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The Concept of Divinity in The Mangongkal Holy Tradition in The Batak Toba's Culture

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Abstracts:

Employed within the Batak Toba community, Mangongkal Holi represents a longstanding tradition that continues to be actively practiced. Functioning as a unifying element, this tradition fosters cohesion amongst the geographically dispersed Batak Toba people across Indonesia. Through a combined approach of literature review and interviews, this research delves into the concept of divinity inherent within Mangongkal Holi. The authors' meticulous analysis unveils Mangongkal Holi as more than just a ceremonial practice; it serves as a profound expression and reflection of the human connection to the divine. This tradition embodies esteemed values such as reverence and dedication towards the Creator, while simultaneously reinforcing the bonds of fraternity among the Batak people scattered throughout Indonesia.

Keywords:

Batak Toba, Cosmos, Dalihan Na Tolu, Mangongkal Holi, Mulajadi Nabolon

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Introduction

Indonesia, a country rich in cultural diversity, offers a captivating panorama that attracts both foreign and local tourists, as well as cultural researchers from around the world. One of the cultural treasures that attracts attention is the Batak Toba culture, an ethnic group inhabiting the highlands of North Sumatra. The Batak Toba themselves are one of the largest tribes in Indonesia and are spread throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Additionally, Batak Toba culture plays an important role as a valuable heritage that enriches the nation's cultural wealth. One of the traditions that is quite well-known among the public is the *Mangongkal Holi* tradition.

For Batak Toba people, culture has higher place in their life and has more respect than religion. Batak Toba people felt deeply offended when they are told *naso maradat* (no culture life) than *so maragama* (no religion). Batak Toba culture can be recognized in to two big parts that are wedding ceremony and funerals. Their culture and custom which holy, unique, sacred, and magic is considered important to be respected, to be valued and to be preserved.[1]

Batak Toba culture has unique characteristics that make it unique within the framework of Indonesian culture. From the pulsating music, rich customs, to a deep spiritual life, Batak Toba culture offers a unique perspective on life and humanity. In this context, the *Mangongkal Holi* tradition becomes an important focus because it is not just an ordinary religious ceremony, but also reflects the essence of the concept of divinity held by the Batak Toba people and aims to show the Batak way of life and their respect for their ancestors.

[1] Lumban Clarita and Niken Vioreza, "Nilai Sosial Dalam Upacara Adat Mangokal Holi Suku Batak Toba," *Pusaka: Journal of Educational Review* 1, no. 2 (2024): 94.

Far more than a ritual ceremony, *Mangongkal Holi* represents the deep spiritual connection between humans and God in Batak Toba beliefs. This tradition reflects an effort to strengthen one's bond with the Creator while acknowledging His greatness in daily life. Rooted in the Batak Toba concept of divinity, it serves as a profound expression of gratitude, reverence, and devotion.[2]

The ceremony takes place when a family or a group of related families (*mardongantubu*) decides to perform *Mangongkal Holi* or *saring-saring* (the exhumation of bones). This is often prompted by the burial site of ancestors - such as grandparents - being located far from their ancestral village, typically in a place of migration. Beyond relocating remains, the ceremony carries deep significance, as it elevates the dignity of a clan (lineage) by honoring parents and ancestors, who are regarded as the primary forebears of the family line.[3]

This tradition was chosen as the focus of this paper because, despite being widely discussed in previous studies, it has not been explored from the perspective of divinity. The authors find *Mangongkal Holi* particularly compelling, as the Batak Toba people hold great respect for those who have passed away. For them, death marks the pinnacle of a person's journey - signifying the completion of life and the return to the original realm in Heaven.[4]

Therefore, this paper aims to gather and explore insights into *Mangongkal Holi* and its connection to the concept of divinity. By doing so, it seeks to provide readers with a deeper understanding of this tradition and its spiritual significance. The discussion will cover both the

2 Charles David M. Silalahi, Robert Sibarani, and Eddy Setia, "Local Wisdom Found in *Mangongkal Holi* Tradition," in *AICLL 2019*, vol. 2019 (Presented at the The Second Annual International Conference on Language and Literature, Knowledge E, 2019), 155.

3 Sutri Marice Nainggolan, "Peran Lembaga Perbato Dalam Melaksanakan Upacara Mangokal Holi Pada Masyarakat Batak Toba Di Kelurahan Talang Mandi Kecamatan Mandau Kabupaten Bengkalis," *Jom Fisip* 4, no. 2 (October 2017): 3.

