

Interiority of caring relations in the *mangokal holi* ritual

In its psychological sense “interiority” refers to the “inner life or substance” of an individual (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Individuals are the originators of interiority; interiority “is responsive to the individual at its centre” (Pimlott, 2018: 5). This individualistic conception becomes important in attempting to understand multiple and overlapping dimensions of the self. It is particularly troublesome when attempting to understand how traditions and cultures construct self, and, in turn, how cultures figure interiority, articulate space, and perform caring relations. This paper delves into how the interiority of caring relations is framed and understood in relation to a specific ritual passage, the Batak *mangokal holi* reburial tradition. It foregrounds indigenous knowledge, experience and ways of being in understanding interiority, and in doing so contributes to ethnographic theories of ritual and caring relations. As an indigenous Batak researcher trained in interior architecture, I describe my own experiences of *mangokal holi* and its interiority.

I will focus on how the Batak, one of Indonesia’s many ethnic groups, perform interiority through caring relations. For Batak, as anthropologist Andrew Causey noted, the self or an individual’s personality is multi-faceted: “a combination of one’s physical quirks and character [...] [and] [...] one’s particular spirit (or *tondi*) ... a complex conflation of individual personality, the particular spirit, and the collective group” (2011: 9-10). *Tondi* is a complex concept which captures the living essence of the individual (Sinaga in Causey, 2011: 3). Acknowledging the duality of a self that is part material body (including personal characteristics) and part spiritual entity (the *tondi*) is necessary in understanding the interiority of caring relations in Batak culture. Care in this context is both material and spiritual.

To Batak, care is also social. Arne Bendtz, a scholar of Batak culture, noted the principal concept within this: that humans are esteemed beings with responsibility to respect and extend goodwill to each other, to nature, to supra-human powers, and the supreme deity (1986: 26). However, this is not solely individualistic, Bendtz maintains, because the individual in Batak culture “does not have a personal life apart from the collective life of the clan [. . .] loyalty to the community is therefore absolute” (26). Being Batak is being part of the collective, and love of community is love of self: these are not separable. One’s sense of self is inextricably bound to community and family. One’s actions are guided

by the community's laws and regulations, and one supports them as an expression of self. Similarly, the self is inextricably bound to one's family, particularly in the patriline clan relationship known as *marga* (Causey, 2011:32).¹ The *marga* relationship organises how groups engage socially and participate in rituals. A common Batak *umpama* (parable) signifies how important *marga* is in defining caring relationships:

Tinitip sanggar bahen huru-huruan
Djolo sinungkun marga asa binoto partuturan

To make a birdcage, one has to cut the reeds
 To know the kinship, one has to ask the clan

Further, care is situated. Causey writes that "for the Bataks, the individual is always part of a group: family, peer group, profession, clan, ethnicity, and nation" (2011: 32). Batak are strongly attached to their home base: a crucial philosophy is "*mulak tu bona ni pinasa*", which means "return to the homeland". This ancestral homeland is the cultural and geographical landscape which Bataks identify as the origin of their ethnic and cultural selves. Returning to the homeland implies drawing close to where ancestors were buried. Cultural performances such as *mangokal holi* pertain to ethnocultural boundaries, becoming a terrain for history and tradition to flourish. In this way, ethnic belongingness is sustained, and conflicts resolved. Chinese philosopher of place Yi-FuTuan describes the importance of physical artefacts in this experience:

If community embraces the dead as well as the living, we are required to heed the voices of our forebears. Artifacts are such a voice. By attending to them we can envisage the needs and aspirations of our predecessors, saddened by their burdens and errors, heartened by their forays into beauty and truth (1986: 110).

Mangokal holi exposes these caring relations and the way obligations to care are fixed through traditions, narratives, myths, memory, spaces, and communal activities. Care is intrinsically bound to performance in a situational and relational context (Fisher and Thompson, 2020: 12). Batak perform their social and cultural interaction within the system of *dalihan na tolu*, or "the three hearthstones". Just as three stones are needed to support a pot in the kitchen firepit, community rests on multiple relations of care (Causey, 2011: 32). These caring relations form an interior, I suggest: a space for collective memory and ancestral belonging, what Ionescu calls "a space where all the trajectories of (both the secular and the religious) consciousness as intentional experience unfold, from awareness to remembrance and imagination" (2018: 3). The inner self of Batak is not an individual matter, as my opening definition suggested, but a collective interiority of caring relations.

The *mangokal holi* tradition: performative care for the dead

Among Batak there are two categories of deceased marked by two stages of funeral rites. First is the primary funeral or burial that represents the separation between the dead and the living. Two decades later, funeral rites continue to be celebrated in a second phase in which the human remains are exhumed, cleaned, and placed in a communal burial place (*batu napir*) containing the remains of

five to seven deceased ancestors. This series of performative events is called *mangokal holi* (Sinaga in Simatupang, 2006).

