

Form and Meaning of Batak Toba House Ornaments

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This research aims to discover the local wisdom of ancient cultural products in Indonesia, specifically the ornamental decorations of the Batak Toba traditional house in North Sumatra. Using Panofsky's iconological approach of analysis, the research investigates the form and meaning contained in the various ornaments attached to house. The data were collected through literature studies and field observations, which were analyzed under two consecutive stages. The first stage interprets the ornaments' textual meanings (Pre-iconography), while the second stage discovers their contextual meanings (Iconography). Results reflect that, in terms of form, the ornamental decorations of the Batak Toba house were majorly inspired by phenomenon and objects of nature that have been stylized, while some were imaginative and novel in character. Further investigations revealed that the ornaments contain meanings that reflect the people's spiritual beliefs of *Banua Tonga* (middle world) being in a harmonious relationship with *Banua Ginjang* (upper world) and *Banua Toru* (lower world). They also represent the life visions and philosophies of the Batak Toba society: *Hamoraon* (prosperity), *Hagabeon* (fertility), and *Hasangapon* (honor).

Keywords: Ornament, Form, Meaning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ornaments are forms of art products that were created in order to fulfill mankind's spiritual needs in seeking beauty or perfection. They reveal the life values of a certain society that support the civilization. As historical products, ornaments are generally found on past daily life objects, public facilities and tools for religious rituals or ceremonies. They are attached to buildings, furniture, household equipment, weapons and on various tools. They take part in adding beauty or aesthetic value to an object. This research aims to specifically study the form and meaning of the ornamental decorations that could be found in the Batak Toba traditional house.

The ornaments often relate to dimensions of mythology, spirituality, religion, culture and sociality. These ornaments are truly rich in form and possess symbolic meanings that ought to be nobly preserved, as they can increase the values of heritage design aesthetics and promote local wisdom in the contemporary society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This is a qualitative research, using Panofsky's approach of Iconography to discover the form and meaning behind the various ornaments of the Batak Toba House (Fig. 1). The data were collected through literature studies as well as field observations. Iconographical studies were used to obtain the meaning behind

the ornaments through two consecutive stages: the first is Pre-iconography, while the second stage is iconography. In the Pre-iconography stage, the objects were analyzed textually in regard to their primary meaning, based on their artistic form in order to obtain textual meaning. Proceeding to the stage of Iconography, the objects were further interpreted with secondary meaning, based on the world of images, emblems and symbols in order to obtain contextual meaning.²

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Beliefs of the Batak Toba Society

Every ornament attached to the building of the Batak Toba House possesses certain meaning or symbol relating to the cosmology and beliefs of the Batak society. All things created had reference to their thoughts, emotions and faith that relates to magical and religious aspects, such as (1) The Almighty God (in Batak language is mentioned as *Debata Mulajadi na Bolon* or *Ompu Tuan Mulajadi na Bolon*), (2) Strength or other forces that strongly relates to the human life, mentioned as *Roh Tondi Begu*, (3) the human spirit that is already dead (in Batak term, it is known as *Begu*), (4) the natural spirit known as *homang* that resides in the jungle, and (5) the spirit of the ancestors such as grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, brother, sister who has already died (in Batak language, it is known as *Sumangot*).³ Ornamental decorations, sculptures and other art objects were created to display the Batak people's loyalty and respect to those various spirits. They functions as mediators to maintain peace with the spirits

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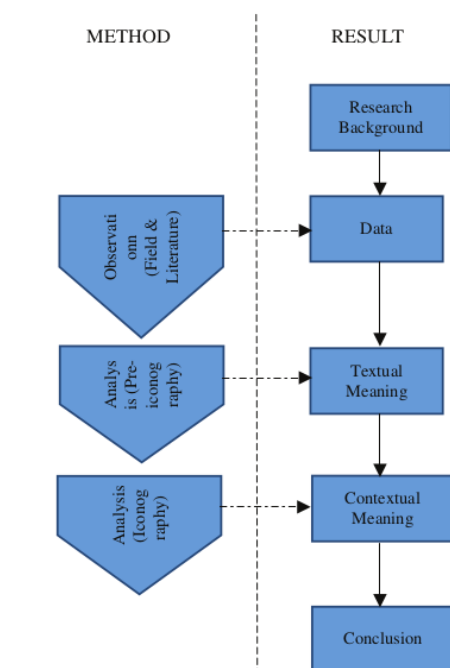


Fig. 1. Research method scheme.

and as shields against the evil spirits. Hence, the ornaments were created as efforts to maintain a peaceful human life.

