

THE SEMIOTICS OF BATAK TOBA SOCIETY MARRIAGE TRADITION

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Abstract. Marriage is one of the culture universals being that it is contracted in every society of the world, but its mode of contract varies from one society to the other. Marriage is one of life's major passages, one of the most profound rites of passage that a person or a couple can experience. In many cultures, marriage is generally made known to the public through marriage ceremony. This paper unravels the semiotics of a marriage tradition in Batak Toba Society. Batak Toba is one of the ethnic groups of Batak society, which is still doing wedding tradition as one of its cultural activities. The theoretical framework applied is the conception of signs by Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Peirce, 'meaning' is a triadic relation between a sign, an object, and an interpretant. There are three types of signs: icon, index and symbol. This work will reveal the meaning of icons, indexes and symbols in the marriage tradition.

Key Words: *marriage tradition, semiotics, icon, index, symbol*

INTRODUCTION

In many societies of the world, marriage is seen as the fundamental unit of the society without which there could be no family. Monger (2004: xiii) says, "There are as many as slight differences of marriage custom and tradition as there are cultures and communities". Ponzetti says that marriage and family relationship must be understood as part of the cultural life as a whole (2003, volume 1: vii) and he asserts, "marriage ceremonies are the major rites of passage in cultures around the world (2002: 1091). According to Hill and Daniel (2008: 262), every wedding is as unique as its participants are. The marriage ceremony in Batak Toba is still held based on custom and tradition. Batak Toba society is one of the ethnics of Batak, which are found in Indonesia. The other ethnics are Batak Karo, Batak Simalungun, Batak Mandailing, Batak Angkola and Batak Pakpak (Tambunan, 1982: 10). Geographically, Batak Land (*Tano Batak*) covers the regions of North Tapanuli, Toba Samosir, Central Tapanuli, South Tapanuli,

Karo and Dairi, which are located in the province of North Sumatera, island of Sumatra, Indonesia. The wedding tradition in Batak Toba society is still conducted by the people wherever they live; whether they live around Lake Toba (Toba Samosir) and North Tapanuli (Tapanuli Utara) or in other islands of Indonesia, like Java, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and so on, which is very far away from the homeland of Batak Toba.

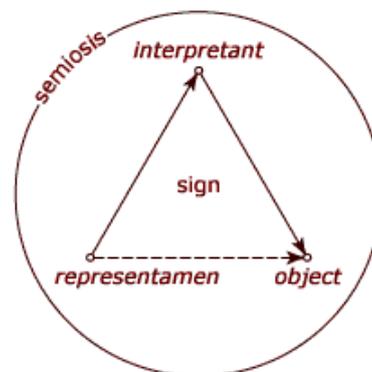
Batak Toba society adopts the patrilineal or father line system, which is to say that the son and the daughter use their father's family name. The son will generate his family name to his son, and a daughter will never generate her family name to her descendants. In Bataknes society, the marriage of the same family name or clan is taboo (will not be allowed) because they are always supposed to be brother and sister. This means to say that the family name is a social and cultural identity of Batak society. There are so many clans in Batak society. Dalihan Natolu regulates the relationships of these clans. The basic meaning of Dalihan Natolu is a fireplace, which consists of three

stones for supporting the cooking tools or containers (Sinaga, 2010: 20). The three stones should be of course of the same height and size in order that the content of the cooking tool will not pour down and the cooking tool itself will stay still and will not get tilted. It means that each of the three stones is of the same importance and function, the absence of one stone will stop the function of the other stones.

According to Levi-Strauss, all cultures are sign systems (Duranti, 1987: 34) and understanding a culture means detecting and interpreting its sign system (Cavallaro, 2007: 16). Signs do not embody specific meanings or concepts. Rather, they give us clues, which only lead to meanings through interpretation. Cavallaro (2007: 16) states that signs become meaningful when they are decoded according to cultural conventions and rules which people employ both consciously and unconsciously. Ward Goodenough says that culture is located in the minds and hearts of men (in Geertz, 1973: 11). Geertz says further that culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly described. (Geertz, 1973: 14). The term *culture* refers to groups of people that share particular values, beliefs, and practices. One culture can be distinguished from another because members of different cultural groups tend to understand the meanings of signs in different ways. The values, beliefs, and ideals that shape the ways in which people act are called *ideology*. Much of what constitutes ideology and culture is guided by *myth*, a connotative system of representations that imply vague understandings based on past practices and stories that are not supported by substantial, verifiable evidence (Gaines, 2010: 93).

