

Transformation Tradition Toba Batak Traditional Marriage in Perspective Ethnoscience

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i4.975>

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine and describe customs of marriage in the Toba Batak people, in particular the stages of implementation, values contained in the culture, as well as changes that occur as a consequence of the influence of modernization. The methods used is a qualitative approach with data collection techniques through observation, in-depth interviews, and literature study. Research results show that the customs of Toba Batak weddings consist of a number of important stages, such as mangarisik, marhata sinamot, pamasu-masun, and the party show. Each stage contains strong social, religious, and kinship values, as well as confirms the social structure of the Toba Batak people, especially the clan system. However, modernization and shifts in society cause a number of customary stages to be simplified or abandoned. This research concludes that although the customs of Toba Batak marriage are still preserved, there is a transformation in meaning and practice as a form of adaptation to contemporary socio-cultural dynamics.

Keywords: *Marriage Customs, Toba Batak, Tradition, Modernization, Cultural Values*

Article History :

Received 28th May 2025

Accepted 26th June 2025

Published 10th July 2025



INTRODUCTION

Customs are one of the important elements in the social structure of traditional societies in Indonesia. As a system of inherited values passed down from generation to generation, customs reflect a group's worldview, norms, and cultural identity. Every ethnic group in Indonesia has its own distinctive customs that govern various aspects of life, including birth, adulthood, marriage, and death. These customs not only function as traditions but also serve as a means of preserving the identity and integrity of the community.

One of the customs that is still preserved today is the Toba Batak marriage tradition. This tradition is rooted in a patrilineal kinship structure, which places the family institution at the center of public life. In Toba Batak society, marriage is not only a legal bond between two individuals but also a social and cultural process that links two large kinship groups, or clans (*marga*), thus reinforcing community ties and ancestral heritage.

The marriage process among the Toba Batak people involves various complex stages that carry deep symbolic meanings. These stages include negotiations between families, the giving of *ulos* (a traditional woven cloth) as a symbol of blessing and recognition, and the implementation of a wedding party rich in ritual and cultural significance. Each of these steps is guided by customary principles known as *Dalihan Na Tolu*, a value system that regulates social relations and kinship within the community.

Dalihan Na Tolu—which translates to "the three-legged stove"—represents the foundation of social interaction in Batak society, emphasizing mutual respect, support, and balance among family members and clans. This philosophy underscores the role of marriage

not just as a personal or familial affair but as a collective social responsibility that strengthens inter-clan solidarity and cultural continuity.

This article aims to study the structure and meaning of the Toba Batak marriage ceremony using a descriptive-analytical approach. It highlights the social function, cultural symbolism, and contemporary relevance of these traditions, especially in the context of a rapidly changing society influenced by modernization, urbanization, and shifting values.

It is expected that this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of Indonesia's cultural diversity and emphasize the importance of preserving local traditions as part of the nation's cultural heritage. By exploring the richness and transformation of Toba Batak marriage customs, the article also invites reflection on how traditional values can be adapted and sustained in the modern world.

METHOD

The study of Toba Batak marriage customs is best conducted using a qualitative research approach, as this method allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings, symbols, and social values embedded in traditional practices. Specifically, the research adopts an ethnographic or case study design, which is ideal for understanding the lived experiences and cultural expressions of a particular community. The research is carried out in areas where Toba Batak people are concentrated, such as North Tapanuli, Samosir, Humbang Hasundutan, or urban centers like Medan and Jakarta, where Toba Batak communities reside.

The primary data sources include in-depth interviews with customary leaders, couples undergoing traditional wedding ceremonies, and family members involved in the process. Observations of actual traditional wedding events are also essential for capturing detailed cultural practices and rituals. Secondary data is gathered from literature on Toba Batak customs, including books, academic journals, village archives, and video recordings of marriage ceremonies. Data collection techniques involve semi-structured interviews to explore informants' experiences and interpretations, participatory observation to directly witness each stage of the ceremony, and document analysis to support and enrich the findings.

Data analysis employs thematic analysis to identify key themes, such as the role of clans (*marga*), the significance of each ritual stage, and the symbolic meanings underlying various customs. Triangulation of data from interviews, observations, and documents is used to ensure validity and reliability. Research instruments include interview guides, observation notes, and recording equipment such as cameras or video recorders when available. Ethical considerations involve obtaining consent from traditional leaders or families, securing agreement from informants, and maintaining the confidentiality of personal information shared during the research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study finds that the traditional marriage customs of the Toba Batak people have a complex structure rich in symbolic meaning, reflecting the social, cultural, and spiritual values of the community. The customary process—known through stages such as *Martumpol*, *Martonggo Raja*, and the *Traditional Festival*—serves not only as a series of ceremonial rituals but also as a mechanism to uphold the social structure, guided by the *Dalihan Na Tolu* system (the three main pillars of Batak social relations).

