

Parsubang as a Symbol of Religious Diversity Appreciation in Batak Culture

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Abstract

Parsubang is a traditional Batak practice that originally emerged as a gesture of respect toward individuals who abstained from consuming pork. Over time, it has evolved into a broader cultural expression symbolizing respect for religious and belief-based differences. This study explores the role of Parsubang in promoting social harmony within the Batak community, with particular attention to how the tradition bridges religious divides between Muslims and Christians. Using a qualitative approach, the research collects data through semi-structured interviews with community leaders, religious figures, and members of the Batak community in both rural and urban settings. Thematic analysis is employed to identify key themes related to tolerance, mutual respect, and social solidarity embedded within the Parsubang tradition. Findings indicate that while the form and expression of Parsubang have adapted in urban environments, its core values remain integral to maintaining social cohesion. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and shifting social norms, the practice continues to serve as a vital component of Batak identity and a facilitator of interfaith harmony. The study concludes that preserving the fundamental values of Parsubang—while allowing for contextual adaptation—offers a meaningful strategy for sustaining religious harmony and reinforcing communal bonds in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: *parsubang, social harmony, community, religious tolerance, cultural traditions*

Introduction

Tradition plays a vital role in the social and cultural life of the Batak people, forming the foundation of values that guide interactions and relationships among individuals (Sihaloho, 2023). One of the traditions that remains relevant today is *Parsubang*. The term *Parsubang* refers to individuals who choose not to consume certain foods that are forbidden by their religion or adat (custom), but it also symbolizes the respect for those who have different customs or traditions, yet are still valued within the Batak community (Witro et al., 2022). This tradition serves as clear evidence that in Batak culture, tolerance toward differences has existed for a

long time. Based on observations, despite significant religious differences between Christians and Muslims in the Batak community, *Parsubang* demonstrates a strong sense of mutual respect and acceptance of these differences in belief. Interactions among community members take place harmoniously, reflecting deeply rooted values of tolerance in their social life.

The history of the *Parsubang* tradition in Batak culture has not been fully researched, but several studies suggest that this tradition developed in Batak society alongside the influence of Islam and Christianity. *Parsubang*, which literally means “sharing food,” is a social tradition that emphasizes respect for fellow

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community members, both in the context of custom and religion. This tradition, in a more general form, can be found in many agrarian societies that value the principle of togetherness within their communities (Marbun, 2018). The existence of *Parsubang* may be influenced by religious teachings that prioritize social values and togetherness. However, this tradition is not explicitly explained in ancient Batak customary texts, and the role of these religions in introducing or reinforcing these values in Batak culture remains a subject of debate. Some scholars argue that this tradition developed as an adaptation by Batak society to maintain social harmony amid religious diversity (Sitompul et al., 2024). In this context, the influence of Christian and Islamic teachings in promoting principles of togetherness and mutual sharing is evident, enriching Batak traditions. Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the Batak people practiced animism, known as *Ugamo Parmalim*, which included certain taboos such as the prohibition of eating pork or dog meat, closely linked to respect for nature and living creatures (Azizah, 2023). When these religions entered Batak society, they influenced the adaptation of these taboos, but the *Parsubang* tradition, involving the sharing of food, remained. While not always associated with forbidden foods, this practice still reflects core religious values of respect for others and togetherness, symbolizing the continuity of Batak cultural values that prioritize harmony, while also reflecting adaptations to the influence of these new religions.

In Batak society, despite significant religious differences such as Islam and Christianity, *Parsubang* acts as a social bridge that maintains harmony. The Batak people are known for their deep respect for adat and tradition, where values of mutual respect and togetherness are highly cherished. As time progresses and society becomes more pluralistic, *Parsubang* remains a reminder of the importance of tolerance toward religious diversity. According to an anthropologist, "Tradition is a means for communities to maintain social cohesion, especially in pluralistic societies" (Figueiredo-

Dalla-Costa-Ames et al., 2024). This strengthens the idea that traditions like *Parsubang* can be effective tools in building harmony amidst diversity.

The *Parsubang* tradition shows that even though someone chooses not to consume certain foods or follow specific customs due to their religious beliefs or practices, it does not serve as an obstacle to being accepted as part of the community. On the contrary, it is honored as a form of respect for religious freedom and the diversity of beliefs. As Gatilov states, "Diversity in society need not be a source of conflict, but can instead be a social force that strengthens relationships between individuals" (Gatilov & Nikolashin, 2021). This view aligns with the concept of *Parsubang* in Batak culture, where differences are valued and celebrated as a social asset that enriches relationships within the community.

This study focuses on the relevance of the *Parsubang* tradition in the increasingly pluralistic and modern Batak society. With the progression of time and the diversification of beliefs, it is essential to understand how *Parsubang* can remain relevant in fostering harmonious interfaith relations within the Batak community. In this regard, *Parsubang* acts as a symbol of tolerance and respect for diversity, not only in terms of religion but also in the broader context of social and cultural differences. As Geertz stated, "Culture is not just an expression of identity, but also a reflection of how a society responds to and makes sense of differences within it" (Geertz, 2021).

