

Analysis of the Position of *Singkap Rere* Oral Tradition in the Batak Toba Marriage and Kinship System

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Abstract:

The oral tradition of *Singkap Rere* is one of the customary practices within the Toba Batak community that has been transmitted orally across generations. This tradition is closely related to the social position of a widow who has lost her husband and the kinship obligations that follow. This study aims to analyze the position of the *Singkap Rere* oral tradition within the marriage and kinship system of the Toba Batak people, including its functions, transformations, and social implications in contemporary society. The research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, combining field observations, in-depth interviews with informants, and library studies of relevant academic sources. The research site is Lae Rambong Village, Silima Pungga-Pungga District, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra Province. The findings reveal that *Singkap Rere* functions not merely as a remarriage mechanism, but also as an instrument for preserving patrilineal kinship ties, protecting inheritance rights, and ensuring the continuation of the marga (clan). The tradition distinguishes between widows who have children and those who do not, each with different customary implications. In the contemporary era, *Singkap Rere* is no longer a compulsory obligation, but has become an optional practice subject to mutual family agreement, reflecting the influence of modernization, formal education, and individual rights awareness, particularly for women. This research contributes to the documentation and preservation of endangered Toba Batak oral traditions and adds to the academic discourse on the intersection of oral tradition, customary law, and gender dynamics in Indonesian indigenous communities.

Keywords: oral tradition, *Singkap Rere*, Toba Batak, kinship system, customary marriage

Introduction

Indonesia is known as a multicultural country with a diversity of ethnicities, languages, customs, and traditions spread across various regions. This diversity is an important identity of the Indonesian nation and demonstrates the rich cultural heritage passed down through generations. One form of cultural heritage that holds a crucial place in Indonesian society is oral tradition. Oral tradition not only serves as a medium for intergenerational communication but also serves as a means of transmitting values, norms, knowledge, and worldviews to its supporters. In many traditional communities in Indonesia, oral tradition even served as the primary foundation for maintaining cultural identity before the widespread adoption of written language.

According to Robert Sibarani, oral tradition is a cultural activity passed down through speech, expressions, advice, stories, and social practices that are prevalent within a community. Oral tradition is not limited to folklore or oral literature but also encompasses value systems, customary rituals, and social customs that are passed down

verbally from one generation to the next. In this context, oral tradition plays a crucial role as a medium for cultural transmission, maintaining the continuity of a community's identity (Sibarani, 2012). Therefore, studying oral traditions is crucial not only for understanding past cultures but also for understanding how a society maintains and negotiates its cultural identity amidst changing times.

One ethnic group in Indonesia that still possesses a strong oral tradition is the Toba Batak people of North Sumatra. The Toba Batak people are known for maintaining customary systems and kinship structures in various aspects of their social life. In Toba Batak society, custom is not merely a social rule, but also serves as the primary foundation for regulating social relations, marriage, inheritance, and even resolving family conflicts. The Toba Batak social system is structured based on the patrilineal principle, a system of descent traced through the father's line. Within this system, the clan (*marga*) holds a central position as a marker of an individual's social and genealogical identity (Vergouwen, 1964).

According to J. C. Vergouwen, the Toba Batak people view marriage not simply as a relationship between two individuals, but as a social alliance between two extended family groups bound by customary norms and obligations. Therefore, every event related to marriage has broad social and cultural dimensions. The relationship between the man's family and the woman's family does not end after the wedding ceremony, but rather continues in various forms of customary relationships throughout the family's life. This view demonstrates that marriage in Toba Batak society has a collective function closely linked to the continuity of kinship ties and the continuation of lineages.

In Toba Batak social life, kinship relations are regulated through the *Dalihan Na Tolu* system. This system serves as the primary foundation of the Toba Batak social structure, which consists of three essential elements: the *hula-hula* (the wife's family), the *dongan tubu* (the same clan family), and the *boru* (the recipient family). These three elements have their respective functions and positions in every Toba Batak customary activity, including marriage, death, birth, and social conflict resolution (Harahap & Siahaan, 1987). The *Dalihan Na Tolu* system emphasizes the principles of balance, respect, and shared responsibility in Toba Batak social relations.