The events are organised by the descendants of the commemorated ancestors. Because of the ceremony's cost, it can usually only be staged for those with "the necessary material resources and [a] large kinship network" (van Bemmelen, 2017: 128). Batak aspire to "a large offspring (*hagabeon*), wealth (*hamoraon*), and social esteem through many kinship alliances (*hasangapon*) which not only determine the power and status of *rajas* [hereditary leaders] in this world, but also the status of their spirits in the hereafter" (128). These three elements determining the social position of the deceased are strongly related to the fortunes of the living.

As it is practiced today, *mangokal holi* consists of several pre-events before the main ceremony, lasting about seven days and nights. These historical ceremonies or *horja turun* involve an assembly of musical instruments called *gondang sebangunan*. To begin, various community groups are invited, to request blessings at the ceremony. Next all the participants—village elders, friends, neighbours, related clans, *dalihan na tolu* relatives, and priests—gather to eat together. These meetings often entail highly technical discussions about the upcoming ritual.

Fig. 1 *Mangokal holi* and the performative care of the dead in Dairi, North Sumatra (1998). [Photo: Author]



The main event lasts a couple of days and starts early in the morning with religious leaders opening the ceremony, at the cemetery, with prayers of worship to God Almighty. During the exhumation, all participants in the ceremony play a role in digging in search of the bones, starting with the religious leaders, moving through various significant community and family members, and on to parents-in-law, biological children, and female descendants. When the bones are found, the husband of the biological daughter of the deceased is invited to remove the remains and take them to the family yard. Male descendants receive and clean the bones in water mixed with kaffir lime and turmeric paste. Once prepared, the bones are put in a crate, and arranged into the shape of a living human. No bones can be thrown away. This part is continued by *marsipanganon*: eating

together and discussing Batak customary rules, praying and asking for blessings. After this meal, the cleaned and neatly wrapped bones are handed over to either the deceased's daughter, the daughter of a brother or sister of the deceased, or a daughter-in-law, who carries them on her head from the family yard to the communal monument, the *batu napir* (the term refers to the top or highest place). This is accompanied by ceremonial dancing.

As the ceremony continues, people are appointed to look for *sari marnaek*, a particular type of wood found in the forest. This wood signifies the regeneration of life. Before dawn the next day, a post made from this wood is planted in the ground and a buffalo tied to it. At dawn, after more dancing, the buffalo is slaughtered in thanksgiving. The ritual concludes with ritual speeches and prayers on behalf of the descendants of the deceased. Through these rituals, the deceased is understood to cross the threshold to a new ancestral identity, becoming part of an enduring lineage. As an ancestor cult, *mangokal holi*,

not only sets up the unity of temporality by focusing on death— the existential event that marks the beginning of someone's career as ancestor—but also asserts the unity of temporality by keeping the relative identity of the temporal sequences (Geană, 2005: 350).

Narratives of lineage are important aspects of Batak social life, promoting family networks and interactions between Batak and their ancestors. Ritual passages define the progress and transitions of life (such as birth, marriage and death) that delineate a sociocultural order. Ritual passages reveal obligations that manifest spatially and temporally as part of "a heritage that gives prestige, but also imposes an obligation" (Author?? 1986: 85; Bell, 1997). The complex performative rituals of *mangokal holi* unfold a relational space of obligations to care.

Fig. 2 *Manortor* or ceremonial dancing in *mangokal holi* as the performative care of the dead in Dairi, North Sumatra (1998). [Photo: Author]



Framing the performative interiority of caring relations

Tradition consists of social encounters, modes of expression, situations, and regulations. Together, these provide a sense of ethnic belonging (Christou, 2006: 71). Images, events, stories, objects, symbols, and practices take on special value as cultural components, of individual and social ethnic identity and pride. As a mode of representation and identification, tradition is performed and situated narratively. The basic structural feature of Batak tradition involves stories of remembering and acts that fix relations and ways of life according to narrative rules and schemata. Tradition is also performed spatially. The continuity of tradition is maintained through the cultural production and consumption of objects, events and artefacts that define space. The physical acts of handling these things—repairing or fixing them—ensures memory and continuity of tradition and also is a way of investing cultural meaning to the places where people inhabit, connect, and interact. In this way, it recalls how built environments in Western traditions acquire significance through “a process of equating socio-historical, cultural, and political values to things—buildings, trees, streets, laneways, parks, and even the relationships between these built forms” (Chan, 2012: 280).

Batak traditions maintain an active relationship to the past, defining an inwards space through a performative series of events that maintain cultural continuity through caring. In other words, these traditions have socio-spatial and temporal dimensions articulated through controls, boundaries, exclusion, habitation, bodies, time, and atmosphere. As theorist of the interior Christine McCarthy has suggested, interiority promotes the making of relationships, allowing exchanges across boundaries which condition habitation (2005: 113). For McCarthy, spatial experience relates to a temporality that is necessarily variable, through subtle changes in boundary, performance, intimacy, between-ness, and enclosure (2005: 120). I propose that we can understand traditions like *mangokal holi* by invoking ideas of interior spatiality and temporality.