4 Anjelita Elan et al., "Tradisi *Mangongkal Holi* sebagai Penegasan Identitas Suku Batak," in *Filsafat Kontekstual Indonesia* (Presented at the Seminar Nasional Filsafat dan Teologi II, Yogyakarta, 2023), 551.

meaning and implementation of *Mangongkal Holi*, highlighting its role in emphasizing the relationship between humans and God. Additionally, this paper will illustrate the central role of God within the religious system of the Batak Toba people.

Literature Review

From 2013 to 2024, numerous studies have explored *Mangongkal Holi* as a tradition practiced by the Bataknese people, particularly the Batak Toba community living around Lake Toba and Samosir Island. One such study, titled *Makna Simbolik Upacara Mangongkal Holi Bagi Masyarakat Batak Toba di Desa Simanindo Kecamatan Simanindo Kabupaten Samosir Provinsi Sumatera Utara*, was conducted in 2015.[5] This research examines the symbolic meanings embedded in the *Mangongkal Holi* tradition in Simanindo Village, Simanindo Subdistrict, Samosir Regency, North Sumatra. Fransiska Dessy Putri, the researcher, identifies three key symbolic meanings within the *Mangongkal Holi* tradition: inferential meaning (the meaning derived from signs), significance meaning (the values associated with the tradition, including religious, social, and leadership aspects), and intentional meaning (the intended meaning linked to motivation and emotions).

Another notable study is Bob Valentino's thesis, *Ulaon Adat Mangongkal Holi Pada Masyarakat Batak Toba di Kecamatan Sipahutar: Kajian Folklor*.[6] This research explores the origins of *Mangongkal Holi* through a historical approach, analyzing the ceremony both before and after the influence of Christianity on the Batak Toba people. Valentino also applies folklore study techniques to explain the myths surrounding

5 Fransiska Dessy Putri, "Makna Simbolik Upacara *Mangongkal Holi* Bagi Masyarakat Batak Toba Di Desa Simanindo Kecamatan Simanindo Kabupaten Samosir Provinsi Sumatera Utara," *Jom Fisip* 2, no. 2 (October 2015): 1.

6 Bob Valentino Parningotan, "Ulaon Adat *Mangongkal Holi* Pada Masyarakat Batak Toba Di Kecamatan Sipahutar: Kajian Folklor" (Sumatera Utara University, 2017).

this tradition. Conducted in Sipahutar District, the study further highlights how the involvement of various community members contributes to the solemnity of the ceremony.

In December 2018, Adison Adrian Sihombing conducted a significant study titled *Introductory of Batak Toba Culture with Philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu (Cohesion Perspective and Harmony)*.[7] This research examines Batak Toba culture and the concept of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, a fundamental philosophy that emphasizes equality, mutual respect, and balance among three key social elements. The number three holds mystical-religious significance in Batak Toba life, particularly in their social structure. Using a descriptive-interpretive qualitative method with a hermeneutic approach, Sihombing explores how time and external influences have led to deviations from traditional values, such as shifts in social stratification and marriage customs. He argues that revitalizing *Dalihan Na Tolu* is essential to preserving Batak cultural identity.

A 2020 study by Hutagaol and Prayitno, titled *Perkembangan Ritual Adat Mangongkal Holi Batak Toba dalam Kekristenan di Tanah Batak,* investigates the enduring social and cultural significance of *Mangongkal Holi* within Batak Toba society. Using sociological theories from Durkheim and Weber, the research explores how this ritual has been adapted to align with Christian beliefs. The findings suggest that *Mangongkal Holi* continues to foster a sense of shared identity and social cohesion (*mechanical solidarity*) within the community while emphasizing the role of charismatic ritual leaders.

Also in 2020, Agus Suryono completed a thesis titled *Animisme Dalam Ritual Adat (Analisis Semiotika Foto Mangongkal Holi, Sebuah Penghormatan Bagi Yang Telah Pergi Karya Andri Ginting di*

[7] Pintor Marihot Sitanggang, "Examining Mula Jadi Na Bolon in the Traditional Belief of Toba Batak People," *Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen Kontekstual* 6, no. 2 (Desember 2023): 92.

