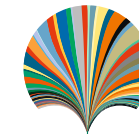


The clan is watching over my shoulder

Ancestor cult and sword art
of the Batak in North-Sumatra

Volume 1





This publication is the companion volume for the exhibition of the same name at the IFICAH Museum of Asian Culture in Hollenstedt-Wohlesbostel, Germany February 2018 to October 2018.

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Text: Dr. Achim G. Weihrauch, Efringen-Kirchen

Short essays:
Karl Mertes, Cologne, Germany
Dr. Udo Kloubert, Erkrath, Germany
Adni Aljunied, Singapore

Photography: IFICAH

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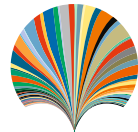
Editing: Kerstin Thierschmidt, Düsseldorf,
Germany

Image editing: Concept33, Ostfildern, Germany

Translation: Richard Freeman, Windach, Germany

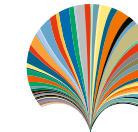
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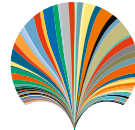
Conservation Care:
Daniela Heckmann, Hollenstedt, Germany



Contents

Foreword Günther Heckmann	8	2.2 The Significance of Metal	123
Foreword Dr. Udo Kloubert	10	2.3 Ancestors, Heroes, Mythical Creatures: the Iconography of the <i>piso</i>	127
Foreword Adni Aljunied	12	2.4 Lizards, Snakes, Horses and ... Humans!	136
Foreword Dr. Achim Weihrauch	16	2.5 The <i>piso</i> as a creative Unit	144
		2.6 Design Features of <i>piso</i>	157
Introduction Karl Mertes		IV <i>Piso</i> - The Forms	162
How I became a Batak	23		
The Batak	24	V The Origins and Cultural-Historical Significance of the Batak Blade Culture	
Founding a family	28	1 Background: Developments in China	177
Durability	35	2 The Dian Culture	181
Introduction <i>Piso</i> Batak: „A blade like a brush stroke“	39	3 Agricultural cycles and Sacrificial Rites	187
I Environment of the Genesis of the <i>piso</i>		4 No Coincidences ...	193
1 North Sumatra - land and people	43	5 Taking Stock: a long story ...	200
2 Early Empires and Centers	46	6 Development trends of the Blade Traditions of Southeast Asia: Summary	203
3 Spheres of Influence and Interdependencies	53	VI Conclusion	210
4 The Batak in a historical Context	59	VII Bibliography	214
5 Early Mentions of the Batak	70	VIII Image credits (page)	217
6 The European View: Warriors, Priests, Cannibals	81		
II The culture of Batak			
1 Of religion and cosmology	84		
2 There from the Beginning			
2.1 North Sumatra in Focus	95		
2.2 Unmistakable Batak: <i>piso, singa, ulos</i>	100		
III <i>Piso</i> - an Art Form of the Batak			
1 The Blade of the <i>piso</i>	111		
2 <i>Piso</i> – an Art Form of the Batak			
2.1 Function and Significance in Times of Change	120		





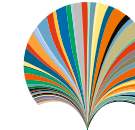
Foreword



The Batak. Far from us in Europe, mostly an unknown quantity. And who of us has been on vacation to Lake Toba in North Sumatra? Although it is the largest volcanic lake on Earth, and three times the size of Lake Constance, most of us haven't even heard of it. Thus, in the exhibition at the Museum of Asian Culture it is important that for once we are able to show visitors where the Batak people live.

They are a proud people who had appeared to have been isolated for a very long period and "discovered" by Europeans for the first time in the mid-19th century. Once discovered and, according to our view of things, proselytized, they were in reality suppressed and robbed, as in so many cases in the history of so-called civilization. For a long time the Batak resisted this kind of appropriation, and even after - or maybe despite - the Christianization, preserved much of what constitutes their character, their history and their culture.

It goes without saying that globalization and the insatiable greed for money and consumables have, in the past few decades, had a considerable and negative influence, particularly in these regions. The forests of Sumatra were cleared, tribes were driven out, nature plundered. Lake Toba is over-fished, the water is increasingly contaminated by excessive fish farming. Not surprisingly, much of tradition has been lost. On the other hand, there are also local people who are trying to draw on these very traditions in order to prevent everything from being lost.