Within this kinship system, various traditions are passed down through generations, one of which is the *Singkap Rere* tradition. This tradition regulates the situation when a woman whose husband has died is encouraged or permitted to remarry her deceased husband's younger brother. In anthropological studies, this practice is known as *levirate marriage*, a marriage system that aims to maintain the relationship between the woman and her husband's family after the death of the male partner (Goody, 1973).

The *Singkap Rere* tradition holds a crucial place in Toba Batak society because it is directly related to the continuity of the clan, child custody, and the inheritance system. In the patrilineal Toba Batak society, sons are seen as the successors to their father's clan. Therefore, when a husband dies, the man's family remains responsible for the widow and the children left behind. Through *Singkap Rere*, the relationship between the woman and her husband's family is maintained, ensuring that childcare and inheritance management remain within the biological father's family.

In addition to its social and kinship functions, *Singkap Rere* also contains a strong oral tradition dimension. The implementation of this tradition is inseparable from various traditional narratives, family advice, the guidance of traditional elders, and deliberation processes conducted verbally in family forums (*marpokat*). According to Robert Sibarani, oral tradition is not only a form of verbal communication but also a medium for conveying cultural values, life philosophies, and social legitimacy within society. In the context of

Singkap Rere, the traditional expressions conveyed in deliberation forums embody the values of family solidarity, collective responsibility, and respect for the continuity of generations.

However, developments in modern society have led to significant changes in the practice of Singkap Rere. Modernization, urbanization, education, and religious influence have influenced the Toba Batak people's perspectives on traditional marriage customs. Younger generations of Toba Batak living in urban areas tend to have more individualistic views than previous generations. Furthermore, increased awareness of women's rights has led to the re-examination of traditional practices perceived as restrictive of women's freedoms (Lubis, 2022).

According to Tobing (2018), the transformation of Toba Batak marriage customs demonstrates a process of negotiation between traditional and modern values in contemporary society. While in the past, Singkap Rere was understood as a customary obligation that must be carried out to maintain the continuity of the family and clan, today the practice is viewed more as a choice dependent on the agreement of the family and the wishes of the woman concerned. These changes demonstrate that Toba Batak customs are not static but are continually reinterpreted in line with social developments.

On the other hand, these changes also impact the continuity of the Toba Batak oral tradition. The decline in the practice of Singkap Rere has resulted in various traditional narratives that were once an important part of family forums being used less frequently by the younger generation. Yet, these traditional narratives contain philosophical values and local wisdom that are crucial to the cultural identity of the Toba Batak people. Therefore, academic documentation of the Singkap Rere tradition is crucial for cultural preservation and strengthening the community's collective memory.

This research was conducted in Lae Rambong Village, Silima Pungga-Pungga District, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra Province. This location was chosen because the community in the village still retains traces of the Singkap Rere practice in their social life. Fieldwork in this village provides relevant empirical data for understanding how this tradition is practiced, negotiated, and transformed within contemporary Toba Batak society.

Extensive research on the Toba Batak community has been conducted previously. J. C. Vergouwen's research focuses more on the structure of customary law and the Toba Batak kinship system in general. Harahap and Siahaan's (1987) research examined the role of Dalihan Na Tolu in Toba Batak social life, while Pasaribu's (2019) research focused on Toba Batak customary marriage law. Pelawi's (2020) research did discuss the practice of levirate marriage in Batak culture, but did not specifically examine the oral tradition and contemporary social transformation of Singkap Rere. Meanwhile, Lubis's (2022) research focused more on the changing position of Toba Batak women in modern society without making Singkap Rere the primary focus of the study.

Based on these descriptions, it is clear that there is still a gap in research related to the study of Singkap Rere, particularly those that integrate aspects of oral tradition, kinship systems, social implications, and contemporary cultural change within a coherent analytical framework. Therefore, this research is crucial to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the Singkap Rere oral tradition in the marriage and kinship systems of the Toba Batak people.