Beritagar.id).[8] This study focuses on the visual representation of Mangongkal Holi through photographs taken by Andri Ginting, published on the news website *Beritagar.id*. Through semiotic analysis, Suryono examines animistic elements present in the images, uncovering key aspects such as the role of women in the tradition, the process of washing bones, and the relational dynamics within the Batak community. An intriguing finding of this research is that each photograph contains mythological and symbolic meanings deeply embedded in Batak cultural beliefs.

At the end of 2023, Ludwig Nommensen published an article titled *Examining Mula Jadi Na Bolon in the Traditional Belief of Batak Toba People*.[9] This study focuses on the missionary work of Nommensen among the Batak people, particularly his efforts to contextualize Christianity, empower local communities through education, and indigenize the church. His approach involved translating Christian texts, establishing schools, and training local missionaries and pastors. The interaction between Christianity and Batak culture is analyzed as a dialectical process involving inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization.

Also in December 2023, Anjelita Elan, Antonia Cristianingsih, Desima Erlinda Agnesia, and C.B. Mulyatno conducted a study titled *Tradisi Mangongkal Holi sebagai Penegasan Identitas Suku Batak*.[10] This research explores the significance of *Mangongkal Holi* in reinforcing Batak ethnic identity. Using a literature review approach, the study examines how the tradition serves as a kinship practice and a means of honoring ancestors. It highlights the role of *Mangongkal Holi* in maintaining familial ties and introducing the tradition to members of the

8 Agung Suryono, "Animisme Dalam Ritual Adat (Analisis Semiotika Foto *Mangongkal Holi*, Sebuah Penghormatan Bagi Yang Telah Pergi Karya Andri Ginting di Beritagar.id" (University of Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah, 2020).

9 Adison Adrian Sihombing, "Introductory of Batak Toba Culture with Philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu (Cohesion Perspective and Harmony)," *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 16, no. 2 (September 2018): 347.

10 Anjelita Elan, et al., "Tradisi *Mangongkal Holi*," 548.

Batak diaspora who have never visited their ancestral land on Samosir Island.

While these studies have extensively examined the rituals, customs, purposes, and contemporary evolution of *Mangongkal Holi*, none have analyzed it from the perspective of divinity. This paper aims to fill that gap by exploring the concept of divinity within the *Mangongkal Holi* tradition, offering a new dimension to the existing body of research.

Research Method

This article adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to offer a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the concept of divinity in the *Mangongkal Holi* tradition. The research is grounded in a literature review of existing studies on *Mangongkal Holi* and is further enriched through interviews with individuals well-versed in Batak culture, particularly those experienced in leading traditional ceremonies. Conducted with residents around Lake Toba, including Samosir Island, these interviews provide firsthand insights that complement and deepen the findings from the literature review.

Discussion

Mulajadi Nabolon: The God of the Batak people

The God of the Batak people is symbolized by Mulajadi Nabolon, the highest deity in the Batak Toba religion, representing the origin of all creation and embodying divine qualities. The name “Mulajadi Nabolon,” used by the Batak people to describe their High God, consists of three key components: “Mula,” “Jadi,” and “Bolon.” In Batak culture, “Mula” means “the beginning,” “Jadi” means “become,” and “Bolon” means “great.” When combined, these words collectively describe the Batak understanding of God as the “Creator.” This concept aligns with St.

Thomas Aquinas's view of God as "the first cause," suggesting that Mulajadi Nabolon is the ultimate cause of creation, from which all things originate.[11]

Mulajadi Nabolon is believed to be the eternal creator (Sang Asal Mula yang Mahabesar) of the universe,[12] which is divided into three realms: Banua Ginjang (the upper world, the realm of souls, and the dwelling place of Mulajadi Nabolon),[13] Banua Tonga (the middle world, the realm of the living), and Banua Toru (the lower world, the realm of the dead, where only the bodies reside, as the souls belong to Banua Ginjang).[14] While these realms are described as separate, they are united as one. This can be understood as different parts of a unified body, where each realm serves a distinct function but all share the same purpose: maintaining the order and harmony of the universe.[15]

Three other deities—Bataraguru, Soripada, and Mangalabulan—embody the power of the Creator, Mulajadi Nabolon. Bataraguru is associated with sharing the Creator's power to establish and uphold customs and laws. Soripada represents Mulajadi Nabolon's power to preserve the sacred, fulfill human needs, protect from disasters, and maintain peace among the people. Mangalabulan, another embodiment of Mulajadi Nabolon's power, is associated with bestowing blessings and other good things. However, Mangalabulan's power also has the potential to bring war and instability to people's lives.[16]

11 Anicetus B. Sinaga, *The Toba-Batak High God: Transcendence and Immanence*, vol. 38–39 (Anthropos Institute, 1981), 238.

