

Gondang Hybridization and Identity Politics of Toba Batak Society

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ABSTRACT

The absence of customary rules regarding music in Toba Batak society causes the ensemble to be very dynamic, and it becomes more complex when *gondang* is subject to hybridization with Western instruments. Contemporary *gondang* is generally in two streams of discourse, either modern or traditional, and a sign of high or low social class. This study aims to problematize the identity construction of *gondang* users through a hybridization approach and consumption that is based on cultural tastes. Research data was acquired through interviews and participatory observations at *adat* (custom) wedding parties in rural areas (Sipeapea) and urban areas (Jakarta). Western musical instruments are believed to be a symbol of modernization. Rural people consider *gondang* as a symbol of animism and an outdated cultural system. The use of trumpets and *gondang* in Sipeapea is considered to represent the high social class. In Jakarta, *gondang* is a cultural symbol that connects them with their home, while hybridization is an attempt of identity negotiation in a cosmopolitan space. This paper shows that identity attached to *gondang* is constructed by power and, at the same time, constructs the Toba Batak contemporary community.

Keywords: *Gondang Toba Batak, Hybridization, Identity politics, Rural-urban*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the use of musical instruments at two Batak Toba wedding ceremonies in rural (Sipeapea Village, North Sumatera) and urban (Jakarta) areas. The first party ensemble consisted of a keyboard (*kibot*), two saxophones, trumpet, and *sulim* (kind of flute), the local people called this ensemble *kibot*. The second ensemble consists of *taganing*, *sulim*, and keyboard, the people of Jakarta call this ensemble *gondang*. Music at the Batak Toba wedding party is not specifically regulated and is not even a compulsory element, so that the practice is very diverse and dynamic. Party organizers have the right to independently decide their music without involving traditional leaders.

Gondang has multiple meanings, although it is often equated with a drum. Okazaki [1] notes its meaning as drums, musical ensembles, musical compositions, repertoires, and ceremonies. The *gondang* ensemble consists of *gondang sabangunan*, *gondang hasapi*, and *uning-uningan*. *Taganing* is one of the musical instruments in this ensemble which is widely interpreted as a *gondang*/drum. *Gondang* as ensemble and repertoire is the terminology used in this article because it represents *gondang* as a material culture apart from that they are mostly understood.

The use of *gondang* in pre-Christian times revolved around spiritual rituals such as the ceremony to ask for



Trumpet Keyboard Sulim

Trio (singers) Saxophone

Figure 1 Wedding ensemble in Sipeapea, known as *kibot*



Taganing

Keyboard

Sulim

Trio (singers)

Figure 2 Wedding ensemble in Jakarta, known as *gondang* (Anna Situmorang, 2020)



Figure 3 Taganing/tataganing instrument and its player

blessing, prosperity, fertility, healing, and kids [1]. People believe that *Debata Mulajadi Nabolon* (The Great Being of the Beginning) and ancestral spirits are the sources of blessings, while musicians are intermediaries with the spiritual dimension. The musicians were known as *batara guru* or highly knowledgeable and respected teachers. When Christianity emerged and missionaries banned the ritual as heretical during 1866–1940, the use of the *gondang* was also not permitted. During this period of prohibition, Situmorang [2] explains that people feel uprooted from their hereditary traditions. After deregulation, the *gondang* may be played if it is not for animistic rituals. The church regulation force the Batak Christian community to change their cultural identity and re-interpret the *gondang*.

Christianization offers a new civilization that is considered modern, including in terms of musical instruments. The church presents Western musical instruments such as keyboards and trumpets, along with translated hymns to replace the function of *gondang* spiritualism and rituals. *Gondang*, which used to express spiritualism, was then considered a symbol of *sipelebegu* (devil worshippers), a gloomy period when the Toba Batak people did not know God and were full of spirits [1]. The *gondang* player who was once given an honorary title is now considered an old-fashioned musician, especially by the younger generation. The meaning of *gondang* is not static and changes along with the political dynamics in society. Perceptions of the identity of *gondang* users also vary depending on the context and dominant discourse.