Religious tolerance is a core value that shapes the dynamics of pluralistic societies. Several prominent theories address the role of tolerance and respect for other religions. One of the most significant is Religious Pluralism, which is highlighted by scholars like Bano. Bano explains that religious pluralism is not merely the coexistence of different religions but involves a recognition that other religious beliefs hold equal value, thereby encouraging mutual respect and understanding (Bano et al., 2023). He argues that pluralism fosters a community where people from different faiths can live together harmoniously while acknowledging

their differences. Similarly, Konisburg emphasizes the importance of “multicultural citizenship,” where individuals’ religious practices are protected within a broader framework of equal rights and respect for diversity (Konisburg, 2023). Bano presents a more global perspective, advocating for a “Principles of Religious Pluralism” that seeks common ground between world religions, facilitating peace through recognition and tolerance of differences (Bano et al., 2023).

These ideas are crucial for understanding how traditions like *Parsubang* can play a role in fostering interfaith harmony. According to the theory of religious pluralism, mutual respect is fundamental, which is reflected in *Parsubang* as a cultural practice that embodies tolerance and acceptance of differing religious beliefs.

In addition to pluralism, Symbolic Interactionism, as introduced by Herbert Blumer in 1969, provides insight into how cultural symbols and practices contribute to the social construction of meaning in society. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the importance of symbols—whether rituals, practices, or objects—in shaping people’s understanding of social reality. In this context, *Parsubang* can be understood as a social symbol that transcends individual religious boundaries and becomes a shared cultural practice. Blumer’s theory suggests that through *Parsubang*, the Batak community engages in ongoing social interactions that reinforce values of respect and tolerance toward different religious beliefs. The cultural significance of *Parsubang* is not just limited to individuals but becomes part of a collective consciousness that influences societal norms and behaviors.

Parsubang holds a profound place in Batak culture, with its roots deeply embedded in both historical and spiritual contexts. The term *Parsubang* originally referred to an individual who refrains from eating certain foods that are prohibited by their religious beliefs, but it also represents a broader cultural symbol of respect for religious differences (Witro et al., 2022). In Batak society, where Christian and Muslim populations live side by side, *Parsubang* has come to symbolize respect for both religious

freedom and cultural diversity. As the Batak people hold strong to their adat (customs), *Parsubang* functions as a form of cultural negotiation that allows for the integration of different religious practices without disrupting the social fabric.

The history of *Parsubang* is closely linked to Batak’s value system, which emphasizes community harmony, familial bonds, and the respect for ancestors. In Batak tradition, maintaining peace and unity within the community is of utmost importance. According to a study by Munir, the practice of *Parsubang* reflects the Batak people’s efforts to maintain social cohesion by embracing diversity (Munir et al., 2024). This tradition also ties into the Batak’s deep respect for their ancestors and the spiritual dimension of their cultural practices. Through *Parsubang*, the Batak community expresses not only respect for individual religious beliefs but also for the collective values that guide social interactions.

By acknowledging that different people within the same community may adhere to distinct religious practices, *Parsubang* fosters an atmosphere where cultural and religious diversity are celebrated rather than suppressed. This aligns with the findings of Mythili, who argued that culture functions as a “system of symbols” that allows individuals to navigate and understand the world around them, especially in the context of a pluralistic (Mythili Devi, 2023)

One of the most striking features of Batak society is its ability to maintain harmony despite the presence of religious differences, particularly between Christianity and Islam. The *Parsubang* tradition exemplifies how religious tolerance can be maintained through cultural practices. While Batak Christians and Muslims may have differing religious convictions, both groups participate in *Parsubang*, which serves as a unifying ritual that transcends individual faiths. This practice reinforces the social cohesion of the Batak community, demonstrating that religious differences need not result in division.

In a similar vein, research on interfaith relations in Indonesia indicates that traditional

practices, such as *Parsubang*, play a crucial role in bridging the gap between different religious communities (Witro et al., 2022). The study finds that traditional rituals that honor cultural diversity, rather than focusing solely on doctrinal differences, create a space for people of various faiths to interact respectfully. Similarly, Witro notes that in the Batak context, *Parsubang* is an embodiment of local wisdom that allows people from different religious backgrounds to coexist peacefully without compromising their beliefs.

Further supporting this idea, a study by Hermanus explores the relationship between tradition and religious moderation in various communities in Indonesia, stating that “local traditions, when aligned with values of mutual respect and understanding, are essential in fostering religious harmony in a pluralistic society” (Hermanus & Rerung, 2024). This perspective is reinforced by Jenri’s research on cultural symbolism in the Papuan Bakar Batu tradition and the Korean Chuseok festival, which highlights how traditional practices serve as expressions of spirituality and social cohesion (Ambarita et al., 2024). Furthermore, Rohmatul Faiziah, in his study on religious moderation in Karimunjawa, emphasizes that local traditions play a strategic role in building interfaith harmony (Faizah et al., 2022). In a broader context, Achmad examines the Cimplo tradition in Cirebon as a manifestation of gratitude, social solidarity, and protection against misfortune, contributing to the strengthening of communal values (Faqihuddin, 2024). This perspective is crucial in understanding how *Parsubang* functions not only as a cultural ritual but also as a form of religious diplomacy that enables peaceful coexistence in a religiously diverse society.