12 *Mulajadi Nabolon* represents the highest deity in Toba Batak religious belief. Mulajadi signifies the genesis of all creations, while Na Bolon embodies the Supreme Being, endowing divine attributes upon this deity. (See Anicetus B. Sinaga, *Dendang Bakti: Teologi Inkulturasi Batak* (Medan: Bina media Perintis, 2004), 52).

13 Anicetus B. Sinaga, *The Toba-Batak High God: Transcendence and Immanence*, vol. 38–39 (Anthropos Institute, 1981), 47.

14 DJ. Gultom Rajamarpodang, *Dalihan Na Tolu: Nilai Budaya* (Medan: Armanda Media Sarana, 1992), 54.

15 P.B. Pedersen, *"Darah Batak dan Jiwa Protestan: Sejarah Perkembangan Gereja-gereja Batak di Sumatera Utara"* trans. Ny. Maria Th. Sidjabat and Dr. W.B. Sidjabat (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1978), 21.

16 Anicetus B. Sinaga, *Imamat Batak Menyongsong Katolik* (Medan: Bina Media Perintis, 2007), 37.

Additionally, there is Dewata Asiasi, the messengers of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, who reside in Banua Ginjang. Banua Tonga, the realm of the living, is the earth, created by Debata Mulajadi Nabolon through Siboru Deak Parujar, who descended from the upper world. "After creating everything, to support humans on earth, God created the first human as an inhabitant of the heavens, then placed them on earth, in Banua Tonga... in the primeval paradise, on the primordial earth...". [17]

Banua Toru is the primeval sea (chaos), an endless realm. Its ruler is Naga Padoha Tua, the Dragon Serpent, who is the king of misfortune. He governs and creates impurity, disasters, diseases, calamities, suffering, and misery. Naga Padoha Tua is also known as the king of death and the devil. The inhabitants of Banua Toru are feared by humans, who seek help from God (Debata) to avoid their influence. One way they do this is by exhuming, cleaning, and relocating the remains of their ancestors to a higher place. This ritual is called Mangongkal Holi. By performing Mangongkal Holi, they believe they are assisting their deceased ancestors (in the lower world) in moving toward the upper world.

In Batak Toba culture, Mulajadi Nabolon is revered as the ultimate source of life and existence, guiding the spiritual and moral values of the community. Based on the roles of Bataraguru, Soripada, and Mangalabulan as embodiments of Mulajadi Nabolon's power—collectively known as "Debata Na Tolu" (the Three Gods/Allah yang tiga)—we can draw a comparison to the concept of the Trinity in the Catholic faith. This characteristic of Mulajadi Nabolon, as the manifestation of divine power in three forms, shares similarities with the Christian understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the Catholic faith, as presented by the Holy Catholic Church and clearly articulated in the

[17] Anicetus B. Sinaga, *Imamat Batak Menyongsong Katolik*, 37.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. The Trinity is one: Catholics do not profess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the "consubstantial Trinity."[18] The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves; rather, each of them is fully and entirely God. The persons are distinct from one another based on their relations of origin: "It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds."[19] Furthermore, the entire divine economy is the collective work of the three divine persons, though each performs the common work according to their unique personal property. The ultimate goal of this divine economy is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity.[20]

The concept of Debata Na Tolu has deeply influenced nearly all traditional and cultural activities of the Batak people, particularly through the philosophical concept of "Dalihan Na Tolu," which is a cornerstone of Batak culture, guiding interpersonal relationships and community interactions. The term "Dalihan Na Tolu," meaning "three-legged stove," symbolizes three essential principles: **Somba Marhula-hula**, which emphasizes respect and reverence for one's in-laws, particularly the wife's family (hula-hula);[21] **Elek Marboru**, which underscores caring for and being gentle with one's own family members, especially the women and daughters (boru), ensuring kindness, empathy, and support to strengthen family bonds;[22] and **Manat Mardongan Tubu**, which focuses on maintaining good relationships and cooperation with one's peers or clan members (dongantubu), fostering mutual support, solidarity, and

18 Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), no. 253.
19 Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), no. 254.
20 Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), no. 260.
21 Grecetinovitria Merliana Butar-butar, "Eksistensi Perempuan Batak Toba Dalam Budaya Dan Agama," *Jurnal Pionir LPPM Universitas Asahan* 6, no. 2 (May 2020), 194.
22 Grecetinovitria, "Eksistensi Perempuan," 194.

collective responsibility.[23] These interconnected principles ensure the balance and harmony of social relationships within the community.