Besides the above belief, there is also one cosmological view that might have some influence from Hinduism, that states that *Debata Mulajadi na Bolon* (The Almighty God) is manifested into three *Debata* or *Debata na Tolu* (arrangement of the universe) that is, *Tuan Bubi na Bolon* who has authority over the upper world (*Banua Ginjang*), *Tuan Silaon na Bolon* who controls the middle world (*Banua Tonga*), and *Tuan Pane na Bolon* who rules the lower world (*Banua Toru*). The structure of the Batak Toba house also reflects this belief. The upper world (*Banua Ginjang*) is symbolized by the roof area, the middle world (*Banua Tonga*) is represented by the walls and floor, while the lower world (*Banua Toru*) is the area beneath the building (Fig. 3). The mythology about the belief in a holistic cosmos (the universe) from these three *banua* is a representation of a peaceful universe. The upper world is belief to be the residence of the Almighty God, the middle world is the secular or human world, whereas the lower world is the place of the evil spirits (the dark world). Harmony in these three universes brings peace, blessings and prosperity.¹

The Batak Toba society also holds a significantly important life philosophy known *Tolu H* (3H): *Hamoraon*, *Hagabeon* and *Hasangapon*. *Hamoraon* means possessing riches, or abundance of wealth. *Hagabeon*, relates to fertility, which implies to having many offspring. *Hasangapon* means acquiring honor, implying the importance of gaining others' respect. These principles have been the main life visions of the Batak Toba society.⁵



Fig. 2. A Batak Toba house with the traditional gabled roof.

3.2. Form and Meaning of the Batak Toba House Ornaments

Studying ornamental decoration cannot be separated from the site of the decoration itself and thus, the Batak Toba House (Fig. 2). *Ruma* is the Batak term for house while *gorga* is the term for decoration. *Ruma Gorga* is generally known as the best type of the Batak Toba traditional house, as it is designed with wooden ornamental carvings of symbols such as *singa-singa*: an image of a human body combined with a horse head. Other simpler buildings include *Ruma Siampore*, void of ornamental carvings such as those in *Ruma Gorga*.⁴

In relation to the concept of the upper, middle and lower worlds represented by the structure of the Batak Toba house, the ornaments were only present on the roof (*Banua Ginjang*) and walls (*Banua Tonga*) as they are considered the places where life is present. Meanwhile, the area beneath the floors (*Banua Toru*) was designed void of any ornaments, representing the absence of life or death (Fig. 3).

The ornamental decorations *gorga* (Fig. 3) consists of geometrical forms, flora, fauna, nature, and profiles of creatures or humans. They were made using two types of techniques: carving and painting on wood, with a limited range of colors (red, black and white). The materials were made of stones or hard clay from

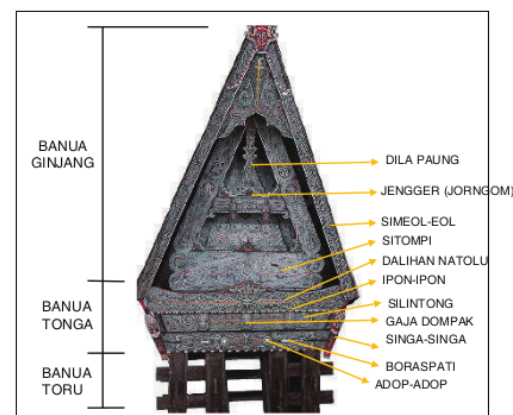
Fig. 3. The various ornamental decorations (*gorga*) on the façade of the Batak Toba House that were carved and painted in traditional colors of black, white and red, rich in form and meaning.