The relationship between *Parsubang* and religious diversity is essential to understanding how traditional practices can foster interfaith tolerance. The ongoing practice of *Parsubang* demonstrates the Batak community’s commitment to living harmoniously despite religious differences. As demonstrated by the scholars mentioned above, cultural symbols such as *Parsubang* contribute significantly to

social cohesion, ensuring that religious diversity is not a source of conflict but a basis for mutual respect and understanding.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of religious tolerance and interfaith harmony, particularly in the context of Indonesia, where religious diversity is common. Research on interfaith relations in North Sumatra highlights how the Batak community, both Muslim and Christian, has historically lived peacefully side by side despite significant doctrinal differences. However, the focus is usually on communal efforts for interfaith dialogue and social interactions, rather than on specific cultural symbols and traditions that embody these values. One such example is the internalization of religious moderation values through *Parsubang* local wisdom-based education in North Sumatra (Witro et al., 2022).

One notable study by Firmando delves into Batak culture, emphasizing the centrality of traditional practices such as *Parsubang* in promoting social cohesion (Firmando, 2021). Firmando’s research primarily discusses *Parsubang* as part of the broader social norms within Batak society, focusing on how it helps maintain familial and community unity. While Sirait provides important insights into the tradition’s social functions, his work does not specifically address how *Parsubang* serves as a direct symbol of religious tolerance and appreciation for diversity, nor does it explore the nuances of *Parsubang* as a cross-religious cultural practice.

Several studies explore the role of traditional practices in fostering understanding and tolerance within Indonesian communities. For instance, the research *Religion, Tradition, and Modernization: Portrait of the Shift in Dawuhan Tradition in the Ngerso Community, Tawangmangu Karanganyar* examines how local customs evolve with modernization while maintaining their cultural significance (La & Farhah, 2024). Similarly, *Religious Harmony in East Nusa Tenggara: Insights into Local Tradition and Values of Muslim Communities* highlights how traditional values contribute to religious harmony, emphasizing the tolerance and respect that underlie these practices. These studies

suggest that cultural rituals, such as the Dawuhan tradition and local religious values, serve as bridges for understanding across diverse communities in Indonesia (Arif et al., 2023). However, this study is more general in its approach to cultural practices and religious tolerance, and it does not focus specifically on the Batak community or the particular role that *Parsubang* plays in enhancing interfaith relationships in this context.

Bajpai's research in *Pluralizing Pluralism: Lessons from, and for, India* makes a significant contribution to the development of religious pluralism and multiculturalism theory, particularly in the context of India (Bajpai, 2022). Bajpai emphasizes the importance of pluralism not only as a theoretical framework but also as a practical application in everyday life. While this study enriches the understanding of the theoretical foundations of interfaith tolerance, it does not delve deeply into how local cultural practices and traditions embody these theoretical principles. Thus, while the work provides broad insights, it does not explore the local implementation of religious pluralism and multiculturalism in concrete terms.

Thus, this study aims to answer two main questions: (1) How does the *Parsubang* tradition reflect respect for religious diversity in Batak society? (2) What symbolism is embedded in *Parsubang* that demonstrates tolerance and respect for religious differences? These questions will be analyzed in-depth by identifying the values within the *Parsubang* tradition and how this tradition influences interfaith relations in Batak society. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how *Parsubang* functions as a symbol in Batak culture that contributes to creating a harmonious social life, as well as offering an example of the application of tolerance values in a local cultural context that could inspire other communities to manage religious diversity.

This research brings a novel perspective by specifically focusing on *Parsubang* as a cultural and social symbol of religious tolerance within the Batak community. While previous research has touched upon interfaith harmony and the

role of cultural practices in fostering unity, few studies have directly explored how *Parsubang* operates as a practical manifestation of these ideals.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on *Parsubang* as a dynamic tradition that not only symbolizes religious tolerance but also plays an active role in bridging gaps between religious communities. By examining *Parsubang* as a cultural symbol that transcends religious boundaries, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how traditions contribute to the maintenance of social harmony in pluralistic societies.

Furthermore, this study will address a gap in the literature by offering a detailed analysis of how *Parsubang* embodies specific values such as respect, unity, and recognition of religious diversity within the Batak community. By integrating theories of religious pluralism and symbolic interactionism, this research offers a unique framework for interpreting how cultural symbols like *Parsubang* function to foster tolerance and respect for religious differences in a local context.

In sum, this research makes a significant contribution by providing a case study of *Parsubang* as a localized practice of religious tolerance. It enhances the existing body of knowledge by offering a culturally specific lens through which to understand interfaith relations, demonstrating how local traditions can serve as effective tools for promoting religious harmony in pluralistic societies. The study also sheds light on the continuing relevance of traditional practices in the modern, increasingly diverse Batak community, offering practical insights for other pluralistic societies facing similar challenges of interfaith integration.

Research Method

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach with a phenomenological framework, designed to explore the social meanings embedded in the practice of *Parsubang* within the context of religious diversity in Batak society. This phenomenological approach is selected as it focuses on understanding

individuals' subjective experiences and how they assign meaning to the *Parsubang* tradition, particularly in relation to values of tolerance and appreciation of religious diversity. The research is conducted in October 2024 in Sibolga, North Sumatra, an area with a significant Batak Muslim population. It involves key figures such as Batak customary leaders, religious figures, and community members who possess knowledge and experience related to *Parsubang*.

