

The Existence of *Ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak Wedding Customs: A Study of Oral Tradition

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Abstract

This study examines the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs through the perspective of oral tradition. *Ruhut-ruhut* is a set of customary rules, norms, and procedures that govern the process and meaning of each stage of a Toba Batak traditional wedding ceremony. Amidst modernization and socio-cultural change, these customary elements face various challenges, such as simplification of the procession, adaptation to changing times, and a diminished understanding of traditional values by the younger generation. This study employed a qualitative descriptive method with an oral tradition approach. Data were obtained through observation, interviews with traditional leaders, and literature review related to Toba Batak wedding customs. Analysis was conducted on traditional speech, ritual communication structures, and cultural symbols embodied in the *ruhut-ruhut* ritual. The results indicate that *ruhut-ruhut* remains a primary guideline in Toba Batak wedding customs, embodying the values of kinship, respect for social structures, and the philosophy of life of the Toba Batak people. However, in practice, transformations have occurred at several stages of implementation due to the influence of time efficiency, economic factors, and changes in the mindset of modern society. This research concludes that the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* is not extinct, but rather is undergoing adaptive transformation without losing its essential values as the cultural identity of the Toba Batak people.

Keywords: *ruhut-ruhut, Toba Batak wedding customs, oral tradition, cultural existence*

Introduction

Culture is a system of values, norms, and practices passed down from generation to generation within a society, including through oral tradition, which serves as the primary means of transmitting local knowledge (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). In the context of the Toba Batak community, oral tradition plays a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of customs, particularly in the implementation of traditional wedding ceremonies. This tradition serves not only as a medium for cultural communication but also as a vehicle for transmitting philosophical values that govern social relations and kinship within the community (James Danandjaja, 2007).

One important element of Toba Batak wedding customs is the *ruhut-ruhut*, a set of customary rules that govern the order, roles, and mechanisms for conducting wedding ceremonies. The *ruhut-ruhut* reflects the social structure of the Toba Batak community, which is based on the principle of *Dalihan na tolu*, a kinship system that governs the relationships between the *hula-hula*, *dongan tubu*, and *boru* (*Dalihan na tolu*) (Simanjuntak, 2015). In practice, *ruhut-ruhut* not only regulate the technical aspects of the ceremony, but also contain ethical values, respect, and social balance that must be maintained by every individual in the traditional community (Situmorang, 2012).

However, developments and modernization have had a significant impact on the implementation of Toba Batak wedding customs. Globalization, changes in societal mindsets, and economic factors and time efficiency have led to the simplification or even elimination of several stages in the *ruhut-ruhut* (Anthony Giddens, 1990). This situation raises concerns about the younger generation's diminished understanding of the traditional values embodied in these traditions, potentially threatening the continued cultural identity of the Toba Batak people (Hutagalung, 2018).

From the perspective of oral tradition studies, *ruhut-ruhut* can be understood as a form of cultural expression that is not only verbal but also encompasses symbols, gestures, and ritual practices passed down through generations (Jan Vansina, 1985). Traditional speech, such as *umpasa* and *hata-hata adat*, is an integral part of wedding ceremonies, conveying moral messages, hopes, and social legitimacy for the wedding event itself (Sibarani, 2014). Thus, the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* cannot be separated from the dimension of oral tradition, which is the primary foundation for preserving Toba Batak culture.

Numerous studies have been conducted on Toba Batak wedding customs, but most have focused on describing the stages of the ceremony or their general symbolic meaning. Studies specifically highlighting the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* from an oral tradition perspective are still relatively limited. This approach is crucial for understanding how traditional values are transmitted, interpreted, and maintained in the context of dynamic social change (Clifford Geertz, 1973). Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* as part of the oral tradition that lives within Toba Batak society.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the existence of a tradition does not necessarily mean a static existence, but rather that it can undergo transformation according to evolving social and cultural contexts. The concept of existence in cultural studies emphasizes a tradition's ability to adapt without losing its essential values (Pierre Bourdieu, 1990). In this regard, *ruhut-ruhut* can undergo changes in form and implementation, yet retain their primary function as customary guidelines for Toba Batak weddings.

Based on this background, this study focuses on understanding the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs amidst the dynamics of social change, and how oral tradition plays a role in maintaining and transforming these values. Therefore, this research is expected to contribute to the development of oral tradition studies and the preservation of local culture in Indonesia (Sibarani, 2015).

Based on the background described above, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What is the form and structure of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs?
2. How do spirits exist in Toba Batak wedding customs amidst social change?
3. What role does oral tradition play in preserving and transforming spirits?