One of the key findings is the dominant role of the family and clan in marriage decision-making. Not only the bride and groom, but also the extended families from both sides are actively involved, particularly in the *sinamot* (dowry) exchange. This dowry serves as a social gesture of appreciation toward the bride's family and as a symbol of the groom's commitment. Additionally, the study reveals a shift in the meaning and practice of these customs as a result of modernization and urbanization. For instance, younger generations tend to simplify several traditional stages, choosing only elements they consider essential, while still preserving Batak identity as a form of respect for their ancestors.

In the contemporary context, these traditions continue to play an important role in strengthening cultural identity and social solidarity, even as they begin to adapt to modern values—such as inter-ethnic marriages and the implementation of customs outside their original geographical regions.

Similarities with another research

The traditional marriage customs of the Toba Batak people share several similarities with those of other ethnic groups in Indonesia, particularly in terms of cultural values and ceremonial structures. One key similarity is the significant role of the extended family. In Toba Batak culture, the involvement of the broader clan is evident in stages such as *Marhusip* and *Mangalehen Marnon*, where both families engage in negotiations and blessings. Similarly, in Javanese, Minangkabau, and Bugis traditions, extended families play a central role in the proposal, dowry discussions, and overall wedding planning. Another parallel is the engagement or proposal ceremony—*Marhusip* and *Marhata Sinamot* in Toba Batak customs are comparable to *seserahan* in Javanese culture or *maminang* in Minangkabau tradition, reflecting a shared emphasis on formal family agreement before marriage.

Dowry or financial offerings are also a common element. In the Toba Batak tradition, *sinamot* represents appreciation and responsibility from the groom's side to the bride's family. This is akin to *uang panaik* in Bugis culture and *uang japuik* in Minangkabau customs. Traditional ceremonies filled with symbolic meaning are present across many cultures. Toba Batak weddings include events like *mangulosi* (the giving of *ulos*), while other regions incorporate rituals such as *paes* in Javanese weddings or traditional dances in Bali and Papua. Symbolism in attire and gift-giving is another point of convergence—*ulos* in Toba Batak represents blessing and honor, much like the use of *songket*, *batik*, or *kebaya* in other Indonesian cultures, each reflecting identity, heritage, and respect for tradition.

The similarities in marriage traditions across various ethnic groups in Indonesia reflect a shared cultural view of marriage as a sacred event that involves kinship ties, symbolic rituals, and traditional ceremonies. This cultural framework emphasizes that marriage is not merely a union between two individuals but a communal process deeply rooted in social and spiritual values. The Toba Batak marriage tradition exemplifies this perspective through structured rituals like *Marhusip*, *Marhata Sinamot*, and *Mangulosi*, which highlight the community's commitment to preserving symbolic meaning and social harmony. Compared to other cultural studies, research on Toba Batak marriage customs tends to provide more detailed and culturally grounded explanations of the marriage process and its societal significance.

One of the strengths of Toba Batak marriage studies is the deep exploration of cultural context, including detailed interpretations of local philosophies such as *Dalihan Na Tolu*, the role of *sinamot*, and the significance of the extended family system. These studies often rely on primary data collected directly from traditional leaders, ceremony participants, and on-site observations, offering a rich and authentic portrayal of the customs. This direct engagement with sources ensures that the research is not only accurate but also reflective of the community's lived experiences and perspectives, unlike some other research which tends to remain distant or overly reliant on secondary sources.

In contrast, studies on other marriage customs often fall into common pitfalls. These include a limited understanding of the local cultural context, overdependence on outdated or irrelevant literature, and superficial analysis that overlooks the complete structure and evolution of customs. Many of these studies treat marriage rituals as static or purely ceremonial, without examining their symbolic meaning, societal impact, or adaptation to modern influences. Additionally, they may lack a critical lens to assess the socio-economic implications of marriage traditions or use overly formal academic language that disconnects the research from the real-life practices of the community. These shortcomings highlight why studies on Toba Batak marriage customs stand out as more contextually rich and methodologically robust.