Data collection techniques in this study include three primary methods: interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews are conducted with key informants to gather their views, perceptions, and understandings of *Parsubang*'s role in fostering interfaith tolerance and social cohesion within Batak society. These interviews provide deeper insights into how *Parsubang* is practiced and perceived in the broader social and religious context. Direct observation is carried out during various Batak traditional ceremonies, allowing the researcher to gain an authentic understanding of how *Parsubang* is integrated into daily life and how religious diversity is incorporated into the tradition. This observation includes documenting symbolic expressions, rituals, and social interactions among participants from different religious backgrounds. Additionally, literature and archival materials related to Batak culture and *Parsubang* are analyzed, providing a theoretical foundation and historical context for understanding the tradition and its connection to religious pluralism in Indonesia.

Data analysis is performed using a symbolic analysis approach to interpret the meanings embedded in the practice of *Parsubang*. The study examines *Parsubang* as a symbol reflecting values of diversity, tolerance, and unity within Batak culture, allowing the researcher to explore how these symbols shape social relationships and group identity. The study also applies Religious Pluralism Theory to explore how *Parsubang* acts as a bridge between different religious groups, fostering coexistence and interfaith dialogue. Additionally, Symbolic Interactionism Theory is used to understand how individuals in Batak society interact and

negotiate social meanings related to religious diversity through *Parsubang*. By integrating these analytical approaches, the research seeks to uncover how *Parsubang* serves as a cultural mechanism for promoting tolerance and interfaith harmony within Batak society.

Results and Discussion

Parsubang as a Symbol of Respect for Religious Diversity and Differences

The *Parsubang* tradition in Batak society is a long-standing cultural practice that serves as a symbol of respect for diversity, both in terms of religion and other differences, particularly in important events such as weddings and family gatherings. This practice illustrates how Batak people maintain harmony by honoring diversity, both in terms of religion and other aspects. The tradition is also a clear example of how Batak society manages differences within a heterogeneous community, including among different religious groups, such as Christians and Muslims.

As explained by a Batak Toba community leader:

"*Parsubang* is our way of honoring guests, especially those from different religions. For example, in Batak weddings, we serve food according to the religion of the guests present. This is not just about food, but also about mutual respect." (Interview with Informant 1, 2024)

This statement shows that *Parsubang* is more than just serving food; it is a way to signify respect for someone's religious identity. This tradition reflects the inclusive attitude of the Batak people in treating everyone with respect, regardless of religious beliefs or practices. For instance, at a Batak wedding, halal food is provided for Muslim guests as a sign of respect for their beliefs. Thus, *Parsubang* demonstrates that differences—whether in religion or belief—are valued as part of the shared harmony. In this context, members of the Batak community show a tendency to prioritize their cultural identity while also respecting the identity of others.

Cristoffel Hutagalung, a Batak community leader, also stated:

"*Parsubang* is our symbol in maintaining

harmony among different religious communities. In traditional ceremonies, we always ensure that everyone feels respected and accepted, regardless of their religion.” (Hutagalung, 2024)

This statement emphasizes the importance of religious pluralism in Indonesian society, where, despite significant religious differences, diversity can live side by side peacefully. In this regard, *Parsubang* not only becomes a symbol of religious tolerance but also a symbol of recognition of differences in a broader social context.

Sopar Hutahaeen, a Batak customary leader, explained the *Parsubang* tradition within the Batak community (Hutahaeen, 2024b). He said:

“Parsubang is not only about religious differences but also other differences, such as food preferences or personal beliefs. For example, someone who cannot eat pork, even though they are Christian, is still respected by providing food that meets their needs. This shows that parsubang serves as a form of respect for every difference that exists within the community.” (Hutahaeen, 2024a)

He continued by giving an example from various Batak traditional ceremonies:

“In many Batak traditional ceremonies, the host will announce or ask guests to sit by saying, ‘For the parsubang, please sit in the designated place.’ This shows that special space and attention are given to those who have certain differences, whether in religion or belief. In this way, parsubang becomes a means of respecting each existing difference.” (Hutahaeen, 2024a).

In Batak adat celebrations, Muslims are still accepted and can participate in the traditional ceremony, but they are separated in terms of food and are referred to as *Parsubang*. This is a form of respect for religious differences, where they are still valued and included in the community, even though there are differences in food consumption. The provision of special seating for *Parsubang* participants further reinforces this concept of respect for differences.

The *Parsubang* tradition in Batak society functions as a symbol of respect for diversity, which can be understood through various cultural and social theories. According to Social

Identity Theory by Tajfel & Turner in Jaubert and also Lim (Lim, 2024), individuals within a group build relationships based on shared values, norms, and beliefs (Jaubert et al., 2022). The *Parsubang* practice in Batak society reflects solidarity and cohesion within the group, while simultaneously acknowledging and respecting differences. Batak people demonstrate a deep sense of collective identity but also actively embrace differences in religion, beliefs, and other practices. In this context, *Parsubang* is not just a mechanism for strengthening social bonds within the Batak community but also creates a safe space for individuals to celebrate diversity without abandoning their own identity. This practice reflects inclusivity, where every individual is valued, regardless of religious or other differences.

