity. The value that she places on her own dignity depends on the amount of *sinamot* received. From a patriarchal perspective, the greater the amount, the higher the feminine dignity she considers herself of having. Irrespective of the other definition of *sinamot* as *tuhor ni boru*, *sinamot* has been used as a tool to exercise power over women in regards to her reproduction, production as well as her role in the community. *Sinamot* serves as a means of exchange and transfer of power over women from men to men, from the father to the husband and his relatives. Through *sinamot*, women are used as means to perpetuate male power or patriarchy.

Exercise of power over women through marriage continues in the practice of male domination over women, husband over wife, male relatives over females, domestication, discrimination, and demands on women stemming from their position as traded objects. This has given rise to various forms of violence against women. They are seen as property that should submit to the husbands as well as to the relatives of the husband. Women's reproduction is controlled through the demands of bearing

children, especially to have a son. The output of women's occupational productivity both outside and inside the home is gathered and considered as a production carried out for the larger circle of the husbands' family, whether the work is money-making or not. Women's role in the community is used to maintain the husband and his relatives' dignity.

Religion and Customs Mutually Reinforce the Internalization of Patriarchy

Batak women remain controlled by the two forces of religion and customs. The two pose differing points of interests, but alternately work hand in hand to subdue women and constrain them as passive beings. It is as if women are tossed around between religious and customary forms of patriarchy. Both reinforce the internalization of patriarchy, exercise of power and subjugation of women. Women and men, young and old, educated or not, clergy and laity, traditional leaders and members of the general public, will eventually view religion and customs as reasonable and true. Within the mind of a Christian Batak, there reside fear and guilt if one does not practice the two bases. However, it is also undeniable that there are people who for certain reasons dare to take a stand to not abide to the legal and community constraint of one or even both forces. In the context of the Batak people and their religion and customs, it is difficult to create an opportunity to change women's fate. The quest in finding texts that can do this is as difficult as finding a needle in the haystack of patriarchy. Not to mention that religious and traditional figures are the ones to determine whether such opportunity can arise or not, and all of them are led by men.

Religion and customs are very important in the life of Batak people. They do not want to be called irreligious or godless. In fact, they will take offence when they are called uncultured. The two institutions provide space for community living as well as protection for its members. Community becomes a place for sharing, helping and mutually building a spiritual living. The ethnic community is a place for members to be heard with their complaints and have their rights protected. Solidarity is built and nurtured

through religion and customs. Unfortunately, patriarchal texts of religious traditions and customary practices wield enormous influence in the Christian Batak community living. The kind of solidarity they live by is one where the two genders support the male gender, but the same does not apply for the female gender. There has not been a good will to establish solidarity for women's equality and justice.

Capitalist economic interest surrounds religion and customs, and it also reinforces the power that the two have over women. Products of capitalist economy have been a contributing factor to the extravagance of Toba Batak sacrament and customary wedding parties in the form of money, other products as well as the global lifestyle. In a similar sense, world market prices also play a role in the appraisal of women's value through the amount of *sinamot* or *tuhor ni boru* paid.

Even the worth of relationships and kinship is valued by money and payments. Women and the roles they play are being commoditized. At the onset of marriage planning, discussions will be made around the question deemed important about the amount of *sinamot* or *tuhor ni boru* to be paid. When a woman is finally married, she will be regarded as someone who is 'sold' even though she took part in the wedding organization. There are even many who actually take up the role as the main sponsor and assume a range of responsibilities from the wedding party financing to economic activities taking place in the family. But from a societal perspective, women are still stereotyped as the ones who experience '*dituhor*' or 'being purchased' for the sole reason of being a woman.

Women even have to multiply the effort they put out in order to retain their dignity, which men prescribe the standards for. This is done by acquiring education and jobs as well as taking part in the customary wedding and bearing the wedding costs. However, the dignity they have will eventually be claimed as the success of the husband and his relatives. The power exercised over women in her married life starts from the start of her marriage, and then further continues its practice in the family, religion, society and ethnic community. The fate of women is in the

power of patriarchal religion and customs, masculine power and economic power of capitalism.