Overall, we can say that "Debata Na Tolu," as a characteristic of Mulajadi Nabolon (the Batak God), bears a strong resemblance to the concept of the Trinity in the Catholic faith. This similarity provides one of the compelling reasons why the Batak Toba people were able to easily embrace the teachings of Christianity.

The similarities between Batak Toba culture and the Catholic faith became valuable advantages for Catholic missionaries. By using methods of contextualization and inculturation, they were able to introduce Christianity to the Batak people without erasing their cultural identity.[24] Both Mula Jadi Na Bolon and the Christian God are revered as the ultimate creators of the world and all existence. The worship of Mula Jadi Na Bolon involves rituals and ceremonies honoring this divine figure as the originator of life and the universe.[25] Similarly, in Christianity, God is acknowledged as the Creator of all things, as described in the biblical account of creation in the book of Genesis. Through this process, Christianity was able to coexist with and even incorporate elements of the traditional belief in Mula Jadi Na Bolon, which led to the successful establishment of a Christian community among the Batak people.

Catholic missionaries discovered an important symbol in Batak tradition called the Baringin tree. This tree is significant on Batak Island due to its impressive height and its deep cultural meaning. The Baringin tree is seen as a symbol of the entire universe, representing the creative power of Mulajadi Nabolon. It serves as a physical connection between the different cosmic realms.[26] Banua Ginjang (the upper world, the realm of

23 Grecetinovitria, "Eksistensi Perempuan," 194.
24 Pintor Marihot Sitanggang, "Examining Mula Jadi Na Bolon", 3-4.
25 Philip Oder Lumban Todbing, *The Structure of the Toba-Batak Belief in the High God* (Amsterdam: Jacob Van Campen Press, 1963), 3.
26 Pintor Marihot Sitanggang, "Examining Mula Jadi Na Bolon," 5.

souls, and the dwelling place of Mulajadi Nabolon) is symbolized by the branches of the tree; Banua Tonga (the middle world, the realm of the living) by the trunk; and Banua Toru (the lower world, where only the dead bodies reside, as the souls belong to Banua Ginjang) by the roots.[27]

Mangongkal Holi Tradition

The Meaning and History of Mangongkal Holi

In Batak Toba language, "Mangongkal" or "diokal" means to raise, dig up, or exhumed, while "Holi" refers to human bones, often specifically the skull of a deceased person, also known as *saring-saring*. The tradition of exhuming and relocating the bones to a proper place dates back to the time of the Batak Toba ancestors.[28] The designated location for this act is typically the *sekundar stone* or *Napir stone*. Mangongkal Holi is viewed as a symbol of honor. The Batak people believe that the universe and all its parts were created by Mulajadi Nabolon, the Almighty God who governs heaven and earth. This belief leads the Batak people to view it as necessary to honor their ancestors by exhuming their bones and reburied them in a suitable place as a mark of respect.

Mangongkal Holi in Batak culture serve two mutually beneficial functions. The first function is to elevate the status (*sahala*) of deceased parents in the afterlife. According to Batak belief, the spirits of the deceased require the intervention of their descendants to secure the best place in the other realm through these ceremonies. The second function is to bestow blessings upon the descendants of the honored parents.[29]

27 Anicetus B. Sinaga, *The Toba-Batak High God*, 60.
28 Fransiska Dessy Putri, "Makna Simbolik," 2.
29 Suzen HR Tobing, "*Mangongkal Holi* Dan Relasi Kuasa Apparatus Adat Dan Agama," *Jurnal Seni Nasional CIKINI* 6 (November 2020): 47.



Figure 1: Batak people are digging a grave.
Source: www.hetanews.com

The Sekundar stone, or Napir stone, commonly referred to as *tugu*, carries several symbolic meanings. First, the *tugu* is usually constructed on Samosir Island in three tiers, representing the three realms of the Batak people. Second, the bones that have been cleaned and moved (*diokal*) are placed on the highest tier, symbolizing the elevation of the deceased to Banua Ginjang, the realm of Mulajadi Nabolon.[30] Third, the *tugu* symbolizes the unity of the clan that constructs it and reflects their social status; the more beautifully the *tugu* is built, the higher the status of the clan that owns it.[31]

30 An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024.
31 An interview with Sr. Agata Maria, FSGM via gmail on May 14, 2024.