Based on this background, this study formulated several research questions, namely: what is the essence and function of the Singkap Rere oral tradition in the cultural system of the Toba Batak community; what is the position of Singkap Rere in the Toba Batak marriage and kinship system, including its implications for child custody and the

inheritance system; and how the Singkap Rere tradition has changed and developed in contemporary Toba Batak society.

In line with the formulation of the problem, this study aims to describe the nature and function of the Singkap Rere oral tradition in the Toba Batak culture, analyze its position and implications in the Toba Batak marriage and kinship system, and examine the changes and development of this tradition in the contemporary era. This study is expected to provide theoretical contributions in the development of studies on oral traditions, cultural anthropology, and customary law in Indonesia, especially in the context of the Toba Batak community. In addition, practically this study is expected to be academic documentation that supports efforts to preserve the Toba Batak oral tradition amidst the currents of modernization and social change in contemporary society.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the meaning, function, and changes in the Singkap Rere tradition in the lives of the Toba Batak people. In qualitative research, social reality is understood as dynamic, complex, and meaningful, thus unable to be explained solely through numbers or statistical measurements. According to Lexy J. Moleong, qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena holistically through descriptions in words and language within a natural context. Meanwhile, Sugiyono states that a qualitative approach is used to examine the conditions of natural objects, with the researcher as a key instrument in the data collection and analysis process. The descriptive-interpretive approach was chosen because this research not only describes the practice of the Singkap Rere tradition but also interprets the cultural values, symbolic meanings, and social changes underlying the tradition's continuity within the Toba Batak community.

The research was conducted in Lae Rambong Village, Silima Pungga-Pungga District, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra Province. The research location was chosen purposively based on the consideration that the village still maintains practices and collective memories related to the Singkap Rere tradition. Furthermore, the local community still upholds Toba Batak traditional values in their daily social life, making this location relevant and representative for studying the cultural phenomenon under study. The research was conducted over three months, from January to March 2026. This time period was used for field observations, in-depth interviews, documentation, and the collection of supporting literature.

The research data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly from the field through observation and in-depth interviews with informants selected using purposive sampling. This technique was used because not all community members have adequate knowledge of the *Singkap Rere* tradition. Therefore, informants were selected based on their involvement, experience, and understanding of the tradition. Key informants in this study included those who had practiced the *Singkap Rere* tradition, namely R. Sitorus, traditional leaders, village elders, and family members involved in the traditional deliberation process. According to John W. Creswell, purposive selection of informants allows researchers to obtain rich and in-depth data in line with the research focus. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained through library studies in the form of books, scientific journal articles, theses, dissertations, and other documents relevant to the study of Toba Batak traditions, folklore, and culture.

Data collection techniques included observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review. Non-participant observation was employed, in which the researcher directly observed the social conditions of the community without actively participating in the

observed activities. Observations were conducted to understand the cultural context, social interactions, and the practices of the *Singkap Rere* tradition within the community. In addition to observation, this study also employed in-depth interviews using a semi-structured model. This technique allows researchers to explore information more flexibly based on informant responses, resulting in richer and more in-depth data. According to John W. Creswell, semi-structured interviews provide researchers with the opportunity to explore informants' experiences and perspectives more openly. To complement the field data, this study also employed a systematic literature review to obtain a theoretical foundation and comparative data from previous research related to Toba Batak customs and folklore.

Data analysis in this study employed the interactive analysis model proposed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. The data collection phase was conducted through observation, interviews, and documentation. Next, the data was reduced by selecting, simplifying, and focusing information relevant to the research objectives. The reduced data was then presented in the form of descriptive descriptions, theme categorizations, and interpretations of cultural meanings. The final stage was drawing conclusions, which was carried out continuously throughout the research process until valid and consistent findings were obtained.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from various informants, while method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and literature studies. According to Sugiyono, triangulation is used to increase the validity and credibility of data in qualitative research. Thus, the research results are expected to provide an objective, in-depth, and scientific picture of the *Singkap Rere* tradition in the Toba Batak community

Results

A. The Nature and Definition of the *Singkap Rere* Oral Tradition

Based on field observations and in-depth interviews conducted in Lae Rambong Village, Silima Pungga-Pungga District, Dairi Regency, it was discovered that *Singkap Rere* is a traditional practice in the Toba Batak community that regulates the remarriage of a widow to the younger brother of her deceased husband. This tradition is understood by the community as a form of collective responsibility of the male family towards the women and children left behind by deceased family members.