The *Parsubang* practice can also be understood through the concept of *Communitas*, as discussed by Rai in his work on reconstructing culture and seasonal labor migration (Rai, 2024). Rai’s exploration emphasizes shared experiences that transcend social divisions and promote unity among diverse communities. In Batak adat ceremonies, *Parsubang* functions to foster unity that goes beyond individual and group boundaries, while still respecting differences. The practice of separating seating or serving food according to specific religions or beliefs, such as providing halal food for Muslim guests, creates an environment where participants can celebrate their differences without causing social friction. Despite these practical separations, the ritual unites them in mutual respect and inclusivity, thereby cultivating more harmonious relationships among individuals from various backgrounds.

Parsubang reflects the religious pluralism that characterizes Batak society. This tradition shows that, despite differences in belief, the Batak people are able to create an inclusive social space where everyone feels respected. In various traditional ceremonies—such as weddings or family gatherings—differences, such as in food, do not hinder unity. *Parsubang* serves as a form of respect for diversity while strengthening community solidarity.

More than just a ritual, *Parsubang* is a symbol of diversity and harmony. It demonstrates that religious differences are not a barrier but a strength that enriches social relations and helps preserve cultural identity amidst diversity.

The Batak tradition of *Parsubang* represents a deep-rooted cultural practice that upholds respect for diversity, particularly in religious and dietary aspects, during communal events such as weddings and family gatherings. This practice ensures that all guests, regardless of their religious background or dietary restrictions, are provided with appropriate meals, reflecting the Batak values of hospitality and inclusivity. While South Korea does not have a direct equivalent to *Parsubang*, several traditions reflect similar values of accommodating dietary preferences and honoring guests.

To explore this further, an interview was conducted with Professor Minkyu Park, a cultural expert and scholar in Korean studies. Professor Park provided insights into Korean customs that align with the philosophy of *Parsubang*. He explained that although there is no specific term or structured practice equivalent to *Parsubang* in Korea, several traditional customs reflect a similar respect for guests' dietary needs and cultural inclusivity. These customs, though not institutionalized under a specific name, highlight the shared human value of honoring differences in communal settings.

One of the closest cultural parallels in Korea, as explained by Professor Park, is the practice of *sangcharim* (상차림), which refers to the arrangement of food in traditional family ceremonies such as *jesasang* (제사상, ancestral ritual table) or *hoesik* (회식, company dinner). In these gatherings, the host often considers the dietary preferences of attendees. Professor Park gave an example of how some families modify the traditional *jesa* offerings by omitting beef if certain family members do not consume it due to religious or personal reasons. Similarly, in large-scale celebrations like weddings, vegetarian or religiously appropriate food options are prepared to accommodate guests

with dietary restrictions. He noted that while these adjustments are not formalized under a specific name, they embody the same principles as *Parsubang*, ensuring that all guests feel included and respected. As he stated,

"Although Korean culture does not have a structured term like parsubang, there is an implicit understanding that food must be prepared in a way that honors the guests' needs, ensuring inclusivity in communal settings" (Park, 2024).

Another example Professor Park discussed was the increasing availability of halal food in Korea. With the growing number of Muslim visitors and workers, many restaurants and public events now offer halal-certified meal options. Professor Park highlighted that in official gatherings, especially those involving international guests, organizers take special measures to provide food that aligns with religious dietary laws. He explained that this adaptation is similar to *Parsubang* in Batak culture, where hosts ensure that Muslim attendees receive halal food during traditional ceremonies. He emphasized that this effort reflects Korea's evolving recognition of dietary inclusivity, particularly in international and multicultural settings.

"Korean society has gradually recognized the importance of dietary inclusivity, particularly in international settings. The effort to provide halal food, especially in government and corporate events, mirrors the parsubang practice in Batak culture, where the host consciously ensures that no guest feels excluded due to dietary restrictions" (Park, 2024).

Furthermore, Professor Park pointed out that the Korean tradition of *banchan* (반찬), or side dishes, provides another cultural parallel to *parsubang*. In Korean meals, a variety of small dishes are served alongside rice, allowing individuals to choose according to their dietary preferences. If a guest cannot consume a particular dish due to dietary restrictions, there are always alternative options available. This ensures that everyone can participate in the communal meal without feeling excluded. He noted that this practice is similar to *Parsubang*, where separate food is prepared for guests with

specific dietary needs while still integrating them into the larger gathering. He explained:

“The banchan culture in Korea naturally accommodates diverse dietary habits, allowing individuals to enjoy communal meals without strict limitations. This reflects a similar philosophy to parsubang, where the goal is to ensure that differences are acknowledged and respected within a shared social space” (Park, 2024).

Despite the cultural differences between Batak and Korean societies, Professor Park emphasized that both traditions share a common philosophy of hospitality, inclusivity, and respect. He noted that the principle of adjusting meals to honor guests, fostering harmony through shared meals, and balancing cultural traditions with inclusivity is evident in both *Parsubang* and Korean food customs. While specific rituals may differ, the underlying values remain universal. By recognizing these shared principles, societies can learn from each other in fostering social cohesion without compromising cultural identity.

