Digital Funeral as Solution for Revitalizing Batak's Funeral Rites *Mangokal Holi*

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ABSTRACT

Tradition for the Toba Batak is a tool to construct and express identity. One of the main traditions related to the construction of Batak Toba ethnic identity is the *Mangokal Holi* ritual – the excavation of ancestral bones from the tomb to be put together in a mass clan grave on Samosir Island. The continuity of this tradition is hampered by the tendency of the Toba Batak ethnic to migrate to other areas. The tendency of the Toba Batak ethnic diaspora resulted in the implementation of complex *Mangokal Holi* in ritual socialization, planning, and funding. One of the solutions to maintain this tradition is to use digital technology, especially during the covid-19 period: digital funerals. This paper presents a review of related literature from various articles, documents, and other sources in accordance with the theme of digital funeral as solution for revitalizing Batak's funeral rite *Mangokal Holi*. Employing Arnold Van Gennep Theory Rites of Passage as the analytical framework, this paper examines three stages of rites of passage including separation, liminality, and integration to examine how digital funerals affect subjectivities and collective consciousness. As a results, this study shows that digital funeral in burial rites of *Mangokal Holi* can help preserving Batak cultural identities.

Keywords: Batak, Digital funeral, Mangokal Holi, Rites of passage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rituals can be seen as actions taken to accomplish objectives, which can be done both privately and publicly. Ritual, according to Bruner (1986), is an expression connected to culturally formed experiences. A ritual's execution can vary depending on cultural structure. Different rituals are produced by many cultures. This relates to the significance of an occasion or the objective that will be accomplished via the use of a ritual. Thus, it may be said that the creation of rituals in society is encouraged by a shared perception of an occurrence. According to Bloch and Parry (1982), a few rituals help to form civilization. On the other hand, social changes promote modifications, transformations, and even the rejection of rituals. Therefore, it can be said that rituals express the beliefs or values of a group. Ritual, according to Reimers (1999), is a means of expressing and enhancing cultural identity. Ritual practice thus plays a significant part in maintaining cultural identity.

One of the forms of ritual that is important in society is burial. Funerals as a way of paying last respects to the deceased and providing an opportunity to socialize with the bereaved family. Thus, there is a collective feeling in a funeral that is present both through the atmosphere and the rituals carried out. Funerals are a fundamental component in both cultural and religious aspects that give rise to perspectives on the importance of the meaning of life. (Mitima-Verloopa, Trudy, Moorena & Boelana, 2021; O'Rourke, Spitberg & Hannawa, 2011). Han (2019) states that the importance of funerals cannot be separated from the psychological need of humans to be separated from grief over the events of death and the motivation to make life more meaningful. Thus, funerals are not only carried out to honor the dead but there is also a practical need for funeral directors.

Mangokal Holi is a secondary funeral ritual in the Batak tradition that has a practical function for its implementers. This ritual is the transfer of ancestral bones from the cemetery to a place called *batu na pir* with the aim of showing respect by descendants to the ancestors and as thanksgiving to God (Silalahi, 2016). *Na pear stone* is a special communal grave for clan members in the tribe. Setiawan (2009) states that *the napir stone is* closely related to the sarcophagus on Samosir Island which serves as an ancestral honor by the Batak ethnic group in the megalithic era. Based on the similarity of these functions, it can be stated that *Mangokal Holi* is a tradition that has existed since the megalithic era. In addition, *Mangokal*

Holi is also related to Batak cultural identity. Pardede (1985) states that family relationships are a factor that is continuously maintained in relation to Batak identity. Thus, it can be stated that the implementation of *Mangokal Holi* aims to maintain the construction of Batak cultural identity.

The Toba Batak ethnic tendency to carry out diaspora becomes an obstacle in the implementation of *Mangokal Holi*. The distribution of the Toba Batak ethnicity throughout Indonesia causes the implementation of this ritual to require large planning and costs up to hundreds of millions of rupiah (Simamora, Sutrisno & Hartutik, 2020) . In addition, the interaction of the Batak ethnicity with other cultures in the diaspora region causes a shift in the perspective on traditions and identities chosen by the descendants of the Batak diaspora (Nainggolan, 2006; Nauly & Fransisca, 2015; Nugroho, Nuhayati, Nationalita & Malau, 2020). This contrasts with the Batak cultural identity in Toba which can be declared stable. Based on this, the high cost of the rituals and the lack of participation of the young Batak generation in the *Mangokal Holi* ritual are the main causes.