RESEARCH METHODS

Pierces conception of signs is used as the theoretical framework. The research questions proposed in this article are: what are the icons; what are the indexes and what are the symbols in the marriage ceremony of Batak Toba society. The source of data is the Batak Toba wedding video recorded on 31 May 2014. The data of this study are limited to the material objects used in the wedding. The data includes: food culture (tudu-tudu ni sipanganon) provided by the groom side, rice (boras sipir ni tondi), gold fish (dekke simudur-udur) provided by the bride side, money (bride price), ulos (from the bride side), . The data are analyzed based on the triadic relationship of Peirce in Umberto Eco (1976: 59) Object (Referent), Representamen (Words) and the Interpretant or the (Reference). The method used in analyzing data is a semiotic method. Rose (2001: 69) explained, semiotics “offers a very full box of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning”. Semiotics is both a science, with its own corpus of findings and its theories, and a technique for studying anything that produces sign (Sebeok, 2001:5). The data are then selected and classified based on the triadic relationship of Peirce in Umberto Eco (1976: 59): Object, Representamen and the Interpretant.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper seeks to unravel the meaning of the elements of culture in traditional marriage ceremony and unravel the meaning of the signs: icon, index and symbols used in it. Pierces conception of signs are used as the theoretical framework. The source of data is based on the participant observation in the practice of marriage ceremony of Batak Toba marriage tradition. There is a document of a Batak marriage tradition for the triangulation of the data that has been collected through participant observation. This paper only discusses the nonverbal data.

Semiotics looks at culture broadly as a language considered as a sign system, or the ways signs and language map onto culture as a whole. Sebeok views that semiotics is primarily concerned with the analysis of signs and symbols and their meaning; it never reveals what the world is, but circumscribes what we can know about it (Sebeok, 2001: 26). As the study of signs, semiotics represents and conveys the significance of things (Gaines, 2010: 7); and it has the general role as vehicles of meaning in culture (Hall, 1997: 6) and the study of sign-making and sign using practices (van Lier, 2002). Culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meaning (Hall, 1997: 2), so understanding a culture means detecting and interpreting its sign systems.

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be *taken* as a sign (Eco, 1976: 7). Words, images, actions and objects can all be studied as signs, as long as they have been recorded in some way and can be studied (e.g. in writing or on video). Semiotics studies all cultural processes as processes of communication (Eco, 1976: 8). It also examines semiotics practices, specific to a culture and community, for the making of various kinds of texts and meanings in contexts of culturally meaningful activity. The whole of culture must be studied as a semiotic phenomenon and all aspects of a culture can be studied as the contents of a

semiotic activity (Eco, 1976: 22) and can be understood more thoroughly if it is seen from the semiotic point of view (Eco, 1976: 27).

This study employs Peircean semiotic framework to analyze the marriage tradition. Peirce sees the sign, its interpretant and object in terms of a triangle. Each element is dependent on the other and can only be understood in relation to the others. The sign refers to something other than itself – the object, and is understood by somebody: in other words, it has an effect in the mind of the user - the interpretant. A sign or representamen is something that stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity (Danesi, 2004: 6). Peirce describes a sign (or ‘representamen’) as anything that denotes an object, and he defines an object as anything that can be thought. He defines an interpretant as the mental effect of a sign and as the ‘signification’ or ‘interpretation’ of the sign (CP 8.184).

Peirce classifies signs into icon, index, and symbol which is fundamental in semiotics (Sebeok, 1991: 111). An icon is a sign that stands for a referent through some form of replication, simulation, imitation, or resemblance (Danesi, 2004: 27). The relation of similarity between an icon and its object may be a resemblance in visual appearance; in this case the icon is an image. It may also be a similarity of internal organization between the elements of the iconic sign and its object, as in maps and diagrams. Sound symbolism, photo, and painting are also the examples of iconicity. Sebeok also states the same thing that an icon is a sign that is made to resemble, simulate, or reproduce its referent in some way. Photographs may be iconic signs because they can be seen to reproduce their referents in a visual way (Sebeok, 2002: 10)

An index is a sign that stands for a referent by pointing to it or by relating it (explicitly or implicitly) to other referents (Danesi, 2004: 27). Manifestations of

indexicality include adverbs such as here, there, map, pointing index finger. The other example is the height of mercury column in a thermometer is an index of temperature; symptoms of diseases are indices of the diseases. Sebeok says about index as a sign that refers to something or someone in terms of its existence or location in time or space, or in relation to something or someone else. Smoke is an index of fire pointing out where the fire is; a cough is an index of a cold ; and so on. (Sebeok, 2002: 10).

A symbol is a sign that stands for its referent in an arbitrary, conventional way. Most semioticians agree that symbolicity is what sets human representation apart from that of all other species, allowing the human species to reflect upon the world separately from stimulus-response situations. A cross figure can stand for the concept 'Christianity' ; a V-sign made with the index and middle fingers can stand symbolically for the concept 'victory' ; a rose is a symbol of love in some cultures; a flag is a symbol of a nation, red is a symbol of bravery in Indonesian culture, white can stand for "cleanliness, purity, and innocence", and the list could go on and on. These symbols are all established by social convention (Sebeok, 2010: 11). This idea is in accord with Danesi saying that a symbol is a sign that stands for its object by convention or agreement in specific contexts (Danesi, 2004: 27).