Etymologically, the term *singkap* in the Toba Batak language means "to open" or "to uncover," while *rere* refers to a state of loss or a situation of emptiness due to death. Thus, *Singkap Rere* can be interpreted as an effort to "reopen" the continuity of family life that was previously interrupted by the death of a husband. In the Toba Batak context, death is understood not only as an individual loss but also as a social event that can disrupt the stability of kinship relationships.

The research results show that the *Singkap Rere* ceremony is not carried out unilaterally, but rather through a traditional deliberation forum (*marpokat*) involving the *dongan tubu*, *hula-hula*, and the woman's family. In this forum, traditional leaders convey various advice, guidance, and customary considerations orally. This oral dimension makes *Singkap Rere* not only a customary legal practice but also part of the Toba Batak oral tradition passed down through generations. As Robert Sibarani points out, oral tradition is a medium for transmitting cultural values that live on through speech, traditional expressions, and community social practices.

In an interview with a traditional leader in Lae Rambong Village, it was discovered that the *Singkap Rere* tradition is no longer viewed as an absolute obligation as it was in the past. The informant stated that the final decision remains with the woman concerned. This indicates a shift in the community's perspective on custom, which now places greater emphasis on individual rights and desires.

B. The Position of *Singkap Rere* in the Toba Batak Marriage System

In the Toba Batak marriage system, which is based on the principle of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, *Singkap Rere* serves as a mechanism for maintaining interfamily relationships after death. Marriage in Toba Batak culture is not viewed solely as an individual relationship, but as a social bond between two extended family groups with ongoing customary and social consequences. Therefore, the death of a husband does not necessarily end the relationship between the woman and the man's family.

According to J. C. Vergouwen, the Toba Batak kinship system places family ties as the primary foundation of social life. In this context, *Singkap Rere* serves to maintain the continuity of these relationships, ensuring they are not severed by death. By marrying the widow to her brother-in-law, the man's family demonstrates their continued responsibility to their former daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

The case of R. Sitorus in Lae Rambong Village is a concrete example of this tradition. After her husband, whose surname is Sinurat, passed away, the groom's family held a marriage forum to discuss the future of R. Sitorus and her children. At the forum, the family proposed that she marry her late husband's younger sibling. After lengthy deliberation and discussions with the family, R. Sitorus finally accepted the proposal.

In an interview, R. Sitorus revealed:

"When my husband died, I felt like my world had collapsed. But seeing my children made me stronger again. My inang simatua suggested I marry my anggi [sister-in-law]. At first I refused, but eventually I came to my senses—my inang simatua accepted me well, and the community here was also friendly to me."

This statement demonstrates that the decision-making process in *Singkap Rere* is not only related to tradition but also involves complex emotional, psychological, and social aspects.

C. Implications for Child Custody and the Inheritance System

Research results indicate that *Singkap Rere* has important implications for child custody and the inheritance system in Toba Batak society. In the Toba Batak patrilineal system, sons are viewed as the successors to the clan and the primary heirs to their father's lineage. Therefore, the presence of the mother within the father's family is considered crucial for maintaining the continuity of the child's social identity.

In the case of widows with children, especially sons, *Singkap Rere* allows the child to remain within the biological father's family, thus preserving their inheritance rights and clan identity. By remaining with the husband's family, inheritance management and child rearing can proceed without conflict that could potentially divide the extended family.

Conversely, in the case of childless widows, *Singkap Rere* is understood as a mechanism to open up opportunities for the birth of new offspring who will continue the male family's clan. In Toba Batak society, clan continuity holds significant social and symbolic value because it is related to genealogical identity and the continuity of the family line.