Studies on *Mangokal Holi* demonstrate its purposes and advantages for both the Toba tribe and society at large. Hutagaol and Prayitno (2020) stated that *Mangokal Holi* is a joint activity that creates mechanical solidarity for the perpetrators. Silalahi, Sibarani, Setia and Takkari, (2020) stated that this ritual could be a solution to the lack of burial grounds in Indonesia. Sibarani, Situmorang and Prawiro (2018) stated that *Mangokal Holi* contains noble values that can function as character education, especially regarding cooperation in society.

There have not been any other studies besides the ones already mentioned that investigate the changes needed for *Mangokal Holi*. This contrasts with other studies of Indonesian rituals, such as the study of the *Ngaben* ceremony's evolution in response to community needs (Anadhi, 2016; Segara, 2020). The dearth of studies examining *Mangokal Holi* from a contemporary angle suggests that for *Mangokal Holi* to remain relevant to the Batak community, it must undergo transformation.

Massive digital funeral technology used during the covid-19 period can be used as a tool to revitalize the *Mangokal Holi* ritual. Digital funerals are funerals that can be attended online by relatives who are unable to attend in person. In digital funerals, interactions that occur are usually interactions in other cyber spaces. The main function of digital funerals are communication to strengthen each other in the face of death. MacNeil, Findlay, Bimman, Hocking, Barclay, and Ho (2021) stated that digital funerals can be used to present a new form of ritual through modification of the death ritual procession. The goal of this research is to simplify *Mangokal Holi* and revive the Batak tribe's most revered tradition.

2. METHOD

This study used descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative research is a research method based on the philosophy of post-positivism, in which research is used on the condition of natural objects (as opposed to experiments) where the researcher is the key instrument. Data collection techniques are carried out by triangulation (combined) data analysis is inductive/qualitative, and the qualitative research results emphasize meaning than generalization (Sugiyono, 2017). The first step in this research is the collection of data related to the implementation of the *Mangokal Holi* ritual and information about the development of digital funerals. The second step is to find and analyze the myth of the origin of *Mangokal Holi* based on the literature found. Myth analysis was conducted to determine the purpose of the implementation of *Mangokal Holi* for the Batak tribe. Furthermore, mapping and analysis of the implementation of the *Mangokal Holi* ritual was carried out as the next analysis material. The next step is the analysis of the implementation of *Mangokal Holi* in digital funerals.

As an analytical tool, this study uses the Rites of Passage Theory from Arnold Van Gennep (1960). In rites of passage, ritual is seen as a procedure used to achieve certain goals through three stages: I) Separation, namely the stage when the individual is separated from society; II) Liminality is the stage in which the individual who is separated from society is in between the old conditions and the new conditions that are expected from the implementation of the ritual; and III) Incorporation: the stage where the individual has entered a new phase after going through a series of actions in the ritual.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Rites of Passage Mangokal Holi

There is a myth behind the implementation of *Mangokal Holi* by the Toba Batak ethnic. The myth tells of an ancestor who comes to his descendants through a dream with a wish. The ancestor asked his family to look for his body in overseas lands to be moved back to his hometown, Tanah Toba. The ancestors stated that the transfer to the land of Toba allowed him to be reunited with other ancestors.

In myth, narrative is a symbolic force to identity formation. Geertz (2014) states that the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic form. Thus, the myth about *Mangokal Holi* can be used as a reference for the ideal view of life in the Batak society. Two things that are significant in the myth are the Land of Toba and the desire to reunite with

Table 1. Stages and functions in *Mangokal Holi* rites

Stages	Function
Tonggo King	A meeting to discuss Mangokal Holi held by the Batak clan, Perbato and the church to discuss the costs, participants, and the ritual date
Paumbahong Strain	Excavating the bones from the grave into a small sieve casket
Panangkokhon Strain	Transferring the ancestor's bone to the *Batu na pear*
Sulang Bao	Gratitude for taking part in the mangokal holi ceremony, which aims to improve relations between clans.
Mangaliat Horbo	Sacrificing livestock commonly Buffalo as a tribute to ancestral spirits
Make Ni Gondang Old	The opening ceremony was carried out by the priest as the leader of the ceremony was followed by a dance performed by the participants of the ceremony as an expression of joy in the implementation of mangokal holi.
Na Gok's Traditional Party	The party is carried out: and the giving of *adat* offerings which aims to strengthen relations between clans in the Batak tribe.
Able	expressing gratitude for coming to the mangokal Holi ceremony