As Professor Park concluded,

“Understanding how different cultures integrate respect for diversity into their traditions allows us to appreciate the various ways in which inclusivity is practiced, even in settings where there is no direct equivalent to parsubang” (Park, 2024).

This interview with Professor Minkyu Park sheds light on the cultural similarities between Batak and Korean traditions, particularly in their shared commitment to inclusivity in communal dining. While *Parsubang* is a distinct Batak tradition, the fundamental values it upholds are echoed in Korean customs, demonstrating that hospitality and respect for diversity are universal principles embedded in various cultural practices.

Tolerance Values in the *Parsubang* Tradition

The *Parsubang* tradition in the Batak community is a powerful example of interfaith tolerance, manifested in the form of respect for different beliefs and social customs. *Parsubang*, typically held during various traditional celebrations such as weddings or family

gatherings, serves not only as a social event but also as a mechanism for integrating tolerance values in a pluralistic society. For instance, during Batak traditional events, the organizers often provide a variety of food options—both pork for Christian guests and halal food for Muslim guests—as a sign of respect for the religious beliefs of the attendees. This demonstrates that *Parsubang* is not only about uniting people in togetherness but also about creating an inclusive space that maintains harmony between different religious groups.

Dalihan Natolu is a fundamental principle in Batak traditions that governs the relationships between different social groups (Fitri et al., 2023). In an interview with Bapak Sopar Hutahaeon, a respected Batak customary leader, he explained:

“Dalihan Natolu teaches us about three main pillars: elek marboru, mardongan tubu, and hormat marhula-hula. Elek marboru means we must respect the maternal family, mardongan tubu teaches us to build equal relationships with others, and hormat marhula-hula is our obligation to honor the paternal family. These values are not just symbols, but practices that we live by every day. We respect and help each other, regardless of religious background or social status” (Hutahaeon, 2024a).

Bapak Sopar further emphasized that the principle of Dalihan Natolu is crucial for maintaining harmony within the Batak community.

“Dalihan Natolu teaches us to respect differences, both in terms of religion and customs. In Batak society, whether Christian or Muslim, we still honor each other’s traditions. That is why we can live harmoniously despite our differences” (Hutahaeon, 2024a).

Dalihan Natolu plays a vital role in fostering an inclusive attitude that transcends religious differences within the Batak community. This principle teaches that groups within the community—whether Christian or Muslim—should respect each other’s customs and beliefs. It helps create a cultural space where religious and traditional differences are celebrated rather than becoming sources of division (N2STV NAOMI, 2021).

According to this finding, Dalihan Natolu is also closely related to the tradition of *Parsubang*, a practice that strengthens the bonds between families and groups within the Batak community. Through the values embedded in Dalihan Natolu, traditions like *Parsubang* can continue in an atmosphere of mutual support and respect, regardless of religious or social background.

In the context of *Parsubang*, this means that Batak Christians and Muslims can sit together at the same table, share food, and celebrate important events without feeling alienated or separated by their religious beliefs. The practice of Dalihan Natolu strengthens the inclusive nature of *Parsubang*, as it reinforces the importance of unity, respect, and social cohesion, all of which are integral to Batak identity.

The application of this tradition in everyday Batak life reflects John Locke's theory of religious freedom, where he states that every individual has the right to practice their religion without interference from others (Dumitrescu, 2022). In the context of *Parsubang*, this freedom is embodied by offering food that aligns with each guest's religion, ensuring that they can participate in the celebration without feeling marginalized or excluded because of their beliefs. Locke argued that tolerance is not just important but a principle that must be upheld in a plural society (Randall, 2022). Through the *Parsubang* tradition, the Batak community actively acknowledges and respects differences, ensuring that everyone feels accepted in the shared social space.

In line with Jatau's thinking on social pluralism, this tradition also emphasizes the importance of providing space for each individual and group to maintain their cultural identity while preserving greater social cohesion (Jatau & Maza, 2023). Kymlicka states that in a plural society, recognizing and celebrating differences—such as offering food options aligned with religious beliefs—not only protects the identity of groups but also strengthens social bonds between those groups (Aguilar Rivera, 2023). In a *Parsubang* gathering, Batak Christians and Muslims sit side by side, sharing the food

provided without any division based on religion. This creates a socially enriching experience, breaking down religious barriers and, in turn, strengthening the social cohesion values in the community.

Furthermore, the application of *Parsubang* can also be viewed through the lens of Friedrich Hayek's perspective on individual freedom (Khalamenkov, 2023). Hayek argued that the freedom to choose is central to a healthy social life. In this tradition, religious freedom is reflected in the choice of food available to all guests, without coercion or discrimination. Guests with religious dietary restrictions—such as Muslims who do not consume pork—can still feel comfortable because alternative options are provided. Thus, *Parsubang* supports individual freedom in determining what aligns with their religious beliefs, while also creating an inclusive space for all parties.