Interviews with traditional leaders indicate that the community still views male descendants as crucial for maintaining the clan's existence. Therefore, the *Singkap Rere*

tradition is often associated with efforts to maintain genealogical continuity within the Toba Batak patrilineal system.

D. Changes in the Singkap Rere Tradition in the Contemporary Era

Research findings indicate that the practice of *Singkap Rere* has experienced a significant decline in recent decades. Traditional leaders of Lae Rambong Village stated that the practice is now much rarer than in the past. In the past decade, the case of R. Sitorus is one example still found in the area.

The decline in the practice of *Singkap Rere* is influenced by several factors. First, increasing levels of public education have led to a new awareness of individual rights and the freedom to choose a life partner. Second, the influence of Christianity, practiced by the majority of the Toba Batak community, has also influenced views on traditional marriage. Third, urbanization and the social mobility of the younger generation have led to a loosening of customary ties in daily life. Fourth, the growth of the gender equality movement has given Toba Batak women greater freedom to make their own life choices (Lubis, 2022; Sinaga, 2021).

These changes demonstrate that Toba Batak customs are dynamic and continually adapt to modern social developments.

Discussion

A. Singkap Rere as a Social Protection System

Based on the perspective of structural functionalism, the *Singkap Rere* tradition can be understood as a social protection mechanism established by the Toba Batak people to deal with the crisis caused by death. In a patrilineal society, the death of a husband not only impacts the individual but can also disrupt the stability of family relationships and the continuity of the lineage. Therefore, *Singkap Rere* exists as a social response aimed at maintaining the balance of the kinship system.

According to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, social institutions in traditional societies function to maintain social order and stability. In the Toba Batak context, *Singkap Rere* fulfills this function by protecting widows, maintaining interfamily relationships, and safeguarding the continuity of the clan.

The social protection function of *Singkap Rere* can be seen at three levels. First, at the individual level, this tradition provides economic and social protection for widows who lose their husbands. Second, at the family level, this tradition helps maintain stable childcare and relationships between the two extended families. Third, at the clan level, *Singkap Rere* serves to maintain the continuity of lineages and inheritance systems.

This finding aligns with Jack Goody's research on levirate marriage in various patrilineal societies in Africa and Asia. Goody (1973) explained that this practice generally aims to maintain family alliances and safeguard social and economic assets within kinship groups.

B. Gender Dimensions in the Singkap Rere Tradition

One important aspect of this research is the gender dimension inherent in the *Singkap Rere* practice. On the one hand, this tradition can be viewed as a form of collective protection for women experiencing social and economic vulnerability after the loss of a husband. In traditional society, the presence of the husband's extended family can be a source of social support for the widow and her children.

However, on the other hand, *Singkap Rere* also demonstrates the power relations within the Toba Batak patrilineal system. Historically, women have often found it

difficult to reject customary decisions due to strong social pressure and collective norms. This suggests that custom serves not only as a protective mechanism but also as an instrument of social control over women.

According to Sinaga (2021), the Toba Batak patrilineal system traditionally prioritizes the collective interests of the clan over women's individual choices. However, research findings indicate a shift in contemporary practices. Toba Batak women now have greater room to negotiate customary decisions. The *Singkap Rere* tradition is no longer viewed as an absolute obligation, but rather as a choice that can be accepted or rejected.

This phenomenon shows that the Toba Batak people are undergoing a process of reinterpreting customs influenced by education, modernization, and discourse on gender equality.

C. Oral Tradition as a Medium for Maintaining Cultural Values

An analysis of the oral dimension of *Singkap Rere* shows that this tradition serves as a medium for maintaining Toba Batak cultural values. The customary advice, symbolic expressions, and wisdom conveyed in the marpokat forum serve not only as customary procedures but also as a means of transmitting values of solidarity, family responsibility, and respect for kinship ties.

As Robert Sibarani argues, oral tradition is a repository of local wisdom that lives and develops alongside its supporting community. In the context of *Singkap Rere*, traditional narratives serve as a medium for social legitimacy and a means of transmitting values to the younger generation.