The objectives of this research are:

1. To describe the form and structure of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs.
2. To analyze the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* in the context of social change in Toba Batak society.
3. To examine the role of oral tradition in the preservation and transformation of *ruhut-ruhut*.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to examine the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs through the perspective of oral tradition. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on understanding the meaning, values, and cultural practices that exist within the community and cannot be measured quantitatively (Lexy J. Moleong, 2017). Descriptive methods were used to systematically describe the form, structure, and dynamics of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through direct observation of Toba Batak wedding ceremonies and in-depth interviews with key informants, such as families who practice the customs and those familiar with *ruhut-ruhut* practices. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained through literature review, including books, scientific journals, and documents relevant to Toba Batak oral tradition and customs (Sugiyono, 2018).

The research instrument in this study was the researcher herself, who served as the primary instrument (human instrument) in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data. In addition, supporting instruments were used in the form of interview guides, observation sheets, and recording devices (audio and visual) to ensure the accuracy of the data obtained. The interview guides were developed based on the research focus, covering aspects of the structure of the *ruhut-ruhut*, the role of oral traditions, and the forms of change that have occurred in customary practices.

Data analysis techniques were conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as proposed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman (1994). Data reduction was achieved by sorting and focusing data relevant to the research objectives. Data presentation was carried out in the form of a systematic descriptive narrative. Next, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the research findings to understand the existence of spirits in the context of social change.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various informants, while method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation (Norman K. Denzin, 1978). Thus, the results of this study are expected to have a high level of validity and reliability in describing the phenomena studied.

Results

The results of this study indicate that the *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs still maintain a strong presence as both normative guidelines and operational structures for the ceremony. The *ruhut-ruhut* not only regulate the order of the procession but also determine the roles of each party within the kinship system based on *Dalihan na tolu*. Based on observations and interviews, the existence of the *ruhut-ruhut* is evident in the consistent use of traditional speech, role assignments, and cultural symbols, which are still maintained, despite having undergone several adaptations.

1. Role Structure in *Ruhut-ruhut*

In Toba Batak wedding customs, several main roles are consistently regulated in the *ruhut-ruhut*. First, the *hula-hula* (the woman's family) holds the highest position as the provider of blessings and blessings. In practice, the *hula-hula* serves as the center of respect, expressed through various forms of traditional speech, such as:

"*Sai horas ma hamu, sai tubu ma anak dohot boru, sai gabe ma hamu di hita sude.*"

(A prayer for the couple's blessings of children, prosperity, and harmony in life). Second, the *dongan tubu* (family members of the same clan) play the primary role of support, maintaining solidarity and ensuring the smooth running of the ceremony. This role is evident in their active involvement in customary deliberations and providing collective advice to the bride and groom. Third, the *boru* (the recipients of the women's wedding vows within the customary structure) act as technical implementers, ensuring each stage follows the rules. The relationship between these three elements reflects the social balance that is at the heart of *Dalihan na tolu*.

Furthermore, the *raja parhata* plays a crucial role as the customary spokesperson. He is tasked with delivering customary speeches (*hata-hata adat*) that regulate the procession and facilitate communication between the parties. During one stage, the *raja parhata* states:

"Adong do adat, adong do uhum, sai pasangap ma hita sude di jabu on."

(This expression emphasizes that customs and rules must be upheld during the ceremony.)

This role shows that spoken language is the main instrument in maintaining the continuity of spirits.

2. Oral Traditions in *Ruhut-ruhut*

Research results show that the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* is highly dependent on the accompanying oral traditions. Traditional utterances such as *umpasa*, *umpama*, and *hata-hata adat* serve as the primary medium for transmitting cultural values. For example, when giving advice to a bride and groom, the *umpasa* is often used:

"Sai songon jala na martampuk, sai marsigomgoman ma hamu."

(Meaning: The couple should support and cooperate with each other in their married life). This utterance not only functions as a verbal symbol but also contains philosophical values that serve as guidelines for life. From an oral tradition perspective, this expression serves as a tool of social legitimacy that reinforces the sacred meaning of marriage.

Furthermore, there are utterances that emphasize the importance of keeping promises and commitments in marriage, such as:

"Jolo nidok hata, asa unang marsala, ai hata do parpadanan."

(Meaning: Before speaking, one must think carefully to avoid mistakes, because words are an agreement).

This expression demonstrates that in Toba Batak culture, language has a binding normative force, so that breaking a word or promise can impact social harmony.