Table 1. ³ Form and meaning of the Batak Toba House ornaments.

| No | Pre-iconography stage (textual meaning) | | | Iconography stage (contextual meaning) | Philosophical value |
|----|---|--|--|--|----------------------------|
| | Name of ornamental | Placement | Form/Motif | | |
| 1 | ² <i>Sitomp</i> | Front wall, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornament shaped like a fastener handle tool usually attached to a buffalo's neck. Its form resembles the movement of woven rattan. | Symbolizing the noble gestures of mutual assistance, working together like a family, having the same life visions and loving each other in times of joy and sorrow. | Honor |
| 2 | <i>Dalihan natolu</i> | Front wall, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornament shaped like coiled tendrils that mutually interlock | Symbol of living kinship that has to be valued by the house owner, according to the philosophy <i>dalihan natolu</i> , meaning always be respectful (<i>somba</i>) towards <i>hula-hula</i> , persuasive (<i>elek</i>) towards <i>boru</i> , and cautious (<i>manat</i>) towards <i>dongan sabutuha</i> or friends with the same surname | Prosperity honor |
| 3 | <i>Simeol-eol</i> | Front and side wall, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> and <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornament shaped like a tangle of vines, with curved lines swerving out | Symbol of joy and serves to add to the beauty | Prosperity |
| 4 | <i>Simeol-eol masialon</i> | | Its form is similar to <i>gorga simeol-eol</i> , but its motif is made in pairs, facing each other symmetrically | | |
| 5 | <i>Sitagan</i> | Edges of the carved planes on the front and side wall, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | The ornaments resemble small squares | Symbol of humility and being polite in receiving guests | Honor |
| 6 | <i>Sijonggi</i> | Free, may be placed on any wall, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> and <i>Banua Tonga</i> | The ornaments are shaped like a bull | Derived from the word <i>jonggi</i> , meaning symbol of virility, which is well known in the cattle group. The bull who lead the band is known as <i>lumbu jonggi</i> meaning doughtiness that is valued and respected (hero). | Honor |
| 7 | <i>Silintong</i> | Front and side wall, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> and <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Radial lines resembling water ripples | Protector against all disease disturbances, especially for the household | Honor |
| 8 | <i>Simarogung-ogung</i> | Front and side wall, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> and <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornament resembling a gong, when viewed from the movement pattern | Symbol of success and welfare | Prosperity fertility honor |
| 9 | <i>Ipon-pon</i> | Edges of all walls, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> and <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Geometrical ornaments such as triangles, rectangles, squares, circles and half-circles. | Symbol of progress, because the society expects that their offspring or the next generation would be more advanced than their parents. | Prosperity honor |
| 10 | <i>Iran-iran</i> | Front wall, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> and <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Spiral geometrical plants | Adding beauty, showing the beauty and splendor of the house, thus revealing its magnificence | Prosperity honor |
| 11 | <i>Hariara Sundung di langit</i> | The side wall of the back area, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Shaped like plants (like the tree of life). There are birds carrying wheat and cotton branches, as well as reptiles such as snakes | The tree of life and serves as the source of blessing and life, that brings people to constantly remember their creator | Prosperity fertility honor |
| 12 | <i>Hoda-hoda</i> | Side wall, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Image of a man riding a horse and articulating of a customary ceremony | Symbol of magnificence and signifies the home owners were entitled to hold a big ceremonial celebrations. | Prosperity honor |
| 13 | <i>Simata ni ari</i> | Left and right areas of the front wall, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Geometrical form resembling the sun shining in all directions across the universe | Symbol of source of strength and decision maker of life | Prosperity fertility Honor |
| 14 | <i>Desa na ualu</i> | The sidewall of the front and rear end, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Geometrical form resembling of the eight points of the compass | Symbol of astrology which is useful for determining good moments for humans to work such as farming, fishing, building a house, having a party, and so on. | Prosperity |
| 15 | <i>Jengger (jorgom)</i> | Front wall, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> | Ornament resembling a giant creature | Symbol as the protecting guard and repellent of dangers. The giant creature was considered as having strength similar to the gods that is able to resist all temptations from demons and ghosts who devour to enter and harm the house occupants. | Honor |
| 16 | <i>Gaja dompak</i> | Front wall, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornament of a giant that looks like <i>jengger</i> , but is placed at a different location. <i>Gaja dompak</i> was placed the right and left edges whereas <i>jengger (jorgom)</i> was placed in the middle. | Symbol of truthful law enforcement for mankind. The Batak Toba society must uphold the truth implied in customs as <i>agent Mula so Nabolon</i> , the creator of the universe. | Honor |

