

Sipaha Sada: A New Year Ritual in The Parmalim Tradition of The Toba Batak Community

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Abstract

Sipaha Sada is a New Year's celebration ritual in the *Ugamo Malim (Parmalim)* tradition of the Toba Batak people, held in the first month of the Batak calendar. This study aims to analyze the symbolic meaning, implementation process, and socio-spiritual function of the *Sipaha Sada* ritual. The research method used a descriptive qualitative approach with literature review and document analysis. The results indicate that *Sipaha Sada* functions as a spiritual ceremony commemorating the birth of *Simarimbulu Bosi*, strengthening community solidarity, and preserving the Parmalim cultural identity. This ritual involves stages of fasting, eating bitter foods, gondang hasapi music, the tortor dance, and collective prayer, all of which have profound symbolic meaning. Despite facing the challenges of modernization and social stigma, the Parmalim community maintains this tradition as an expression of their faith and ethnic identity, demonstrating high cultural resilience in the face of changing times.

Keywords: *Sipaha Sada, Ugamo Malim, Toba Batak, New Year's ritual, local beliefs*

Introduction

Indonesia is a nation rich in diverse cultures and local belief systems. Despite the power of major religions, traditional beliefs persist and serve as spiritual symbols for some communities. One such belief is Parmalim, or Ugamo Malim, an indigenous teaching of the Toba Batak people that began to develop in the late 19th century and is still practiced today (Deha et dkk., 2025).

Ugamo Malim originates from the traditions of Batak ancestors and focuses on the idea of divinity known as *Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon* (One Almighty God). This teaching emphasizes the values of purity, respect for ancestors, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature and the Creator. Historically, Ugamo Malim underwent a formalization in 1870 when Sisingamangaraja XII took the lead in this teaching in response to foreign influence and the spread of Christianity and Islam in the Batak region (Sitorus dkk., 2022).

One of the most vital rituals in Ugamo Malim is *Sipaha Sada*, which literally translates as "first month." This ceremony serves as a new year celebration based on the Batak calendar, held to welcome the new year while commemorating the birth of God Simarimbulu Bosi and the spiritual leader of Parmalim. *Sipaha Sada* is not only a religious ceremony, but also a crucial moment for strengthening social unity, conveying cultural values, and affirming the identity of the Parmalim community.

Although *Sipaha Sada* holds profound spiritual and cultural significance for the followers of Parmalim, the ceremony remains underrecognized in academic research. Most studies on the Toba Batak people focus primarily on linguistic aspects, the Dalihan

Na Tolu kinship system, or marriage traditions, while traditional spiritual practices such as *Sipaha Sada* receive less thorough documentation. This research is crucial for documenting and analyzing local religious rituals as elements of Indonesia's cultural diversity that should be preserved, particularly amidst the threats of modernization and globalization that could erode traditional values.

Taking this into consideration, this study aims to: (1) explain the background and development of the *Sipaha Sada* ritual in the context of *Ugamo Malim*; (2) analyze the various stages and processes of implementing the *Sipaha Sada* ritual in a comprehensive manner; (3) identify the symbolic meaning and socio-spiritual functions related to the *Sipaha Sada* ritual.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with the aim of comprehensively exploring the phenomenon of the *Sipaha Sada* ritual within the context of the Parmalim tradition. Data collection was conducted through a literature review by analyzing various written sources such as academic journals, books, articles, and ethnographic documentation related to the local wisdom of the Toba Batak people, particularly regarding the *Sipaha Sada* ritual and Parmalim beliefs (Silalahi dkk., 2024).

The primary data sources were obtained from published research articles on Parmalim, *Ugamo Malim*, and ritual practices among the Toba Batak community. Additional data sources were obtained from ethnographic books, cultural documentation, and scientific articles examining local belief systems in Indonesia (Fauziah dkk., 2022). The collected data were then analyzed using a descriptive-interpretive approach to describe the ritual's implementation, identify its symbolic meaning, and understand the socio-cultural role of the *Sipaha Sada* ritual for the Parmalim community.

The data analysis process is carried out through several stages: (1) data reduction, which is the step of sorting and selecting information that is relevant to the research objectives; (2) data presentation, namely organizing data in the form of a structured descriptive narrative; and (3) drawing conclusions, which refers to the interpretation of the meaning and function of rituals based on data analysis. Data validity is maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing information from several literatures to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the data obtained (Nurrisa & Hermina, 2025).

Results

Sipaha Sada is a traditional New Year celebration in the *Ugamo Malim* (Parmalim) culture of the Toba Batak community. This ritual is performed in the first month of the Batak calendar, also known as *Sipaha Sada*, and usually occurs around March in the Gregorian calendar. The ritual process includes:

1. Spiritual Preparation (*Marsihapsan*): Purifying oneself physically and mentally, and wearing traditional white clothing as a symbol of purity and holiness.
2. Fasting for One Day and One Night: Abstaining from food and drink, and avoiding negative behavior and speech, serves as a cleansing ceremony to purify the soul.
3. *Mangan Napaet* (Eating Bitter Food): Eating bitter foods (such as fern leaves or raw cassava leaves) without any additional spices, symbolizing a readiness to accept the bitterness of life and the process of cleansing from sin.