Research on the Toba Batak *gondang* so far has revolved around functional and musical changes. Previous researchers have shown that *gondang* is a material object that is not static and is constantly in the process of negotiation. Okazaki [1] and Purba [3] [4] have discussed the change in the meaning of *gondang* due to church power from the pre-Christian era (before 1860) to the 1990s. This research will look at the cultural phenomenon of the use of *gondang* in contemporary societies that have the right to determine their party music, which no longer requires church permission to use musical instruments.

Power over musical instruments is transferred to the community, especially party organizers. They have the right to vote according to their respective preferences and motivations, while the church and *adat* do not provide standard regulations. It is ironic that in practice, party organizers often go into debt to rent music, so it should be assumed that music is used as a representation of a certain identity. This kind of ideological meaning has the potential to become a source of social and cultural conflict, so it needs to be critically explored and understood. This study is necessary considering that society is increasingly complex thanks to urbanization, which allows a mixture of culture and globalization, which gives room for the hybridization of Western and local musical instruments.

1.1. Gondang Hybridization

Hybridization is a logical impact of globalization because it allows world citizens to communicate with each other physically and culturally. Hybridization, according to Kraidy [5] is a combination of two forms, styles, or identities that are relatively distant, or cross cultures that transcend geographic and cultural divides. Hybridization can occur due to the movement of cultural products or people, and can be interpreted as a symptom of pluralism or cultural domination.

The use of the *gondang* and Western musical instruments in the two *adat* wedding parties studied is a form of hybridization. The musical sound of the two ensembles sounded relatively similar because they played the same repertoire. This suggests that the Batak Toba hybrid *gondang* was born through the merger of two ensembles (*gondang* and Western) to play the same repertoire. Okazaki [1] notes that in the fund-raising feast of HKBP Dame in Pematang Siantar (1992), the church permitted the shared use of *gondang* and keyboard ensembles, which are not possible under custom. He also argues that hybridization is an effort to unite the old (traditional) and the new (modern). Based on the statement, it can be assumed that the wedding party in 1992 did not use hybrid music. The author did not even find data on the use of *gondang* in *adat* marriages before or during Christianization.

Nurtiasa (60) and Petti (60), informants who were each married in the 1980s, stated that there was no music at their *adat* wedding party. Younger informants, Tiarlina (50) who married in 1993 and Mangajir (50) who married in 1997, stated that they used the Batak Opera recordings played over a loudspeaker as their wedding music. Tiarlina stated that *kibot* first appeared in 1994, while Mangajir stated in 1999. Based on their statements, it can be stated that wedding parties in the 1980s did not use any music, in the 1990s were accompanied by music recordings, and in the late 1990s had used *kibot*.

Parties in rural areas use only one *gondang* instrument, namely the *sulim* and the rest are the keyboard, trumpet, and saxophone. While in urban areas, two *gondang* instruments are used, namely *taganing* and

sulim, the rest are keyboards. In rural weddings, the party organizer is in charge of determining the ensemble. Meanwhile, in urban areas, the organizer hands over the power to determine the ensemble to the meeting hall manager. Organizers do not choose independently but are represented to present music at their party.

1.2. Cultural Tastes and Social Differentiation

The thought of Bourdieu [6] regarding the legitimacy of class representation through cultural consumption, is a theoretical basis for the meaning of identity in party music. There is an ideology in society that works to determine which culture is respectful for the upper class and which culture is vulgar for people with the lower class. This thinking can be applied to the public's interpretation of the choice to use music, so that it will be known what the ideology behind that choice is.

The relationship between social class and taste in music has been studied by Coulangeon [7] in France and Veenstra [8] in Canada, but both have different findings. Veenstra [8] is in line with Bourdieu's theory by stating that there is a real difference between upper- and lower-class musical tastes, the upper class doesn't like country music, easy listening, and golden oldies, which are low-class favourites. Coulangeon [7] does not rely solely on music preferences based on social class, but rather generational differences and the unequal distribution of musical knowledge and competence. Both studies show that Bourdieu's theory [6] should be used while considering the context of the community under study.