Table I. Continued.

| No | Pre-iconography stage (textual meaning) | | | Iconography stage (contextual meaning) | Philosophical value |
|----|---|--|--|--|---------------------|
| | Name of ornamental | Placement | Form/Motif | | |
| 17 | <i>Ulu paung</i> | Front wall, <i>Banua Ginjang</i> | Ornament of a giant, half-human half-animal, or a human head with animal horns. | A symbol of strength, greatness, power to protect people (household) from all threats and other human malice or evil spirits (demons from outside) | Honor |
| 18 | <i>Singa-singa</i> | Front wall of the left and right sides, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornament shaped like a noble human face with a tongue extending down to the chin. His head is equipped with a three-winding cloth with his feet kneeling down on his left and right cheeks | Symbol of legal justice and truth (its meaning is similar to Gaja Dompok) | Honor |
| 19 | <i>Boraspati</i> | Front wall, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornament of a small lizard with a two-edged tail | Symbolizes a power to protect human richness. Also the protector of wealth to ensure the multiplication of richness. | Prosperity |
| 20 | <i>Adop-adop (Susu)</i> | Front wall, right above the entrance, <i>Banua Tonga</i> | Ornaments resembling women's breasts, four on the left and four on the right, always accompanied by <i>gorga boraspati</i> | Symbol of fertility and wealth, it is also regarded as the symbol of a mother, as a gracious and merciful figure | Prosperity |

carbon. Based on those three colors, the ornamental decorations of the Batak Toba house were divided into two types: *Gorga Silinggom*, dominantly painted in black (black on planes or *gadu gadu* while the carved lines or *lili* were painted red) and *Gorga Sigaraniapi/Sipalang*, that uses more of red color (the planes or *gadu-gadu* were painted red while the carve lines or *lili* were white).⁵

Besides color, the ornamental decoration of the Batak Toba house has various important motifs, each symbolizing certain meanings. The installation and placements of the ornaments were based on customary rules accepted by the Batak.⁵

Through two consecutive stages of analysis, it has been found that, in terms of form, the ornaments were inspired by phenomenon and objects of nature, in which some have been stylized while others were more imaginative and hence, novel in character. After drawing correlations between the forms analyzed with literature studies and texts on Batak Toba life philosophies, it has been found that these ornaments function as symbols and emblems of the people's unique life visions and believes. They contain rich contextual meanings relating to their land's history, traditions and way of life that has been passed down for many generations. Further investigations revealed that the ornaments contain meanings that reflect the people's supernatural and spiritual beliefs of *Banua Tonga* (middle world) being in a harmonious relationship with *Banua Ginjang* (upper world) and *Banua Toru* (lower world). The contextual interpretations reveal that, as a whole, the ornaments represent the life visions and philosophies of the Batak Toba society: *Hamoraon* (prosperity), *Hagabeon* (fertility), and *Hasangapon* (honor).

Table I above is a summary of the findings of this research, regarding the form and meaning of the Batak Toba house ornamental decorations.

4. CONCLUSION

The various forms of geometrical patterns, flora, fauna, nature and creature or human profiles are representations of the perceptions (mental acceptance) of the Batak Toba society regarding what is beautiful, pleasing and sensually enjoyable. They articulate the concept of *Banua Tonga* (middle world) living in harmony with *Banua Ginjang* (upper world) and *Banua Toru* (lower world), hence reflecting a harmonious vertical and horizontal relationship with their Almighty God (*Mulajadi Nabolon*) and the cosmos. Moreover, the ornamental decorations are representations of the life visions and philosophies of the Batak Toba people: *Hamoraon* (prosperity), *Hagabeon* (fertility), and *Hasangapon* (honor), in which happiness could be found when these three visions are achieved.

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