Andrea Cossu has argued that understanding ritual as action promotes the importance of roles, settings, and “what constitutes the ‘raw cloth’ of ritual: its sequences, its perceptual components, the waves of movements, the sounds and visions enacted in the course of the ritual process” (2010: 35). As performance and action, “ritual is characterised by fluidity, polyphony, use of different media of expression, and an active and selective role of the audience in making sense of what actually happens during its celebration” (2010: 36). McCarthy points to such selectiveness as one of the most important mechanisms of interiority. Following this line of thought, we can recognise the way ritual evokes interiority by selectively and collectively detaching a ritual space from ordinary life and transforming social relations by marking time:

Rituals are ‘marked’ moments of heightened experience [...] which punctuate the flow of time and which are characterized, as any sacred thing is characterized in its relationship to the domain of the profane, by difference, opposition and heterogeneity. The flow of time, thus, is internally differentiated, and it is structurally organized by the presence of relevant moments which stand out of the ordinary, and which are characterized not only by a different way of living, [...] but also by a different perception of the self and of the other people cooperating in or experiencing ritual (2010: 39).

Ritual performances differentiate and separate the flow of time, dynamically producing temporal interiorities through the “emotive, physical and even sensual aspects of ritual participation” (Bell, 1997: 73). The sensual qualities of physical movement and bodily practice come to the fore in rituals. In similar ways to interiors, they rely “on the perception and sense-making of boundary features, degrees of enclosure, social conventions, behaviour rules, symbolism, verbal cues, and labelling of spaces” (Popov, 2010: 98). Ritual happens in a setting, “a force field [...] a *frame*” (Grimes, 2004: 260). Framing brings meanings into action; for anthropologists such as Catherine Bell, ritual

indicates the way in which some activities or messages set up an interpretive framework within which to understand other subsequent or simultaneous acts or messages. Frames, for Bateson, are a form of “meta-communication.” For example [...] it is the frame placed on a ceremonial blow that makes it clear whether one is initiating war or making peace (1997: 116).

Frames reveal edges, mark boundaries, and permit the formation of contained elements. As architectural theorist Elizabeth Grosz explains:

The frame separates. It cuts into milieu or space. This cutting links it to the constitution of a plane of composition, to the provisional ordering of chaos through the layering down of a grid or order that entraps chaotic shards, chaotic states, to arrest or slow them into a space and a time, a structure, and a form where they can affect and be affected by bodies (2008: 13).

Framing articulates a space and time to be experienced. The Batak ceremonies frame, and thus produce inward space, by fixing relationships of care. In *mangokal holi* ritual acts to fix the recognition of roles, relationships, obligations, and settings, organising space, time, and bodies. Attentively caring for the dead articulates thresholds and establishes new roles for them. At the same time, the selves of the living (both their embodied character and their spiritual *tondi*) are collectively balanced (Causey, 2011: 35).

Fig. 3 Act of cleansing the bones in *mangokal holi* as the performative care of the dead in Dairi, North Sumatra. [Photo: Author]



Caring touch, caring space

In *mangokal holi*, the narrative frame and social space are particularly expressed through touch. Skin touches dust and bones, triggering sensory experience. As a nine year old, I vividly remember touching and cleaning bones in our family yard. I will never forget my startled fascination on slowly touching them for the first time. In my case, touch prompted an ever-deepening sense of care. McCarthy writes that touch is critical to interiority, as “the point of physical exchange at which body and interior cause change in each other (bruises, contagious diseases, fingerprints, food stains, steamy windows, scent, vibration)” (2005: 119). Touch gives nuance to the sensation of attachment between different existences.

Touch (as the perpetrator of the trace) is a perpetrator of interior transformation. It enables interiority to change and transform, to be a subject of time, and to figure familiarity (closeness) as a literal exchange, wearing body, surface, and space to become threadbare, worn, and nostalgic. Touch is the closest form of interiority. It belies habitation while desiring it (McCarthy, 2005: 119).

For Batak, bone cleansing is also an act of remembering, commemorating the embodiment in time of the deceased, and defining new relationships in the present. It figures familiarity, produces intimacy, and frames a social space. In Batak burial ceremonies, the sequence of events, objects, and performances are experienced as caring relations that frame an inward space that is a repository for collective memory. *Mangokal holi* enables the community to place their cultural selves in the continuum of their culture. This is a kind of inwardness, opening to a world where community extends across the threshold between death and life. Twenty-three years later, I recall experiencing *mangokal holi* through the textures of selves, feeling my way into a sense of *tondi*. Through the caring touch that has filled my memory with depth, contour, and gesture, I share a space with my ancestors.

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ENDNOTES

1. As Causey puts it: "The Bataks' marga society consists of three conceptual groups: (1) those who share your clan name (*dongan sabutuha*, translated roughly as "womb sharers," with whom marriage is impossible because it is considered incestuous); (2) those to whom your clan provides daughters as wives (*boru*), and who are considered to be slightly inferior socially; and (3) those from whom your clan accepts daughters as wives (*hulahula*), and who are considered to be socially superior. These relationships are eternal, and cut across geographic distance and socioeconomic class; one may never marry *dongan sabutuha*, no matter how distant the actual ancestral connection is; one may always expect a favour from the *boru*; and one must always respect the *hulahula*." (2011: 32).