3. The Existence of *Ruhut-ruhut* Amidst Social Change

Although *ruhut-ruhut* is still maintained, research results indicate a transformation in its implementation. Several stages of traditional ceremonies that were previously performed in full have now been simplified, especially in urban communities. Economic factors and time efficiency are the main reasons for this change. However, core elements such as the role of the *hula-hula*, *dongan tubu*, and *boru* remain as essential parts of the tradition.

In this context, the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* cannot be understood as static, but rather dynamic and adaptive. The changes that occur are more in the form of implementation, rather than in the values they contain. This is evident in the continued use of traditional speech, albeit for a shorter duration. Thus, the transformation that occurs is actually an adaptation strategy to maintain the continuity of tradition amidst modernization.

4. Social and Cultural Function of *Ruhut-ruhut*

The research results also indicate that *ruhut-ruhut* plays a significant role in maintaining the social structure and cultural identity of the Toba Batak people. First, *ruhut-ruhut* serves as a mechanism for regulating social relations, ensuring that each individual understands their position and responsibilities within the community. Second, *ruhut-ruhut* serves as a means of cultural education for the younger generation through direct participation in traditional ceremonies.

Furthermore, its symbolic function is also evident in the use of meaningful traditional language. For example, the expression:

"Sai gabe ma hamu jala sai horas ma di jabu ni roha."

(Meaning: May you have happiness and prosperity in your married life).

This expression reflects the community's collective hopes for the bride and groom while strengthening the value of togetherness.

5. The Role of Oral Tradition in Preserving *Ruhut-ruhut*

Oral tradition has proven to be a key factor in maintaining the existence of *ruhut-ruhut*. Through traditional narratives passed down from generation to generation, cultural values remain alive, even though they are not always documented in writing. This demonstrates that the strength of Toba Batak culture lies in the communicative practices that occur directly in social life.

However, this study also identified challenges in preserving oral traditions, particularly related to the declining ability of the younger generation to understand traditional language and narrative. Therefore, revitalization efforts, such as documentation and cultural education, are needed to ensure the continued transmission of oral traditions.

Discussion

This discussion interprets research findings regarding the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs through the perspective of oral tradition, referring to the problem formulation, research objectives, and theoretical framework outlined previously. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: (1) the structure and roles of *ruhut-ruhut*, (2) their existence in the context of social change, and (3) the role of oral tradition in the preservation and transformation of cultural values.

First, regarding the structure and roles of *ruhut-ruhut*, the research results indicate that the *Dalihan na tolu* kinship system remains the primary foundation for regulating social relations in wedding customs. This finding aligns with Koentjaraningrat's (2009) view that social structures in traditional societies serve as behavioral guidelines that bind individuals to a particular value system. In the Toba Batak context, the relationship between *hula-hula*, *dongan tubu*, and *boru* is not simply a division of roles but also reflects a hierarchy of respect and social responsibility that must be carried out collectively.

The role of the *hula-hula* as the most highly respected party demonstrates a value system that positions the female giver as a source of blessings and social legitimacy. This is reinforced by performative traditional speech, such as prayers and blessings delivered during ceremonies. According to John L. Austin (1962), performative speech has the power to "do something" through language, not simply convey information. Thus, the speech in *ruhut-ruhut* is not merely symbolic but also has a concrete social function in legitimizing the marriage relationship.

Furthermore, the role of the *parhata* king as a mediator of customary communication demonstrates that spoken language is a primary instrument in maintaining the order of the procession. This aligns with the concept of oral tradition proposed by Jan Vansina (1985), who emphasized that oral tradition is not only a means

of communication but also a mechanism for cultural transmission. In practice, the *parhata* king not only conveys speeches but also interprets and adapts customary messages according to the context of the situation. Thus, he acts as a cultural agent, maintaining the continuity of the *ruhut-ruhut*.

Second, regarding the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* amidst social change, this study found that despite simplification in several stages, core values remain. This phenomenon can be explained through the theory of reflexive modernity proposed by Anthony Giddens (1990), which states that modern society does not completely abandon tradition but rather reconstructs and adapts it to the needs of the times. In this context, *ruhut-ruhut* undergoes a transformation in form, but does not lose its primary function as a guideline for customary practice.

This transformation can also be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, which explains that social practices are formed from the internalization of cultural values that are then reproduced in everyday actions. In Toba Batak wedding customs, although some stages are shortened, the values of respect, togetherness, and social balance remain part of the practice. This demonstrates that spirits remain alive in the community's collective consciousness as part of its cultural identity.