However, the decline in the practice of *Singkap Rere* in the modern era has also weakened the transmission of this oral tradition. Many younger generations of Toba Batak are increasingly hearing traditional narratives that were once an important part of family forums and social life. Therefore, academic documentation of this tradition is crucial for preserving the collective memory and local wisdom of the Toba Batak.

D. Comparison with Previous Research

Previous research on the Toba Batak community has generally focused on the structure of Daliha Na Tolu, customary marriage law, and the kinship system in general (Vergouwien, 1964; Harahap & Siahaan, 1987). Studies specifically examining *Singkap Rere* as an oral tradition are still very limited.

Pelawi's (2020) research discusses the practice of levirate marriage in Batak culture, but has not yet examined the oral dimension and philosophical values contained within it. Meanwhile, Tobing's (2018) research focuses more on the transformation of Toba Batak marriage customs in general without making *Singkap Rere* the primary focus.

Thus, this research provides a new contribution through a more holistic approach, connecting aspects of oral tradition, kinship systems, gender implications, and contemporary social change in one integrated study.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the oral tradition of *Singkap Rere* plays a crucial role in the marriage and kinship system of the Toba Batak people. Based on fieldwork in Lae Rambong Village, Silima Pungga-Pungga District, Dairi Regency, it was discovered that *Singkap Rere* is not simply the remarriage of a widow to her deceased husband's younger sibling, but rather a traditional institution with complex social, cultural, and kinship functions. This tradition serves as a social protection mechanism for women and children left behind, a means of maintaining interfamily ties, and an effort to preserve

the continuity of the clan within the Toba Batak patrilineal system. In practice, *Singkap Rere* also serves as a medium for transmitting cultural values through traditional speech, advice, and oral family deliberations. The values of solidarity, collective responsibility, and generational continuity are at the heart of this traditional practice.

The research also indicates that the status of *Singkap Rere* is influenced by the circumstances of the surviving family, particularly the presence of children from previous marriages. In the case of widows with sons, this tradition serves to maintain the continuity of the clan and ensure that the child's inheritance rights remain within the father's family. Meanwhile, in the case of childless widows, *Singkap Rere* is better understood as a means of maintaining kinship continuity and opening up the possibility of new descendants to carry on the male family's clan. These findings demonstrate that the Toba Batak kinship system is closely linked to the concept of genealogy and the continuity of lineages.

Furthermore, this study found that the *Singkap Rere* tradition has undergone significant transformation in the contemporary era. Modernization, education, urbanization, the influence of Christianity, and increased awareness of women's rights have changed how society views this customary practice. While in the past, *Singkap Rere* tended to be positioned as a customary obligation, today the tradition is more understood as a choice dependent on the consent of all parties, especially the woman involved. These changes demonstrate that Toba Batak customs are dynamic and constantly undergoing a process of negotiation in line with modern social developments. However, the basic values contained in this tradition, such as family responsibility and kinship solidarity, are still maintained by some Toba Batak people.

This research has several strengths that make it an important contribution to the study of Toba Batak culture and oral traditions. First, it uses a holistic approach by integrating the perspectives of oral tradition, cultural anthropology, customary law, and gender studies within a single, integrated analytical framework. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of *Singkap Rere* not only as a traditional practice but also as a social and cultural phenomenon within the community. Second, the use of empirical data through in-depth interviews and a real-life case study in Lae Rambong Village provides authenticity and relevance to the research findings. Third, this research helps fill a gap in previous research, which generally only discusses the Toba Batak kinship system in general without examining the oral dimensions and social transformation of *Singkap Rere* in depth.

However, this study also has several limitations. The study's scope, which was limited to a single location, means the results cannot be generalized to all Toba Batak communities across the region. Furthermore, the limited number of informants means that varying perspectives on the practice of *Singkap Rere* are not fully represented. This research also faced challenges in obtaining comprehensive documentation of the *Singkap Rere* traditional speech practices, as most of these practices are passed down orally and only conveyed in certain, closed, traditional forums. Therefore, further research is expected to expand the scope of the study, involve more informants, and document the forms of traditional speech in greater detail to optimize the preservation of Toba Batak oral traditions.

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