Table 2. Rites of passage *Mangokal Holi*

Stages	Phases in mangokal holi
Separation	*Tonggo King*
Liminality	*Paumbanghong strain, Panangkokhon strain na batu na pear, Sulang bao, mangaliat horbo*
Incorporation	*Made this old godang, traditional party na gompu, Mangampu*

family. As a symbolic form, these two things are related to hometowns and genealogical relationships. Therefore, it can be stated that for the Batak Toba ethnic, cultural identity refers to these two things. In addition, the myth about ancestral communalism shows the Batak Toba ethnic belief to remain as one unit.

A belief to remain as one unit is also shown through the stages of *Mangokal Holi*. There are eight stages of *Mangokal Holi*, namely *Tonggo Raja*, *Paumbanghong Filtering*, *Panangkokhon Straining Tu Batu Na Pir*, *Sulang Bao*, *Mangaliat Horbo*, *Mambuat Tua ni Gondang*, Traditional Party *na Gok*, *Mangampu* (Silalahi et al, 2020).

Based on Table 1, it appears that the *Mangokal Holi* ritual prioritizes communication in the ritual procession which appears at stages 1, 4, 6, 7, and 8. It can be stated that in the *Mangokal Holi* ritual communication of family members is prioritized over the ritual procession. Van Gennep's Rites of Passage theory (Grimes, 2000) is "asking to a bodily movement through space like traveling across an international border or walking through the doorway". Rogers (2015) states that in thresholds are particularly important in van Gennep's theory, as the act of crossing over one is ceremonially significant because it is designated a change in status of the ritual participant and his/her separation from one world and incorporation into another. Based on this, the threshold that must be crossed in the *Mangokal Holi* ritual is to become an integral part of the clan through communication.

Based on the stages and functions of *Mangokal Holi*, the division of rites of passage is as follows: I) Separation phase takes place in Tonggo Raja. According to Gennep (cited in Rogers, 2015), separation is the point at which

people are extricated from their surroundings. In matonggo raja, participants are released from their daily roles to be placed in traditional Batak structures; II) The liminal phase is a stage in which one phase moves into another. *Mangokal Holi* has two types of liminality: the waiting period for ancestral spirits to reunite, which lasts from the death experienced (first burial) to reburial at the monument; and the acceptance or affirmation of Batak identity for ritual practitioners; III) incorporation, when people and communities enter a new stage, particularly in terms of how they view the dead. This phase of *Mangokal Holi* is the most important phase. The stages of ceremonies that fall under this category show this. Making old ni godang, hosting a traditional na gompu party, and creating mangampu are the stages of incorporation in *Mangokal Holi*. The mangaliat horbo stage, in addition to these two stages, can also be categorized under incorporation because it expresses more gratitude to the living person for the implementation of *Mangokal Holi*.

Additionally, it can be observed that *Mangokal Holi* is dominant in the stages of the rites of passage that involve communication activities in each of the phases (see Table 2). One manifestation of the myth's ideology or values is the predominance of clan communication during the *Mangokal Holi* procession. In the meanwhile, it can be said that *Mangokal Holi* seeks to reunite the divided elements in the Batak tribe, both living and deceased clan members, based on the purpose of the stages. The attempt at unification demonstrates that there was a distance between the Batak tribe's members prior to the introduction of the *Mangokal Holi*.

Death and the diasporic movement of the Batak tribe are two examples of the separation that occurs in this instance. The burial of the remains serves as a structural symbol of separation for the deceased Batak people. The deceased is brought together with other ancestors in one location with the relocation of the tomb. For the living, this tradition is a reminder from the diaspora to rediscover their Batak identity through clan-based communication. Accord ing to Gennep (cited in Rogers, 2015) alienation is experienced by people in social structures and environments that inherently signify the transition of life phases or liminal zones can lead to liminality in rites of passage. *Mangokal Holi*, which emphasizes blood ties throughout the ritual, plays a significant part in fortifying the relationship of the Batak tribe that comes before class and social status as liminal zones. According to Bowie