However, social change also brings challenges, particularly in terms of the younger generation's understanding of the symbolic meanings of *ruhut-ruhut*. This finding aligns with Clifford Geertz's (1973) view that culture is a system of meaning that must be interpreted. When the interpretation process is not optimal, there is a risk of a reduction in the meaning of cultural practices. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the transformation does not eliminate the philosophical dimension contained within customs.

Third, the role of oral tradition in preserving *ruhut-ruhut* is crucial. Research shows that traditional utterances such as *umpasa* and *hata-hata* are still consistently used in wedding ceremonies. This demonstrates that oral tradition remains a primary medium for transmitting cultural values. According to James Danandjaja (2007), oral folklore functions as an educational tool, validation of social norms, and a means of social control within society.

Furthermore, the traditional utterances in *ruhut-ruhut* also serve as representations of moral values that govern domestic life. Expressions emphasizing the importance of cooperation, loyalty, and responsibility demonstrate that language serves as a means of internalizing these values. From a cultural linguistics perspective, this demonstrates that language not only reflects social reality but also shapes it. Therefore, the continuity of oral traditions is key to maintaining the existence of spiritual traditions.

On the other hand, this study also identified challenges in preserving oral traditions, particularly related to the dominance of Indonesian and foreign languages in the daily lives of the younger generation. This situation has the potential to reduce their ability to understand traditional speech using the Toba Batak language. According to Joshua Fishman (1991), language shift can directly impact the loss of the culture inherent in the language. Therefore, efforts to revitalize language and oral traditions are crucial.

In the context of cultural preservation, the role of social institutions such as families, traditional communities, and educational institutions is crucial. Oral traditions cannot survive without ongoing practices in daily life. Therefore, the preservation of *ruhut-ruhut* depends not only on documentation but also on the active participation of the community in carrying out customs. This aligns with UNESCO's (2003) view on the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage through community practices.

Furthermore, this study's findings also indicate that *ruhut-ruhut* serves as a means of social integration. In wedding ceremonies, all elements of society are involved in a process that reflects the values of mutual cooperation and solidarity. This demonstrates that customs serve not only as rituals but also as social mechanisms that strengthen community cohesion. Thus, the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* is not only important in a cultural context but also in maintaining social stability in the Toba Batak community.

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs is maintained through a combination of social structure, oral tradition, and adaptation to changing times. The transformations that have occurred do not indicate decline, but rather a form of cultural dynamics that allows traditions to remain relevant. Therefore, preserving *ruhut-ruhut* requires an approach that focuses not only on normative aspects but also on strengthening the practice of oral tradition as the primary medium for cultural transmission.

Thus, this research confirms that *ruhut-ruhut* is not simply a customary rule, but a living and evolving value system within Toba Batak society. Its existence depends on the community's ability to maintain a balance between tradition and modernity, and to transmit these values to future generations through a sustainable oral tradition.

Conclusion

This research shows that the *ruhut-ruhut* in Toba Batak wedding customs continue to exist as a normative and cultural system that regulates the structure, roles, and procedures for conducting wedding ceremonies. Based on the results and discussion, the *ruhut-ruhut* serve not only as technical guidelines but also as representations of philosophical values reflecting the *Dalihan na tolu* kinship system. The roles of *hula-hula*, *dongan tubu*, and *boru* demonstrate the social balance that is at the heart of Toba Batak life.

From an oral tradition perspective, the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* is highly dependent on customary speech practices such as *umpasa* and *hata-hata*, which serve as a medium for transmitting cultural values. Oral language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a means of social legitimacy and the internalization of moral values in community life. Therefore, oral tradition plays a strategic role in maintaining the continuity of *ruhut-ruhut*.

However, this research also found that *ruhut-ruhut* undergoes transformation in response to social change, modernization, and economic factors and time efficiency. This transformation does not eliminate the essential values inherent in customs, but rather demonstrates cultural adaptation to maintain their relevance to contemporary societal conditions. Thus, the existence of *ruhut-ruhut* can be understood as a dynamic phenomenon that continues to evolve without losing its fundamental identity.

However, the main challenge lies in the younger generation's declining understanding of the language and symbolic meanings of oral traditions. This has the potential to lead to a reduction in cultural value if not balanced with systematic preservation efforts. Therefore, synergy between indigenous communities, educational institutions, and the government is needed to maintain the continuity of *ruhut-ruhut* through documentation, language revitalization, and strengthening oral tradition practices.

Overall, this research confirms that *ruhut-ruhut* is an integral part of Toba Batak cultural identity, persisting through a combination of social structure, oral tradition, and the ability to adapt to changing times. Its sustainability depends heavily on the community's collective commitment to maintaining and transmitting traditional values to future generations.

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