2. METHOD

Data collection was carried out by the group and individual interviews and participatory observation. The resource people for this study were party organizers, guests, leaders of the *adat* wedding (*raja parhata*), and Christian religious leaders. Data collection in Sipeapea took place on January 5-12, 2020 and in Jakarta on February 11, 2020, both of which took place face-to-face.

3. DISCUSSION

The Toba Batak community practices a wedding feast in a variety of ways, although in general for Christians, it consists of a blessing at the church and a traditional feast. Diversity is a sign of freedom for the Toba Batak people to practice their customs. This diversity can simply be compared through the duration of the two *adat* weddings which are the objects of this research. The wedding in Jakarta took place on November 23, 2019, at 09.30-18.00 WIB, while in Sipeapea it took place from the afternoon of January 10 to the evening of January 11, 2020. The two were relatively far apart, indicating that the composition of the event was also different.

This diversity does not necessarily divide the practices into urban and rural areas, because even people between villages have their habits. The informant, Eldon,

repeatedly stated, "*Asing luat asing do adatna*," which means that different regions have different customs even though they are generally referred to as Batak customs. Eldon served as the leader (protocol) of the custom of the clan of the bride at the wedding ceremony in Sipeapea. In addition to guiding the course of the event, he also gave various sayings (advice) and prayers, especially for the bride and groom. He is also a *sintua*/elder of the HKBP Sipeapea church. Eldon's statement regarding the diversity of customary practices of the Toba Batak community is:

Batak people do not share the same custom. People judge the good and bad of customs because of their habits, sometimes it creates a strange feeling and even debates when we meet different customs.

Custom leaders act as regulators of the procession while still paying attention to the customs of the people of one area. Eldon often had to ask questions about this custom before presiding over *adat* in other areas, so that he could adjust the event. He did not insist on applying the customs he practised in his community. Although he has interacted with many differences, Eldon still experiences isolation which creates conflict, even among traditional leaders. He observed only one practice that is always the same at all traditional festivals, that the *ianakhon* (the group of the groom's clan) serves meat (usually pork) and the *hula-hula* (the bride's clan group) serves fish-based food. Things other than the two practices take place without standards.

The spirit of freedom in the procedures for *adat* wedding parties also continues in choosing the music as the right of the party organizer. Traditional leaders have no interest in controlling musical instruments, nor are they involved in decisions to use or not use music. The *adat* wedding party does not place music as a mandatory element. Eldon said that the absence of music at the party has no significant impact. It should be underlined how he integrates freedom of choice of music with the ability to pay the rent. Simply put, the financial ability of the party organizer is directly proportional to the flexibility of using music, but there is no clear relationship between musical instruments and the success or excitement of the party. Eldon's statement regarding renting music at *adat* parties:

Determining music is the right of the party organizer, not even the custom leader. If I can use a trumpet, like at yesterday's party, why not? No one is prohibited nor ordered. Even if you only wear *kibot* and *sulim*, dancing is still valid and good. Musical instruments are not standards, not the main requirement, but additional.

Music rental (*kibot*) in Sipeapea is handled directly by the party organizer and is usually packaged with tents, tables, and chairs. The meeting hall is not used because it is held at home. The informants spent around IDR6,500,000 to IDR16,000,000 for the cost of renting a *kibot*, singers, tents, tables and chairs for two days. A different system takes place in Jakarta because the *adat*

wedding party takes place in the building and the building usually already has regular musicians. A party in an urban area lasts one day and costs a total of IDR300,000,000 (IDR9,000,000 for rent *gondang* and IDR28,000,000 for the building). Based on a simple comparison of some of the above components, the cost of marriage in urban areas is much higher than in rural areas.