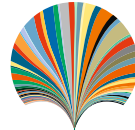
With this publication, and the exhibition associated with it, the foundation IFICAH endeavours to contribute at least a small part to bringing the culture of the Batak people into the public eye for a certain period of time. This is a public that is massively oversaturated, but perhaps because of this is also open to a topic that does not always follow the mainstream. We are grateful that we are able to illustrate the culture of the Batak with a number of very good, in some cases very rare and important objects. Thanks to the generous cooperation with private collections from home and abroad, we have achieved an exhibition that shows both the aesthetics of the objects and the fascination of the distinctive craftsmanship.

Dr. Weihrauch, using his research and his experience, has written a work that sheds light on old rumours and, above all, focuses on the topic of the culture of the blade for the first time, and which as a specialist reference literature will certainly become recognised as a standard by the experts.

I would like to thank all those who contributed to the realization of this project with their financial professional and spiritual support, the assistance with the construction of the exhibition and the production of the publication and, not least, the lenders. Although thanking those involved is my duty, my gratitude comes from the bottom of my heart and the implementation of the Batak project has provided me with a great deal of pleasure.

In the run-up to this project, I was repeatedly asked why the IFICAH Foundation cares so much about the Batak. And the answer is as short as it is simple: Because they deserve it!

Günther Heckmann
Executive Board Director IFICAH

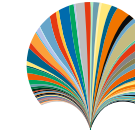


The clan is watching over my shoulder - Ancestor cult and sword art of the Batak in North Sumatra



This is the title of the exhibition in the IFICAH Museum of Asian Art and of the publication, which you, honored reader, have in your hands. The original settlement areas of the Batak, a people belonging to the Austronesian language family, were the mountain ranges and their foothills in the northwest of the island of Sumatra with the extensive Lake Toba at its center. For many decades the Batak have been the subject of the special attention of ethnographers and ethnologists. The reasons for this originate from the European viewpoint of their having a culture protected by its seclusion (it was only around 1900 that the Batak lands were brought under Dutch rule) as well as the alien phenomena of their way of life, such as the second burial, head hunting and – a matter repeatedly cited - ritual cannibalism.

The worship of the ancestors is a fundamental aspect of the immaterial culture of the Batak, whose cosmology was based on the idea of a tripartite division of the world into upper, middle and underworld. The ancestors, who the Batak trace back to the legendary ancestor Si Raja Batak, represent for the individual the binding link to the creation myth of the people and to his own social position in the family and society. This society is divided into clans (*marga*), often comprising of hundreds of members. The social intercourse within and between clans is governed by certain traditional rules, especially in relation to marriages. Karl Mertes, Chairman of the German-Indonesian Society in Cologne, gives us a captivating impression of his personal



experience. Although the Batak are nowadays largely Christian, ancestor worship is still manifest, as demonstrated by the monumental tombs in the landscape around Lake Toba.

The material culture of houses, carvings, sculptures, musical instruments and metal-ware is also partially unique in the Southeast Asian island region and bears a close relationship to the religious and social aspects of the Batak. An extremely important aspect of this figurative culture is the *piso* blade weapon, in the form of daggers, swords and sabers. In addition to their function as weapons they are a patrilinear element of the male as well as a status symbol and they serve as an indicator of the social structure. In marriages, they play an important role as exchange gifts that symbolize the male element, while the female element is symbolized by artistic textiles in traditional colors and patterns.

There have been several excellent exhibitions of Batak culture. In these, however, there was only partial reference to the extraordinarily interesting bladed weapons of the Batak, with their blades like a brush stroke and their grips in the form of an ancestral figure, who serves to provide a balance to the forces of the blade. It is a great pleasure for me that the IFICAH Foundation, in its fourth exhibition on the traditional culture of the Southeast Asian and East Asian region, has addressed this hitherto neglected topic in its museum in Hollenstedt near Hamburg and has been able to present a

collection of objects, most of which have never previously been on display. IFICAH is extremely happy that it could again gain the expertise of Dr. Achim Weihrauch for the introductory article on the history and development of the *piso* as well as for the description of the objects. Here he makes it clear for us that the Batak were by no means as isolated as has often been reported.

You can do a good deed by spreading the word: and let me not forget to mention at this juncture, that IFICAH and the exhibitions organized by this foundation are purely privately funded and receive no public subsidies.

I wish you great pleasure in viewing and reading about the exhibition,

Horas!

Dr. Udo Kloubert
Member of the Board IFICAH



„An insiders view...“

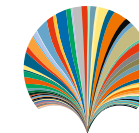
It was in the early 1990s, while taking a bus from Surabaya to Denpasar, Bali, that I had my first "scary" encounter with a Batak.