Figure 2: *Napir* stone or *tambak*.
Source: imagive.blogspot.com

In this tradition, the term "sombaon" refers to the sacrificial animal offered to the ancestral spirits, typically a buffalo. The buffalo serves several functions: first, it represents the host family and symbolizes their good fortune in conducting the tradition; second, it acts as a representation of the ancestors; and third, it provides food, known as "jambar juhut," which reflects the structure of Toba Batak society. Each part of the buffalo carries specific significance and is distributed to various parties according to their roles in the ceremony.[32]

From a historical perspective, the Mangongkal Holi tradition has no clear beginning. Research has uncovered remains, such as a sarcophagus with human skulls, found in Samosir.[33] However, this tradition originates from the Batak people, who believe it has existed since the time of their ancestors. Initially, the tradition was focused solely on moving the

32 Togar Nainggolan, *Batak Toba: Sejarah Dan Transformasi Religi* (Medan: Bina Media Perintis, 2012), 120-121.
33 Togar, "Batak Toba," 212.

deceased to their new realm or tomb. Over time, however, it evolved to also strengthen the bond between the living and the dead.[34] This tradition was likely influenced by monotheism, which developed within their society. The ancient Batak people believed that the universe was created by Mulajadi Nabolon, the Almighty God who rules over heaven and earth.

In an interview with Mr. Firdaus, he noted a noticeable change in the Mangongkal Holi tradition. Before the arrival of religion, the Batak people believed that the deceased, or those who were buried, remained in Banua Toru. They also believed that every Batak individual had to encounter Mulajadi Nabolon, who resides in Banua Ginjang. Therefore, they sought to elevate their deceased family members to a higher realm.[35]

With the influence of Christianity, while the Mangongkal Holi procession itself did not undergo significant changes, its meaning evolved. Before the introduction of Christianity, the tradition symbolized the elevation of family members from Banua Toru to Banua Ginjang, the final resting place for humans, and served as an effort to meet God. The Christian influence is seen in the addition of worship during the procession, including the celebration of the Eucharist and prayers modeled after Christian practices. The informant revealed that this addition reflects the influence of Christianity on Batak culture.[36]

The Procession of Mangongkal Holi

In an interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon, he explained that Mangongkal Holi is one of the highest traditions in Batak culture, alongside marriage traditions. The procession itself is complex and lengthy. The preparations for Mangongkal Holi are not completed in just a

[34] Defri Simatupang, "Pengaruh Kristen Dalam Upacara *Mangongkal Holi* Pada Masyarakat Batak," *Jurnal Arkeologi Sangkhakala* 17 (2006): 2.

[35] An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024

[36] An interview with Sr. Agata Maria, FSGM via gmail on May 14, 2024

few days, but often take several months or even a full year. This extended preparation period is due to the various processes that must be followed. Below is a simplified explanation of the Mangongkal Holi traditional procession, as shared in the interview.

a. The family must ensure that the deceased has been buried for at least seven years. This is necessary to confirm that only the bones remain, as only bones are eligible to be placed in the stone grave (tambak). Additionally, the family must verify the gender of the deceased, as this is relevant for obtaining Mangongkal Holi permissions. Typically, the tradition involves exhuming the bones of ancestors or grandparents, rather than those of younger family members.[37]

b. The family must then seek permission from the immediate family or descendants of the deceased. If the deceased is male, consent or blessing must be obtained from his maternal uncle (tulang). If the deceased is female, permission must be sought from her brother (iboto). The family is required to obtain approval or blessings from at least five families related to the deceased.[38]

c. After receiving the necessary permissions, the bones can be exhumed (diokal). Any flesh remaining on the bones must be removed and reburied, as only bones are placed in the stone grave (tambak). The tambak must be constructed on Samosir Island, believed to be the birthplace of the Batak people. The exhumed and cleaned bones are then wrapped in white cloth and placed in a small coffin. The family,

37 An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024
38 An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024

along with immediate relatives of the deceased, transports the bones to Samosir Island.[39]