Jürgen Habermas' principle of communicative dialogue is also clearly reflected in the implementation of the *Parsubang* tradition. Habermas emphasizes the importance of rational communication in achieving consensus within a pluralistic society. Based on the researcher's observations during a Batak traditional ceremony, the event organizers or those responsible for distributing food, known as *Parhobas*, first consult the master of ceremonies, referred to as *Raja Parhata*, to communicate with the guests about who among them follows the *Parsubang* practice—abstaining from certain foods such as pork or dishes containing blood. These guests are then directed to a designated seating area prepared specifically for them. This demonstrates how open dialogue and respect for diversity are embedded in Batak cultural practices. The tradition creates an inclusive space for communication, where every individual is valued and can uphold their beliefs without disrupting social harmony, serving as a tangible example of Habermas' theory of dialogue.

Interfaith Harmony and Social Identity

One of the strengths of the *Parsubang* tradition is its ability to create interfaith harmony within the Batak community. As a

plural society, the Batak community often faces challenges in maintaining relationships between different religious groups. However, through the *Parsubang* tradition, these tensions can be eased. When Christians, Muslims, and people of other religions gather around the same table, they are no longer seen as separate religious groups, but as part of a larger Batak community. In this sense, *Parsubang* serves as a platform that allows religious differences to be bridged in a respectful and acknowledging manner.

The statement of Sahat Simatupang, a Batak Muslim community leader, illustrates this clearly: in *Parsubang* celebrations, Batak Muslims feel respected and accepted in the same space as Christians, despite their deep religious differences (N2STV NAOMI, 2021). This shows that the tradition is not just about sharing food, but also about sharing social values that prioritize tolerance and togetherness.

As someone who has participated in various Batak traditional events, I have witnessed firsthand how these tolerance values are put into practice. I remember attending a Batak celebration that involved guests from various religious backgrounds, where halal and non-halal food were served side by side, without anyone feeling alienated. Everyone sat together, shared food, and engaged in conversations with mutual respect. *Parsubang* is not just about food, but more importantly, it symbolizes the Batak community's commitment to living together in harmony.

Breaking Down Religious Boundaries

In addition to being a symbol of tolerance, *Parsubang* also serves to break down the religious boundaries that often become sources of tension. In this tradition, people from different religious backgrounds can sit together, enjoy the same food, and celebrate without feeling divided by their religious beliefs. For instance, in some *Parsubang* events, I observed how Batak Christians and Muslims discussed their religious views in a mutually respectful way—not to compare or criticize, but to understand each other.

Overall, *Parsubang* demonstrates that in the Batak community, religious differences are not

an obstacle to sharing the same social space. On the contrary, these differences enrich the shared experience, form a more inclusive social identity, and create a space where everyone—regardless of their religion—feels accepted and valued. Therefore, *Parsubang* not only demonstrates tolerance in everyday life but also builds a strong social bridge between different religious groups.

The Impact of *Parsubang* on Social Harmony

The *Parsubang* tradition, deeply embedded within the Batak community, plays a crucial role in fostering social harmony, particularly between Batak Muslims and Christians. This practice, rooted in Batak adat (customary law), is a powerful tool for promoting social solidarity and interreligious tolerance. To gain a deeper understanding of its impact, it is important to integrate relevant theoretical frameworks, such as social capital, intergroup relations, and cultural adaptation, while also drawing from scholarly sources that address these topics.

Social Capital and the Strengthening of Social Bonds

Robert Putnam's theory of social capital emphasizes the value of social networks and the connections that bind people together within a community (Okwuchukwu, 2022). According to Putnam, social capital can be understood through two primary forms: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the strong ties between individuals within a group, while bridging social capital connects individuals from different groups, fostering broader social cooperation.

In the Batak context, *Parsubang* is an example of bridging social capital. Simon Somin Butar-butur's observation that Batak adat events invite people from different religious backgrounds aligns with Putnam's view on how social networks are vital for the development of cohesive and inclusive communities. By inviting friends from different religious communities to partake in significant life events such as weddings or funerals, *Parsubang* not only reinforces familial bonds (bonding social capital) but also creates a space for fostering

understanding and cooperation across religious lines (bridging social capital).

As Putnam states: “Social networks have value, and participation in social networks can enhance individuals’ well-being” (Okwuchukwu, 2022). In the case of *Parsubang*, the tradition contributes to the collective well-being of the Batak community by promoting solidarity among its members, despite differences in religious beliefs.

Religious Tolerance and Intergroup Cooperation

Intergroup contact theory, first proposed by Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice*, suggests that under the right conditions, interactions between members of different social or religious groups can reduce prejudice and foster greater mutual understanding (Rose, 2020; Sniderman et al., 2021). This theory is directly applicable to the impact of *Parsubang* on the Batak community, where Muslims and Christians regularly engage in shared activities, reinforcing positive relationships and social harmony.

Sahat Simatupang’s comment, “We support and cooperate with one another in adat events because we know that we are all part of one big Batak family,” exemplifies Allport’s contact hypothesis (N2STV NAOMI, 2021). According to Verma and Sobhana, prolonged, meaningful interactions within social groups play a crucial role in overcoming prejudices and fostering positive intergroup relations (Sobhana & Verma, 2024). This idea aligns with the practice of *Parsubang*, which serves as an effective means of promoting religious tolerance and cooperation. By encouraging individuals from different religious communities to collaborate towards a shared objective, often within the context of Batak adat, *Parsubang* helps to build trust and understanding between groups, thus contributing to more harmonious social dynamics.