Based on interviews with the informants, it was found that musical instruments that are often mentioned and their meanings for them are:

Table 1 The informants' opinion about *kibot*/keyboard in Sipeapea

Informant	Interview Quote
Tiarlina	Parties with <i>kibot</i> are more profitable, it encourages people to donate more.
Petti	The cost of renting <i>kibot</i> (including tents, tables, and chairs) was IDR16 million, which could be paid off immediately because we received IDR30 million from donations. It is better to owe rice and meat than <i>kibot</i> .
Mangajir	<i>Kibot</i> is used in almost all adat parties today. The progress of time has made traditional customs abandoned. <i>Kibot</i> makes party music sound alive.
Eldon	The keyboard can put people in a trance, not just <i>gondang</i> . It is simple and only needs a few players, but it is detrimental because then we forget the <i>gondang</i> .

Table 2 The informants' opinion about *kibot*/keyboard in Jakarta

Informant	Interview Quote
Nurtiasa	The keyboard can mimic the <i>gondang</i> 's sound, usually played in church, but it's cheap. The <i>gondang</i> makes the guests dance merrily. The keyboard is modern, while the <i>gondang</i> is ancient. The ancient values that sometimes make people choose <i>gondang</i> , the sound's good, unique. <i>Gondang</i> was created by our ancestors in ancient times.
Anna	In a village that is far from the city, people will save money by only using the keyboard.

Table 3 The informants' opinion about *gondang*/*taganing*/*tataganing* in Sipeapea

Informant	Interview Quote
Tiarlina	<i>Tataganing</i> is no longer seen at weddings if we don't have money. Only go into debt if you are sure the money will come back.
St. Purba	<i>Gondang</i> is played to raise grief, <i>kibot</i> is to celebrate joy. <i>Gondang</i> is prohibited because it causes trance. <i>Taganing</i> is not available at the <i>kibot</i> rental place, it must be sought by the rental. The old <i>gondang</i> and <i>kibot</i> can mimic the sound of the <i>gondang</i> .
Petti	<i>Gondang</i> is used to summon demons. The sound is strange, many people hate hearing it.
Mangajir	<i>Gondang</i> will reduce the festivity of the party.
Mangajir and Eldon	<i>Taganing</i> is not prohibited in the church, but personnel are none. <i>Gondang</i> is not against Christianity.

Table 4 The informants' opinion about *gondang*/*taganing*/*tataganing* in Jakarta

Informant	Interview Quote
Nurtiasa	In the village, the rich will look for the best <i>gondang</i> , but no problem if you can't afford it. In the city, if you can't afford <i>gondang</i> , you will go into debt. Parents dare to go into debt to marry off sons. The <i>kibot</i> is

Informant	Interview Quote
	lower than the <i>gondang</i> . The <i>gondang</i> is an attempt to climb a little and make the party more festive.
Anna	<i>Gondang</i> does not sound good when played alone, combining traditional and modern is a must. <i>Gondang</i> brings the beat and the keyboard brings the tone. Music is influenced by development times and family requests. Musicians in Jakarta already have a partnership with the building owner, we just have to accept it.

Table 5 The informants' opinion about trumpet in Sipeapea

Informant	Interview Quote
Tiarlina	Trumpets create an honourable and festive party feel.
Mangajir	The trumpet is only used by the rich, the wealthy, whose children are successful.
Eldon	The trumpet is not the norm for the party. If they have the funds, go ahead. I think wind music is not suitable for tortor dance.

Table 6 The informants' opinion about a party without musical instruments in Sipeapea

Informant	Interview Quote
Tiarlina	A party without <i>kibot</i> evokes feelings of smallness and poverty.
Eldon	Parties can take place without music and there are no customary rules about this.

Table 7 The informant's opinion about a party without musical instruments in Jakarta

Informant	Interview Quote
Nurtiasa	In the village, most parties don't have music, but it's still good. In the city, people use <i>gondang</i> and <i>kibot</i> because time is progressed.

3.1. Musical Instruments as a Marker of Spiritualism

As explained earlier, music in the traditional practices of the Toba Batak community can not be separated from the history of Christianization. This is still reflected in the statement of the source who links the use of *gondang* with a Bible verse (Psalm 150:3-5). This verse contains advice for people to praise God with various musical instruments. Eldon and Mangajir answered with this verse to answer the church's view of the use of the *gondang* to accompany adat or church services. Mangajir is quite active even though he is not an elder at GSJA Sipeapea (a charismatic church). The following is an excerpt from the bible:

Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet, praise Him with the harp and harp! Praise Him with tambourines and dances, Praise Him with harps and flutes. Praise Him with the clinking cymbals, praise Him with the ringing cymbals. (Psalm 150:3-5).