Conclusion

In fact, current religious texts that are most commonly used as the basis of Christian and Toba Batak customary marriage practices severely constrain women. They both mutually reinforce and strengthen the internalization of patriarchy in the community. The texts of liturgical marriage have not been read, interpreted, and contextualized within historical-critical feminism. The practice of customary Toba Batak wedding has not honestly asserted the position that women take up in the wedding party organization as an equally active collaborators. It should not be that *sinamot* or any property for that matter becomes an object that defines equality.

As an asset used to finance the Toba Batak customary wedding party, *sinamot* is actually enjoyed together by both sides of the bride and groom's family and relatives. Then, why do many people interpret it as *tuhor ni boru*? Is it due to men's practice from early history to exercise power over women by being the party who pays the costs? Hence, if the bride was the one who finances a part or the whole cost of Toba Batak customary wedding party, does the term *tuhor ni bawa* or "money to buy men" apply? If *sinamot* is not paid by the groom's family, there will appear a lingering fear that they lose the right over the bride to turn her into a successor of the groom's lineage.

In the context of the Toba Batak wedding, *sinamot* is actually used for the interest of everyone attending the wedding. The groom hands over *sinamot* to the bride for wedding party purposes and it ought not to be used personally by the bride's parents. *Sinamot* is supposed to be treated as a shared asset used for the common good of the people to hold a celebration and express joy as well as gratitude, regardless of which side of the family paid the sum. *Sinamot* or material possession should not be a tool to exchange the power over the person receiving the money. It should be that *sinamot* is seen as a shared funding for the Toba Batak customary wedding.

Sinamot is used as a tool to exercise power over women's reproductive, productive and communal roles. But on the contrary, the roles that have been carried out by women is a proof that women cannot be deemed as *dituhor* or purchased, nor can they be seen as passive objects. In the series of roles that they play, women are subjects that actively determine how the marriage and household run in the family and society.

Moreover, women have human rights and their own independence. There is no valid reason to put a person under the control of others. Christianity believed that slavery or servitude to or by anyone should no longer prevail. Jesus Christ was against all forms of slavery or servitude and brought about liberation and independence. Everyone should live in equality in terms of their race (whether Jewish or Greek), their status of being a slave or free person as well as their sex (male or female), (cp. Book of Galatians 3:28). The two traditions may add more value in the construction of justice and gender equality when read and interpreted in a constructive manner. The liturgical marriage texts should be read using the historical and contextual approach to critical feminism. Similarly, customary Toba Batak wedding should mention *sinamot* as shared wedding costs. *Sinamot* should not be viewed as *tuhor ni boru*, and also should not be used as a tool to exercise power over women.

By positioning women and men as equal, women and the general public could break away from religious and customary patriarchy by changing the way religious texts and the principles that underlie customs are interpreted. Moreover, a woman can catapult her independence of the two forces by leaving religion and customs and live not within the two principles. However, in actuality, the two remain integral to human lives as mentioned before. Religion and customs provide the space to build community living as well as to foster solidarity and spirituality. This state is attained by continuous learning and effort to combat any forms of discrimination within the system as well as enforcing gender equality by defending humanity and the life of all beings.

Is there still hope for religion and customs to become a shared space of equality for people to seek and build community life, solidarity, and spirituality? Alternatively, should we leave religion and customs to uphold the justice and equality for women? In my opinion, any social community is virtuous when the spirit of fairness and gender equality exists within it. In relation to this topic, the pressing fundamental move that needs to be done is to approach the reading of biblical scripture texts and traditions

with honesty, openness and humility for the sake of gender justice and equality, and to have a contextual as well as historical critical feminist reading carried out by religious leaders and the community. In an ethnic community, religion highly influences the believers' effort to create a gender-fair community living. To that end, it is required that the state plays a role in encouraging the institution of religion to achieve gender fairness, for the effort could only be attained by such an institution.

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