Differences with other Researches

Comparing the differences in the results of research on Toba Batak marriage customs with research on marriage customs from other tribes or regions, we can compare them from several main aspects, such as:

Table 1. Comparison of Research on Toba Batak Marriage Customs vs. Other Research (e.g.: Javanese Marriage Customs)

Aspect	Toba Batak Marriage Customs (based on various studies)	Javanese Marriage Customs (e.g., research results on Yogyakarta/Solo culture)
Social Structure	Very strong on the clan system (patrilineal), marriages cannot be between members of the same clan.	More flexible, does not prohibit marriage based on family name.
Stages of Marriage	There are several stages such as marhusip, martumpol , and traditional parties .	There are stages such as proposal, midodareni, marriage contract, reception .
Cultural Values and Symbols	Emphasizing the importance of ulos, sinamot (traditional dowry money) , and clan responsibility .	Emphasizes Javanese rituals, offerings , and symbols of harmony in the family.
Family Participation	The extended family is very active (especially the male clan), and can even determine the continuation of the relationship.	Families are involved, but not as tightly as the clan structure in the Toba Batak.
Social Function of Marriage	Marriage as a tool to strengthen clan networks and responsibilities between families.	Marriage is more of a personal and social bond, with the value of harmony.
Modern Change	Research shows that there is starting to be a compromise with customs, especially in urban areas (for example, sinamot is more flexible).	Many traditional elements are still used, but some have been simplified or combined with religion.

Two notable studies on Toba Batak marriage customs offer deeper insights into how traditional values interact with modern societal dynamics, particularly regarding the prohibition of *pernikahan semarga* (marriage within the same clan). The first study, titled "*Marriage of the Same Surname in the Toba Batak Community in Tanah Jawa Village, Simalungun Regency*", was conducted by Rebekka Nikita Siahaan in 2023 from Jambi University. This research employed a juridical-empirical method with a descriptive approach, focusing on the implementation of same-surname marriages, their causal factors, and the customary sanctions applied. The key findings indicate that such marriages still occur, despite being prohibited by adat, influenced by factors such as place of residence, education level, modernization, and the weakening of customary boundaries.

The second study, "*Dalihan Na Tolu Traditional Institution in Preventing Same-Surname Marriage in North Tapanuli Regency*", was conducted by Ade Tirza Wanda Anastasya Nababan in 2024 at Atma Jaya University Yogyakarta. This research used a normative approach, emphasizing the legal and social frameworks of Toba Batak customs. The study specifically examined the role of the *Dalihan Na Tolu* traditional institution in upholding customary law through routine meetings and the dissemination of genealogical knowledge to prevent *pernikahan semarga*. While these efforts show that the institution is still active in maintaining traditional norms, the research notes that the prevention measures are not yet optimal, especially due to the limited engagement of the younger generation in understanding and appreciating kinship values.

Together, these two studies highlight the tension between the resilience of Toba Batak customary law and the pressures of modern life. While Rebekka Siahaan's work illustrates how socio-cultural changes have led to the circumvention or erosion of traditional rules, Ade Nababan's research sheds light on institutional efforts to reinforce them. Both studies

emphasize that although Toba Batak customs remain a strong cultural foundation, they must continually adapt and find more effective ways to engage younger generations in order to preserve these traditions meaningfully.

Table 2. Comparison of Findings

Aspect	Research 1 (Siahaan)	Research 2 (Nababan)
Approach	Empirical, descriptive juridical	Normative, focuses on legal and social norms
Main Focus	Phenomenon marriage permanent surname happen although forbidden customs	The role of institutions customs Dalihan Natolu in prevent marriage surname
Key Findings	Social factors like domicile, education, and modernization influence occurrence marriage surname	Customary institutions active through meetings and socialization, but effort not optimal because lack of attention to the generation young
Social Implications	Change mark customs and adaptation law customs to dynamics social	The need for strengthening role institution customs in educate generation young about importance kinship

Toba Batak marriage customs are one of the most intricate and symbolically rich cultural traditions in Indonesia. The tradition reflects the patrilineal social structure of the Toba Batak community, where marriage not only unites two individuals but also strengthens the bonds between clans. Ceremonies such as Mangarisik, Martumpol, Marhata Sinamot, and the Adat Wedding Party go beyond ceremonial rituals – they function as mechanisms to reinforce social order through the philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu.

When compared to the marriage customs of other Indonesian ethnic groups such as the Minangkabau, Javanese, or Bugis, there are several similarities, particularly in the involvement of extended families, the dowry process, and the existence of traditional ceremonies. However, studies on Toba Batak weddings often delve deeper into the cultural context, values, and meanings of each ritual, making them more comprehensive and analytically grounded.