According to Peirce, "meaning is a triadic relation between a sign, an object, and an interpretant. This triadic relation is not reducible to a set of dyadic relations between a sign and an object or between an object and an interpretant" (CP 1.345). The triadic relation between a sign, an object, and an interpretant may be repeated infinitely (CP 2.303). Peirce's theory accounts for the ways signs function. Peirce's view describes the process of signification, which is called "semiosis." This process involves the production and the interpretation of signs. The process of

semiosis works through three positions: a perceptible or virtually perceptible item-the sign or representamen--that stands in for something else; the mental image, called the interpretant, that the recipient forms of the object; and the thing for which the sign stands-the object. When one sees a painting, say a still-life of a scenery, the image is, among other things, a sign or representamen of something else. The viewer shapes in her or his mind an image of that something with which she or he associates this image. This interpretant points to an object. The object is different for each viewer: it can be a real scenery, a nature, or a good mood.

Icon of Kinship and Respect

The 'food culture' called (*tudu-tudu ni sipanganon*) is prepared by the groom's side.



Cultural Food "Tudu-tudu ni Sipanganon"

The food culture consists of the head, the neck part, the stomach, the two legs, the liver, the back part and the tail of the animal prepared for the marriage ceremony is a pig. It can be a cow or a buffalo, a goat (for Moslem). The food represents an icon of respect and kinship. The food culture is to show the respect of the groom side to the bride giver that they have slaughtered a pig to appreciate them. This means to say that they do not buy the food at the market, because the market does not provide the whole body of the animal. The availability of the whole part is important in Batak culture because this food culture is distributed to the clans of the bride and

groom later on the groom side has submitted it to the bride giver. This cultural food is cut small and then distributed to the identified people in the groom and bride sides. These small cuts, which come from “the food culture” (*tudu-tudu ni sipanganon*) are called ‘*Jambar*’. Every small cut means a lot to the receiver. It shows his identity as the close relative of the host of the marriage ceremony. The receiver is proud of getting this small cut, and when people have already got their rights in receiving the cuts. At the end of the distribution, the spokesman of each side asks the audience whether anyone has not yet got his ‘*jambar*’. An iconic message resembles some agent of the real world to which it refers. As an iconic message, *tudu-tudu ni sipanganon* represents the animal slaughtered for the marriage ceremony.

The other icon of respect is represented a little part of the bride price will also be distributed to the close relatives of the bride side. Everyone gets very little amount of money, but it is meaningful to the receiver of the money. It shows that they are relatives. Their kinship to the host of the marriage party is made clear to the other audience. The process of semiosis works through three positions: the sign or representamen: *tudu-tudu ni sipanganon*--that stands in for something else: the image presented here is the object and the interpretant is that this object signifies respect, kinship or close relationship. This type of sign resembles its object in some way: it looks or sounds like it. Visual signs are good examples of icons, such as a photograph, map, and diagram.

Index of Kinship

The action of receiving the small cut of the cultural food shows that this is the index of kinship. The receivers of the small cuts are identified as the close relative of the host and they belong to the same clans. The object of this index is the small cuts of meat

originated from ‘*tudu-tudu ni sipanganon*’. It signifies respect to the bride side as a whole but it means kinship when it is made into a lot of small cuts and distributed to the relatives of the parents of the bride and groom. An indexical message points to an object or is a sample of that object. The receivers of the small cuts are the relatives of the hosts of the bride side and groom side. If they are not the relatives, they will not receive the small cuts ‘*jambar*’.

Index of Wedding

That there is a wedding is denoted by the fact that there has been an agreement concerning with bride price (*tuhor*) which is given by the groom side to the bride side. This agreement has been agreed by the two sides in a ceremonial event called ‘*marhata sinamot*’ (bride price talk). If this is not agreed, of course, the wedding ceremony will not be held. The presence of the triadic relation (*Dalihan Natolu*) consisting of *Boru* (daughters of the bride and groom sides), *Hula-hula* (the bride givers to both sides), *Dongan Sabutuha* (the clan of the same family name of the two sides). The marriage will not be culturally legalized if the elements of *Dalihan Natolu* are not attending the traditional marriage ceremony. The food culture ‘*tudu-tudu ni sipanganon*’ from the groom side and ‘*dekke si mudur-udur*’ from the bride side are available to denote that there is a wedding. *Ulos* and *boras ‘sipir ni tonidi’* (rice) are the cultural materials that should be provided by the bride side. There is a welcome act from the groom side to the procession of the bride side. Sebeok says about index as a sign that refers to something or someone in terms of its existence or location in time or space, or in relation to something or someone else (Sebeok, 2002: 10). In this marriage tradition all the objects mentioned above should be present as the signs of the ceremony.