Figure 3: The process of grave digging to retrieve bones.
Source: decode.uai.ac.id

d. The bones are placed into the stone grave (tambak) after a series of prayer ceremonies. These prayers are led by an elder within the extended family lineage. While there is no specific formula for the prayers, they consistently include expressions of gratitude and requests for blessings for the living family members.[40]

e. A traditional ceremony follows, typically lasting at least three days. The event is marked by music and dancing, symbolizing gratitude to God. On the first day, the family directly involved in placing the bones into the stone grave conducts the ceremony. From the second day onward, extended family members of the clan group (punguan) join

39 An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024
40 An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024

the festivities.[41] These subsequent days are often celebrated with great enthusiasm, with many people participating. Another significant purpose of Mangongkal Holi is to promote the well-being of the community around Samosir Island, particularly those who belong to the clan group organizing the celebration.

During the procession, according to the informant, supernatural occurrences often take place, where the spirit of the exhumed individual appears and interacts with the family members present at the ceremony. On several occasions, the informant personally witnessed the spirit entering someone and communicating with the family. Typically, the spirit conveys positive messages, such as expressing gratitude for the traditional ceremony held in their honor, and provides guidance to the family members. These messages usually include blessings, advice on things to avoid, and insights into future fortunes.[42]

The Concept of Divinity in the Mangongkal Holi Tradition

The meaning of the Mangongkal Holi tradition has evolved over time, especially with the influence of religion in Batak culture. In the pre-religious era, the Batak people recognized Mulajadi Nabolon as the supreme being or God. At that time, the tradition was rooted in the belief that, upon burial, the deceased entered Banua Tonga (the middle world) but needed assistance to reach Banua Ginjang (the upper world), where Mulajadi Nabolon and the ancestral spirits resided. The Batak people believed in a dualism within human beings: the flesh, which originated from Banua Tonga and could not ascend to Banua Ginjang, and the

41 An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024
42 An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024

bones, which symbolized the soul and were destined to return to its creator, Mulajadi Nabolon. Therefore, Mangongkal Holi involved exhuming the bones and placing them in a tomb or monument as a sign of respect and to facilitate the soul's journey to Banua Ginjang.

Mulajadi Nabolon played a central role in this tradition. As the creator of the universe, Mulajadi Nabolon was regarded as the receiver of sanctified spirits and the intermediary between the deceased and their living descendants. This connection allowed messages to be passed from the ancestors to their descendants. Additionally, Mulajadi Nabolon was believed to protect ancestral spirits from Naga Padoha Tua (The Dragon Serpent) and extend this protection to the living. The tradition also emphasized Mulajadi Nabolon as the giver of blessings, with the elaborate ceremonies—featuring buffalo sacrifices and large feasts—seen as a manifestation of divine favor through the ancestors.[43]

With the introduction of Christianity to Batak land, the tradition underwent significant changes. The belief in Mulajadi Nabolon was reinterpreted through the Christian faith, with Jesus Christ now seen as the savior of humanity. As a result, Mangongkal Holi shifted from a ritual meant to guide the dead to Banua Ginjang to a ceremony expressing gratitude and respect for ancestors. Christianity also introduced new elements to the tradition, such as fellowship prayers and the Celebration of the Eucharist in Catholicism. These religious practices became an integral part of Batak cultural ceremonies, with priests often leading prayers or performing rituals like sprinkling holy water. This fusion of customs and religion highlights the enduring adaptability of the Mangongkal Holi tradition in contemporary Batak society.

Conclusion

[43] An interview with Mr. Firdaus Simbolon on May 22, 2024

The Mangongkal Holi tradition, which involves relocating the bones of ancestors, reflects the Batak Toba community's strong belief in Mulajadi Nabolon as the supreme creator and protector. In this ceremony, Mulajadi Nabolon serves as a mediator between Banua Ginjang, Banua Tonga, and Banua Toru, ensuring balance and harmony. The use of the tugu and the sombaon ritual, including buffalo sacrifices, demonstrates profound respect for the ancestors. The concept of divinity in this tradition is not just a belief, but a reflection of the close relationship between humans, ancestors, and the Creator, fostering this connection in daily life. Through Mangongkal Holi, the Batak Toba community strengthens its cultural and spiritual identity, while reinforcing familial and social bonds. This tradition is vital for the Batak people as it highlights an important aspect of their identity that deserves preservation.[44]

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