In terms of novelty, research on Toba Batak marriage traditions holds considerable potential for offering new insights. Innovative approaches, such as virtual ethnography of Batak diaspora weddings, gender-based perspectives, and genetic-anthropological analysis, contribute fresh dimensions to the field. These methods allow researchers to explore not just what traditions are practiced, but how and why they are adapted in new contexts.

Studies on Toba Batak marriages often meet or exceed expectations in terms of research outcomes. They tend to provide in-depth descriptions of ceremonial stages, explore cultural philosophies, and analyze social functions. For example, researchers consistently find that despite modernization, core rituals like Martumpol and Marhata Sinamot remain essential and are preserved even when simplified.

One of the strengths of the Toba Batak wedding tradition lies in its rich symbolic structure and communal spirit. Each ceremony is loaded with meaning – from choosing the wedding date to exchanging ulos, which symbolizes blessings and protection. The involvement of extended families strengthens inter-clan solidarity and reflects a strong sense of social responsibility.

The giving of ulos is a particularly unique feature of the Toba Batak wedding. Unlike other ethnic traditions, ulos is not merely ceremonial clothing – it represents spiritual protection, love, and family acceptance. It serves as a tangible symbol of blessing from elders and the larger family to the newlyweds, bridging generations and honoring ancestral values.

However, these customs also present several challenges. One significant drawback is the high cost of conducting a traditional Batak wedding, particularly the payment of sinamot (a form of dowry). This financial burden can create stress for families and sometimes leads to social pressure to fulfill expectations beyond their means, especially when compared to more flexible dowry traditions in Javanese or Sundanese weddings.

Another limitation is the length and complexity of the process. Toba Batak weddings can involve multiple days, numerous ceremonies, and many people from both families. This contrasts with some ethnic groups whose marriage ceremonies are shorter and involve fewer formalities, making them easier to organize, especially for urban or younger generations.

Toba Batak customs also face limitations in interethnic and interfaith marriage situations. The strong emphasis on clan identity and Christian religious affiliation makes it difficult for individuals to marry outside the Toba Batak tradition without significant negotiation or adjustment. This rigidity can hinder inclusivity and cultural integration in more diverse social settings.

Despite these challenges, the uniqueness of the Toba Batak wedding lies in its deeply rooted kinship system and emphasis on community. The rituals involve entire communities – both local and in diaspora – making the wedding more than a private event. It becomes a cultural celebration that fosters unity and a collective sense of belonging.

The implications of Toba Batak wedding customs are multidimensional. Socially and culturally, they help preserve ethnic identity, strengthen intergenerational relationships, and maintain respect for tradition. However, they also reveal tensions, such as generational gaps in understanding customs or gender roles that limit women's agency in a patriarchal structure.

In conclusion, research on Toba Batak marriage traditions provides a valuable lens into how a cultural practice can both preserve identity and adapt to change. While modernization challenges the completeness of traditional practices, it also opens opportunities for innovation, reinterpretation, and intercultural dialogue. Preserving these customs through research, documentation, and education ensures that their cultural value endures while remaining relevant in contemporary society.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of Toba Batak marriage customs reveals a deeply rooted cultural tradition that reflects the community's strong values in kinship, social structure, spirituality, and cultural identity. Each stage in the marriage process – from *Mangarisik* to *Pesta Adat* – is rich in symbolism and serves to reinforce familial and social ties through the foundational philosophy of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. These customs are not merely ceremonial but function as a mechanism to maintain intergenerational relationships and ensure continuity of clan identity. Compared to other ethnic wedding traditions in Indonesia, Toba Batak marriage rituals stand out due to their complex structure, extensive involvement of extended families, and the use of culturally significant items like *ulos*. Despite the modernization that has led to simplification in certain aspects of the tradition – especially among younger generations or urban communities – the core values remain intact. The implications of these customs extend across social, economic, and cultural domains, offering both strengths and challenges. While they preserve cultural identity and social cohesion, issues such as high costs, rigid clan regulations, and gender role limitations must be addressed for continued relevance in modern contexts. Importantly, the uniqueness of the Toba Batak wedding lies in its ability to balance tradition and adaptation, making it a living cultural practice rather than a static ritual. Therefore, ongoing research, documentation, and cultural education are essential to safeguard this tradition while allowing it to evolve in harmony with contemporary values and societal changes, ensuring that it remains a source of identity, pride, and unity for generations to come.

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