The research results indicate that *Sipaha Sada* plays a significant role in several aspects:

Main Meaning and Function

Theological

It demonstrates recognition of Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon and respect for Simarimbulu Bosi, teaching that true value lies in the purity of the soul, not in material possessions.

Solidarity

It strengthens social relationships, fosters togetherness, and affirms Parmalim's collective identity by uniting thousands of followers from various regions.

Self-Purification

The activities of fasting and mangan napaet serve as cleansing rituals, freeing oneself from past mistakes and teaching resilience to face life's challenges.

Cultural Transmission

The transmission of Batak spiritual and cultural values to the younger generation through direct experience (experiential learning).

Connection with Nature

Appreciation for natural resources teaches gratitude and respect for the environment, reflecting Parmalim's cosmological perspective, which emphasizes the balance between humans, nature, and God.

Challenges and Cultural Resilience: The Parmalim community faces obstacles in preserving their traditions: Social Stigma: Parmalim adherents often face discrimination and are considered "old-fashioned" or "not religious". Modernization and Urbanization: The migration of young people to urban centers makes participation in rituals more difficult and weakens the transmission of traditional knowledge. Value Shift: The impact of globalization has resulted in younger generations tending to think more rationally and less understanding the meaning of rituals.

Nevertheless, the Parmalim community demonstrates remarkable cultural resilience through various adaptation measures: Digital Documentation: Archiving rituals and creating content on social media to engage the younger generation. Interfaith Dialogue: Being open to discussion to reduce existing stigma. Internal Education: Holding special classes for children and adolescents about *Parmalim* teachings. Legal Advocacy: Fighting for official recognition as a recognized faith. Overall, *Sipaha Sada* is a cultural heritage that is relevant in instilling the values of spiritual purity, togetherness, and harmony with the environment.

Discussion

1. History and Background of *Sipaha Sada*

Sipaha Sada is rooted in pre-Christian Batak spiritual traditions, which were later formalized in the Ugamo Malim system. This ritual commemorates the birth of Lord Simarimbulu Bosi, a spiritual figure who, in Parmalim cosmology, is believed to be the manifestation of supreme purity. According to Parmalim beliefs, Simarimbulu Bosi was born without physical perfection (without arms and legs), yet possessed perfect spiritual

purity, symbolizing that true purity lies in the spirit, not matter (Butarbutar Sekolah Tinggi Theologia Ebenhaezer, 2016).

In addition to commemorating the birth of Simarimbulu Bosi, Sipaha Sada also honors Parmalim spiritual leaders, including King Naipospos, Sisingamangaraja XII, and King Saribu Barita, who played a crucial role in preserving and developing the teachings of Ugamo Malim. This ritual marks the beginning of the spiritual year for Parmalim followers and serves as a moment of reflection to begin the year with a pure soul and pure intentions (Suharyanto, 2016).

2. Time and Venue

Sipaha Sada is held at the beginning of the first month of the Batak calendar (Sipaha Sada), which usually falls in March of the Gregorian calendar. The Batak calendar system, called Parhalaan, consists of twelve months of 30 days each, unlike the commonly used Gregorian calendar (Ahmad et al., n.d.).

The center of the ritual is Huta Tinggi, Laguboti, Toba Regency, North Sumatra. This location is a historic site that serves as the spiritual center of Parmalim and is considered holy ground for adherents of this faith. Every year, thousands of Parmalim followers from various regions in North Sumatra and even from outside the province gather to collectively perform this ceremony, making it a gathering moment for the Parmalim community throughout Indonesia.

3. Stages of the *Sipaha Sada* Ritual

The *Sipaha Sada* Ritual has several important stages that are carried out sequentially and are full of symbolic meaning (Wungo et al., n.d.).

1) Spiritual Preparation (*Marsihaposan*)

Before the ritual begins, *Parmalim* worshippers perform spiritual preparation by cleansing themselves physically and mentally. They wear traditional white clothing as a symbol of purity, with an ulos (traditional Batak cloth) draped over their shoulders. The color white was chosen because it symbolizes purity, holiness, and honesty in facing God.

2) Fasting One Day and One Night

Parmalim followers fast for one day and one night before the main ritual. This fast involves not only abstaining from food and thirst, but also refraining from negative actions and words, focusing on prayer and spiritual meditation. Fasting, in the context of Parmalim, serves as a purification ritual to cleanse the soul of past sins and mistakes.