Index of Respect

The bride side is welcome by the groom side to the gate of the hall. The groom side welcomes the procession of the bride givers with traditional Batak music. They show their respect by folding their hands in front of their chests, which means showing their respect to Hula-hula (bride giver). The bride sides put down the palms of both hands which signifies 'giving blessing' from the bride giver side. The respect is also displayed by the groom side by providing the food culture '*tudu-tudu ni sipanganon*' to say that they are really happy that the bride's parents are ready to give their daughter to the groom side, because later on the descendant of the new couple will bring the family name of the groom, her husband. The other object that shows respect is the bride price given to the bride's parents.

Symbol of Blessing

Symbols can be studied, not only in language (both written and spoken forms), but also in rituals, culture, images, art, and anything that can be read as text. In Batak marriage tradition, ulos is very important.

The Symbol of blessing is represented by *Ulos* (Batak traditional woven material).



Ulos Batak

The first ulos is given to the parents of the groom which is called '*Ulos Pansamot*'. Giving ulos *pansamot* means that *ulos* is a media of the blessing of God in order that the parents have long lives, good health, and have descendants from their son and daughter-in-law.

The second is given to the bride and groom by the parents of the bride. The name of *Ulos* given to the bride and groom is called '*Ulos Hela*' (*Hela means son-in-law*). *Ulos* is a media to ask for the Bless of God in their life: to ask for descendants, good destiny and all virtues in their lives. The symbolic meaning of *Ulos* signifies that the bride and groom have become one and they are tied by this ulos and they will never be separated for any reason except death separates them. The brothers and sisters of the host of groom side are the receivers of *ulos* and the bride side is the giver. This cannot be on the other way round. The bride givers are always the givers of *ulos*, and the groom's relatives are always the receivers of *ulos*. The newly wedded couple also gets a number of *Ulos* from the guests invited by the parents of the bride and the bride giver of the groom's side (Hula-Hula of both sides). *Ulos* also signifies warmth to the souls and health of the bride and the groom. The couple is prayed to have good life, health and long age.

The other sign is the 'rice' (*boras sipir ni tondi*). The bride giver brings rice in a container called '*tandok*' (a specific rice container for rice) in a cultural event. The rice symbolizes strength in their spiritual life in starting their new life as husband and wife. The rice is put on the heads of the bride and groom and throw up the rice after the *ulos* is submitted by putting on the shoulders of the bride and groom.

Giving '*dekke si mudur-udur*' (Gold fish) usually given odd in number, is an icon of blessing and a prayer to God in order that they always run their lives like the fish which always go here and there together. This signifies a good hope for the life of a good and happy household for the newly wedded couple. Giving "dekke" signifies a prayer to God and a hope that the couple will always support each other in all the happiness and difficulties they face in their lives like what the fishes do in their lives.



Dekke si mudur-udur

The fishes swim together to the same direction all the times, so the couple are hoped to support each other along their lives.

The symbolic relationship is understandable because of a pre-existing social convention in Batak culture that *ulos*, rice (*boras si pir ni tondi*) and fish (*dekke simudur-udur*) symbolize blessing. This is specific in Batak culture because other cultures may signify these objects differently. For this sign there is no resemblance or connection between the symbol and the object. A symbol's connection

with its object is a matter of convention, rule or agreement between the users, in this case Batak cultural society. Symbols are profound expressions of human nature which have occurred in all cultures at all times (Fontana, 1994: 8). A symbol can represent some deep intuitive wisdom that eludes direct expression like what is found in this paper. The symbol found in this study is found in culture, Batak marriage tradition, where the marriage ceremony functions as a text and the non-verbal language is a part of the text. For Hall (2007: 1), signs are everywhere and they are formed through the society that creates them, by the structures they employ and through the sources they use. Also for him, signs are always produced and consumed in the context of a specific society, Batak society.

CONCLUSION

In line with Pierces classification of signs, Hall, (2007) states that icon, index and symbols are the basic building blocks for meaning-making. In this paper the icons, indexes builds specific meaning which is culturally bound to Batak culture and tradition. The same object can become an index, index and a symbol. *Tudu-tudu ni sipanganon* can become an icon, and an index. Symbol of blessing is represented by different objects: *Ulos*, *boras si pir ni tondi* (rice), and *dekke si mudur-udur*. The semiotic resources are not limited to writing and picture making but as almost everything we do, cultural event can articulate different social and cultural meanings.

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