Scholarly research has confirmed the positive effects of intergroup contact on reducing religious prejudice. A study by Turner found that intergroup contact reduces intergroup anxiety and promotes positive

intergroup attitudes, particularly when individuals perceive their interactions as cooperative and aimed at achieving common objectives (Turner, 2020). This is exactly the type of interaction facilitated by *Parsubang*, where Batak Muslims and Christians work together harmoniously during adat events.

Adaptation to Modernity: Changes in Practice and Continuity of Core Values

As the Batak community has become more urbanized, *Parsubang* has adapted to fit modern lifestyles. Cristoffel Hutagalung’s observation that in cities like Medan and Sibolga, *Parsubang* gatherings have shifted to more casual forms, such as eating together in restaurants, highlights the ongoing evolution of the practice (N2STV NAOMI, 2021). This adaptation understood through the lens of cultural preservation and adaptation.

Anthony Cohen argues that cultural traditions, while adapting to external changes, continue to retain their symbolic meanings (Cohen & Fowle, 2022). In this case, although the form of *Parsubang* has changed to fit the contemporary urban lifestyle, the core values of the practice—respect for religious diversity, tolerance, and mutual cooperation—remain intact. Cohen writes: “Tradition is both a resource and a response to modernity; it adapts, but in doing so, it does not lose its essence” (Cohen & Fowle, 2022). *Parsubang*, thus, serves as a powerful example of how a traditional practice can maintain its core values while evolving to meet the needs of a modern, urbanized society.

Additionally, the theory of **cultural resilience** supports this observation (Manahung et al., 2022; Wu & Yuan, 2023; Xiao, 2023). Cultural resilience refers to the capacity of cultural practices to endure and adapt in the face of external pressures, such as globalization or modernization. *Parsubang* is resilient in this sense because it continues to function as a tool for social cohesion and religious tolerance, even in the face of changing social and cultural contexts.

The Role of Tradition in Social Integration

Parsubang’s enduring relevance, despite the

changes in its practice, highlights its central role in the social integration of Batak Muslims and Christians. By creating spaces for cooperation and mutual respect, *Parsubang* ensures that the community remains unified even in the face of religious and societal differences.

The tradition of *Parsubang* plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of togetherness and deep collective identity, which is essential for maintaining social cohesion. This cultural tradition has the ability to “create a sense of commonality in time, place, and identity,” allowing communities to unite beyond the confines of familial or religious ties. In this context, *Parsubang* functions as a cultural tool that transcends religious differences, strengthens the shared Batak identity, and fosters an inclusive sense of belonging. Several studies suggest that cultural practices like *Parsubang* have the ability to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds, strengthen social cohesion, and create a broader collective identity, surpassing religious or familial differences (Streeck, 2023).

The Continuing Role of Parsubang in Strengthening Social Harmony

Although the form of *Parsubang* has evolved, its impact on social harmony and interreligious cooperation remains profound. By strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital, facilitating intergroup contact, and adapting to modern urban realities, *Parsubang* continues to play an important role in maintaining social harmony within the Batak community.

The theoretical frameworks of social capital, intergroup contact, cultural adaptation, and cultural resilience provide valuable insights into the ongoing importance of *Parsubang*. As demonstrated by the perspectives shared by Batak leaders like Simon Somin Butar-butur and Sahat Simatupang, *Parsubang* functions as a symbol of unity and tolerance, helping the Batak community navigate the challenges posed by modernity while preserving its cultural and social cohesion (N2STV NAOMI, 2021).

By upholding core values such as respect, tolerance, and social harmony, *Parsubang*

exemplifies how traditions can serve as powerful forces for community integration and peace, especially in a world marked by religious and cultural diversity.

Conclusion

This study finds that *Parsubang* contributes positively to strengthening social capital—both bonding (within-group solidarity) and bridging (inter-group connections)—thereby reducing interreligious tensions and fostering meaningful interactions between Batak Muslims and Christians. The findings affirm the relevance of social capital theory, intergroup contact theory, and cultural resilience in explaining how traditional practices can act as cohesive forces amid social change. Given these findings, it is important to explore how the values embedded in *Parsubang* can be adapted and applied to other regions in Indonesia with different cultural and religious backgrounds. While *Parsubang* is rooted in Batak culture, its core principles—respect for difference, shared responsibility, and inclusive social interaction—are universally applicable. Therefore, policymakers and community leaders are encouraged to adopt several concrete measures to promote such values more broadly: 1) Incorporate the spirit of *Parsubang* into multicultural education curricula at schools to instill values of tolerance and respect from an early age. 2) Support interfaith and interethnic dialogue programs that draw on local traditions of peaceful coexistence. 3) Facilitate community-based cultural festivals that highlight inclusive practices like *Parsubang* to encourage mutual understanding across regions. 4) Encourage local governments to document, preserve, and promote indigenous traditions that foster harmony and cooperation, through regulations or cultural development programs.

Moreover, the adaptation of *Parsubang* in urban settings should be managed thoughtfully to ensure the core values of the tradition are not lost amidst modernization. Future research should further examine how traditional cultural practices can be revitalized and integrated into national-level social cohesion strategies, especially in plural societies.

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