3) *Mangan Napaet* (Eating Bitter Food)

After the fast ends, the ritual continues with *Mangan Napaet*, which involves eating bitter foods such as fern leaves, raw cassava leaves, or other bitter plants without salt or seasoning. This ritual symbolizes a willingness to accept life's bitterness with sincerity and serves as a symbol of self-purification from all sins. Bitter foods also remind people that life is not always sweet, and that humans must be ready to face challenges with sincerity.

The bitter food is eaten communally in a solemn atmosphere, led by Raja Malim (a spiritual leader) who recites prayers in the ancient Batak language. After the meal, worshippers are allowed to eat the common food that has been communally prepared as a symbol of shared blessings and joy at the start of the new year.

4) Closing with Traditional *Martutu*

The ritual concludes with a traditional *martutu*, a ceremony in which traditional elders impart advice and moral teachings to the younger generation. This serves as a moment to transmit cultural and spiritual values from the older generation to the

younger, ensuring the continuity of the Parmalim tradition. The elders convey teachings about the sanctity of life, respect for ancestors, harmony with nature, and the importance of maintaining community solidarity.

4. Symbolic Meaning and Socio-Spiritual Function

Sipaha Sada has several important meanings and functions in the lives of the Parmalim community (Suharyanto dkk., (2019).

1) Theological Dimension

This ritual is an expression of faith in Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon and respect for Simarimbulu Bosi. The concept of spiritual purity, separate from physical perfection, teaches that a person's true worth lies in kindness and purity of soul, not in physical or material appearance.

2) Community Solidarity

Sipaha Sada is a gathering moment for thousands of Parmalim followers from various regions. This communal ritual strengthens social bonds, builds a sense of togetherness, and affirms collective identity as adherents of Ugamo Malim. In today's individualistic modern era, this ritual serves as an important platform for maintaining social cohesion.

3) Cultural Transmission

Through these rituals, Batak spiritual and cultural values are passed on to the younger generation. Direct participation in the rituals allows for deeper experiential learning than mere verbal learning. The younger generation not only hears stories about the traditions but also feels and experiences their spiritual meaning firsthand.

4) Self-Purification

Fasting and eating napaet serve as purification rituals, cleansing oneself of past mistakes and starting the new year with a clean soul. It also teaches the value of simplicity and a willingness to accept life's challenges with an open heart.

5) Connection with Nature

Offerings of produce teach gratitude and appreciation for nature. This reflects the Parmalim cosmology, which emphasizes harmony between humans, nature, and God. This concept is relevant to contemporary environmental issues that demand humans to appreciate and preserve nature more.

5. Challenges and Adaptation

The Parmalim community faces several challenges in maintaining the Sipaha Sada tradition. First, social stigma, where Parmalim adherents often face discrimination and are viewed as "primitive" or "non-religious" because they are not officially recognized by the government. This creates social pressure, especially for the younger generation who want to be accepted into wider society.

Second, modernization and urbanization have caused many young Batak people to move to cities and leave their hometowns. Geographical distance makes it difficult to participate in communal rituals and weakens the transmission of traditional knowledge. Third, the influence of globalization has brought about a shift in values, with the younger generation tending to be more rationalistic and less understanding of the symbolic meaning of traditional rituals. Fourth, limited documentation, with the paucity of academic documentation and literature on Parmalim, has limited knowledge of this tradition within the local community.

Despite facing challenges, the Parmalim community demonstrated resilience by adapting without losing its spiritual essence, including: (1) digital documentation by recording rituals and creating social media content to reach the younger generation; (2)

interfaith dialogue by opening up to dialogue with other religious communities to reduce stigma; (3) internal education by holding special classes for children and adolescents about Parmalim teachings; and (4) legal advocacy by fighting for official recognition as a legitimate faith.

Conclusion

Sipaha Sada is a New Year's ritual within the *Parmalim* tradition that holds profound spiritual significance and important socio-cultural functions for the Toba Batak people. This ritual includes stages of fasting, *mangan napaet* (prayer offerings), *gondang hasapi* music, *tortor* dance, and collective prayer, all of which contain rich symbolism embodying the values of purity, solidarity, and harmony. The ritual's significance encompasses theological dimensions, strengthening community solidarity, intergenerational cultural transmission, self-purification, and connecting with nature.

Despite facing the challenges of modernization, social stigma, urbanization, and shifting values, the Parmalim community maintains the *Sipaha Sada* tradition as an expression of their faith and cultural identity. Adaptation strategies through digital documentation, interfaith dialogue, internal education, and legal advocacy demonstrate high cultural resilience. This ritual is not only a legacy of the past but also a cultural asset relevant for the future, teaching the values of spiritual purity, togetherness, and harmony with nature.

Further research is needed to explore other aspects of Ugamo Malim, such as the *Sipaha Lima* ritual, cosmological system, and spiritual healing practices. Comprehensive documentation of ritual practices such as *Sipaha Sada* is crucial for preserving Indonesia's cultural richness and supporting the rights of local faith adherents as part of the nation's diversity.

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