The two informants did not find a connection between *gondang*, adat, and church, and even realized the potential of *gondang* as a spiritual medium. However, their church did not use a single *gondang* ensemble

because there were no players. However, a contradictory statement was conveyed by another source, namely Petti, who stated that *gondang* was used to summon demons and made strange sounds so that many people (now) hate hearing it. This was the basis for the prohibition of the use of *gondang* by missionaries in the past and is still believed today.

The views of these sources show that Christian ideology is deeply embedded in them. This ideology provides them with a way of evaluating *gondang* positively (supporting) and negatively (contradicting). *Gondang* is played to praise God or it is removed altogether, this is the spirit that encourages missionaries when allowing *gondang* to be used again as long as it removes the ritual element.

The sound of *gondang* is believed to cause people to experience trance, but in this case, the sources are divided into those who believe and those who do not. Purba is an elder at GSJA Sipeapea who believes that *gondang* is prohibited from playing because it can cause people to be possessed, while Eldon states that possession is not the result of *gondang* because the keyboard can also cause people to be possessed. One of the reasons for the issuance of a ban on the use of *gondang* is because its use is considered animistic. It is interesting to find that the material on the Christianization agenda that was delivered 80-150 years ago still survives as an ideology that is believed by the Toba Batak community.

3.2. Musical instruments as a Marker of Social Class

The views of the speakers regarding the representation of social class through music are generally associated with the cost of renting musical instruments and the financial ability of party organizers. Although they strongly believe in this representation, not all informants are ready to go into debt to rent a musical instrument. *Gondang* is most often stated to have this representation function in both urban and rural areas, while trumpets are only believed to represent the social class in rural areas.

Nurtiasa admitted that she spent a total of IDR300,000,000 on organizing her first son's wedding. She invited 1000 people to attend the party which was held at the Sejahtera building. Even though she didn't get into debt, Nurtiasa said that someone's prestige and cynical comments could not be avoided from the party. Even though she has no experience of marrying off her children, Nurtiasa feels that she has successfully organized a party and has received praise from the guests.

Regarding the musical instruments at her son's wedding, Nurtiasa stated that she chose the *gondang* as an effort to "go up a little bit" because the *gondang* rental fee was more expensive, while if it was only a keyboard, the cost was cheap. She also compared how urban and rural people responded to the high cost of renting a *gondang*. She stated that the rich in the village would try

to find the best *gondang*, and if they were not rich enough, they would not go into debt. Meanwhile, in urban areas, if they can not afford to rent a *gondang*, people will go into debt. Based on Nurtiasa's statement, it can be seen how the rental price is considered to represent the ability and economic class of party organizers both in rural and urban areas, although she considers that only urban people are willing to go into debt to rent music which is considered representative.

When Tiarlina and Purba married in 1993, they played music from a Batak Opera record, but for their daughter's wedding, they dreamed of using *taganing*, keyboard, and trumpet. Tiarlina thought that the presence of *gondang* and trumpet would make the party more respectable. Furthermore, Purba stated that the party organizer's financial ability would be able to present *taganing* even though it was rarely found or even unavailable at the owner's music rental place.

The trumpet is a musical instrument that the informants often mention in Sipeapea, but not in Jakarta. The informants agreed that the trumpet would only be rented if the party organizer and the children were financially capable. The sources' views on the effect of trumpets on parties were divided between those who believed that trumpets made the party more respectable and festive and those who thought trumpets were not suitable to accompany traditional processions.

The inability to rent party music was considered by Tiarlina can give the feeling of poverty. Thus, to bring music to her party, she is willing to go into debt or postpone the celebration altogether. This shows that music at weddings is used as an arena for class differentiation in society. Those who believe in symbolizing the high price of musical instruments as an identity for the high social class will try to gain self-esteem even though they must sacrifice a lot.