(2000) , the performer of the ceremony is physically and psychologically changed or molded so that society's values can be imprinted on his or her body and mind. The Batak collective identity is being reintegrated through intense communication, the tortor dance movements performed at stage 6, and the Batak symbols worn throughout the ceremony. Likewise, the interment of remains in the monument's tomb, which serves as a reminder of the Batak tribe's unity

3.2. Integration of Digital Funeral in Mangokal Holi

Based on rites of passage analysis, *Mangokal Holi* can be interpreted as an attempt by the Batak tribe to improve clan communication. When this ritual first began, verbal communication could only take place when people gathered in one place. Nowadays, humans no longer solely rely on face-to-face interactions in the real world to communicate as technology advances. According to Reed (2019), every technological advancement transforms people. One such change is how people perceive the boundaries between public and private spaces, particularly how intimate and intense communication feels. Now, it's not unusual to see two people seated next to one another, but they are each absorbed in their own device. Arnold, Gibbs, Kohn, Messe, and Nansen (2018) made the following claim about death: "Changes in living and remembering death, which are now rampant in social media, have an impact on the increase in human activity in the digital world." To make it simpler to preserve Batak cultural identity, it is therefore necessary to change the *Mangokal Holi* rites. It is important to take socio-cultural factors into account when implementing digital funerals. As the previous analysis demonstrated, *Mangokal Holi* is a rite that emphasize communication on its stages. Therefore, technology is needed to provide space for communication during the implementation of digital funerals into *Mangokal Holi*.

One form of technology that can provide a communication room is a meeting platform. Platform meetings is a type of technology that prioritizes communication and is widely used in many fields during the covid-19 pandemic c, especially in education or business sector. The use of platform meetings in *Mangokal Holi* can expand the communication that occurs during rituals. Participation in *Mangokal Holi* is currently limited by available funds. The use of a meeting platform can reduce the need for funding for the transportation of participants. Thus, members of the Toba Batak ethnic group who are not a priority can still follow and communicate with the clan during the ritual. In addition, the use of platform meeting can minimize human errors during *Mangokal Holi* rites. Nainggolan (2017) states that perbato institutions often cannot function optimally due to budgetary problems and communication problems during implementation.

The execution of the *Mangokal Holi* ceremony can make use of streaming technology, which is now widely used in social medi, in addition to the use of platform meetings. The awkwardness of streaming is eliminated by increased social interaction online, especially during the pandemic. Services held in churches to circumvent the ban on gatherings have been one area where streaming has been extensively used during the pandemic. Using streaming technology can make ritual practitioners' feelings more intense. According to Simamora et al. (2021), ritual participants believed they were reunited with a family member who had passed away at the time of reburial, which caused happiness to emerge. There is not much room for ritual performers to move around, and other participants often block their view. Using streaming, participants in rituals are made as visible as possible, both physically and virtually, through a camera that can get a close-up view of the bones.

A photo slide show of the faces of the ancestor in their lifetime can be shown to the ritual participants to further enhance their sense of immersion. Participants in digital funerals gained meaning from slide shows that featured images from the deceased's life, according to MacKenzie (cited in MacNeil et al, 2021). A photo slide show can create a different impression at a digital funeral. The small coffin that was initially used to transport the bones is a representation of the ancestor that was transported. (Silalahi et al, 2020; Sihotang, 2020). The use of photo slides can serve as both a reminder of the past and another representation of the abandoned ancestor figure. Thus, it can be said that in *Mangokal Holi*, nostalgia serves as a vehicle for ritual meaning. According to Turner (1987), one of the purposes of nostalgia is to display emotional spontaneity. Slide shows of photographs can be used to enhance the emotional effect on ritual participants, such as grieving for the death. The presence of the same feeling at one time can increase the unity of a communal. Thus, it can raise a collective awareness of the unity of the Batak tribe.

4. CONCLUSION

Mangokal Holi is a Batak tradition that promotes the idea of the genealogically based unity of the Batak tribe. This article has shown that to address issues with ritual socialization, financial constraints, and contemporary relevance, *Mangokal Holi* needs to be transformed. Some of these issues can be solved through the application of technology, in this case, digital funerals. By using streaming technology and camera techniques to give ritual participants a virtual immersive experience, the gap between emotion and the sacredness of ritual behavior can be closed. In order to preserve Batak cultural identity, digital funerals can be incorporated into the *Mangokal Holi* celebration.

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