3.3. Musical Instruments as a Marker of Modernism

Informants in rural and urban areas generally considered the keyboard and other Western musical instruments used with them as signifying entities of modernism, while the *gondang*, apart from being traditional, was also considered old-fashioned. Mangajir and Eldon argue that the dominant use of the keyboard compared to the *gondang* in rural areas is a sign of the unavoidable progress of the times. Anna, as the youngest informant, sees the incorporation of *kibot* as a modern product that must be hybridized with *gondang* as a traditional product. She considered that the musicalization of the two ensembles could complement each other.

Purba and Eldon assess the modernization offered by the keyboard because of its ability to imitate other musical instruments, including the *gondang*. Keyboards make the party practical and don't take a lot of energy to

prepare. This causes the number of personnel to be much smaller so that rental costs are also cheaper.

Even though she considers *gondang* ancient, Nurtiasa states that *gondang* is sometimes preferred because of its good and unique sound, besides that *gondang* was created a long time ago by the ancestors of the Toba Batak. Nurtiasa's statement shows another meaning of *gondang* as a distinguishing identity of the Toba Batak community in the contemporary era, in addition to connecting this community to their origins (home).

Okazaki [1] finds associations of Christianity with Western culture and the attachment of progress narratives to hymn singing and Western instruments. Simply put, those with these signs are considered modern, progressive, and westernized. More than 25 years after the research from Okazaki [1], the same association is still found in the researchers' interviews with the sources.

3.4. Benefit from Music

Wedding party guests usually make donations to the family in the form of money called *tumpak*. Guests can also make donations to the bride and groom or other family members when they singing. The informants argued that this moment could significantly affect the total amount of money the party organizers received. Tiarlina stated that renting a *kibot* will provide financial benefits because guests will be encouraged to give more (generously).

Petti gave an example of her experience renting a *kibot* (along with tents, tables, and chairs) for IDR16,000,000, but at the end of the party, she collected IDR30,000,000. She was not only able to pay off the *kibot* rental immediately and even get a profit. However, not all parties end up as financial gain for the party organizer. At a wedding in Jakarta, Nurtiasa spent a total of IDR300,000,000 and only received a batch of IDR30,000,000. She considers the comparison between the cost of going out and coming in is not comparable.

4. CONCLUSION

The ideological dynamics inherent in *gondang* are contradictory between old and new cultural values. The emergence of a new life system through Christianity, together with various social and political situations, have opened a historical route for the culture of the Batak Toba people today. *Gondang* is a cultural entity with a dynamic meaning. This is in line with the nature of cultural instability and the absence of essential principles in the identity of cultural actors. This research shows that the ideological change of *gondang* is not limited to a contradictory phenomenon between the past and the attractiveness of newness due to Christianization, but is used as an arena for the identity politics of contemporary society. The contradiction between meanings continues to this day so that the meaning of *gondang* becomes complex and even overlaps.

The discussion of the dynamics of music in the Toba Batak wedding party can not be separated from the changing customary ecosystem. Informants aged 50 years and over agreed that in the past, *gondang* was (only) used in traditional funeral customs. Their marriage (around 1980-1990s) didn't even use any musical instrument. When they later had the opportunity to organize their children's weddings, music became an inevitable element of marriage and the cultural system of the Toba Batak people.

The choice of musical instruments is not only based on the financial ability of the organizers, but also on the identity they want to display. The cost of renting a *gondang* and trumpet which are considered expensive is a symbol that is considered to represent high social class so that if they can not afford it financially, some people are even willing to go into debt. The keyboard is considered to symbolize modernity because it can mimic the sound of other musical instruments, reducing the number of musicians and rental costs. *Gondang* for urban communities is also used as a cultural identity amid cosmopolitanism. Although the Batak people have a saying, *adat do na balga, adat do na metmet*, which means that all parties are the same, party music turns out to have problematic and political meanings.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Data collection were performed by Vita Pasaribu. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Vita Pasaribu. Supervision and critical review were performed by Tommy Christomy. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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