The bus broke down after about half way through, and while getting off, my local cousin who was with me said; "It's going to be a long journey to Denpasar".

Usually it takes at least one hour for a replacement bus to arrive, but only after about half an hour, we were all happy to see one coming. As the bus stopped, out came the driver; a typical loud and bold Batak.

My cousin was very pleased at seeing this, as many there are aware that the Batak bus drivers are known to be very fast. As we boarded the bus, others were already having friendly chats with the driver, all anticipating a fast leg of the journey from hereon. Yes he was speeding, but he is also clearly an experienced driver.

It was about only half an hour on the road when passengers at the back were informing that they are smelling some burning coming from the engine behind them. The driver just ignored it and boldly continued on. Even after some smoke was seen coming into the bus, his response was....."Tenang...Tenang. Nggak ada apa-apa". Relax...there's nothing there. Eventually a small flame broke out, and as he slowed down and stopped, thankfully it also somehow stopped the flames.



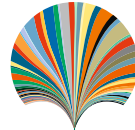
Disembarking for the second time, my cousin repeated his words with a bigger sigh to it.

"It's going to be a long journey to Denpasar". The Batak driver was still in "command" of things. "Relax... relax... there's nothing there" he said; trying to fix the engine, but it was obvious that he is a good driver, but sadly know not much about the engine. He gave up after a while, and went out looking for the nearest phone. (At that time the hand phone is science fiction).

After about half an hour, a traffic police car arrived, and officers came out and asked for the driver, who somehow had disappeared and never to be seen again.

And as we waited for more than one hour before another replacement bus to come, my cousin repeated his words again: "It's going to be a long journey to Denpasar", and credited the bold, gutsy and brave Batak driver, who saw the opportunity to make a quick buck by renting a cheap bus to take the passengers to Denpasar, and later claiming high compensation from the bus companies.

The stereotyping of Bataks as being in the mould of the above driver has been the norm in Indonesia for a long while. In many television drama serials, many Batak actor usually plays the role of the bad guy. A Batak lawyer will take on a case that all others give up upon.



How this reputation came about is not from just one factor alone, and this book's presentation of its artefacts and details, instigates the reader to look closely, and from a wider view of history, hypothesise for themselves; and realize why "they became what they had to become".

The following are excerpts from the mythological references of the Batak existence and culture. A bit of compressions have been made to shorten a long story, but the fundamental remains.

At the beginning of time there was only the sky and great sea beneath it. In the sky lived the gods and the sea was the home of a mighty underworld dragon Naga Padoha.

At the beginning of creation stands the god Mula Jadi Na Bolon. His origin remains uncertain and lives in the upper world which is usually thought of as divided into seven levels. His three sons, Batara Guru, Mangalabulan and Soripada were born from eggs laid by a hen, and fertilized by Mula Jadi. He also has three daughters whom he gives as wives for his three sons, of which one of the daughters was not happy with Batara Guru, Sideak Parujar. She fled from her intended husband from the sky to the middle world which was still just a watery waste. She refuses to go back but feels very unhappy. Out of compassion Mula Jadi sends his granddaughter a handful of earth so that she can find somewhere to live, and she spread out this earth.

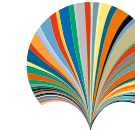
The earth had been spread out on the head of Naga Padoha, the dragon of the underworld, who attempted to get rid of it by rolling around. Whenever Naga Padoha twists, an earthquake occurs. The earth was softened by water and threatened to be destroyed, but with the help of Mula Jadi and by her own cunning, Sideak Parudjar was able to overcome the dragon. She thrust a sword into the body of Naga Padoha and laid him in an iron block.

Batara Guru and Sideak Parujar were wedded, and had twins of different sexes, and mankind is the result of this. The couple settle on Pusuk Buhit, a volcano on the western shore of Lake Toba, and found the village of Si Anjur Mulamula. The mythological ancestor of the Batak, Si Raja Batak is one of their grandchildren.

Marga is a term in Batak societies referring to a clan name in Batak or Toba mythology, all *marga* are traced to the common ancestor of "Si Raja Batak" (The King of the Batak).

Fast forward a couple centuries, and there are now more than 450 *margas* presently in records, spreading as far as west Malaysia, as well as Singapore. And with colonization and independence, though not in many numbers, they had also migrated into the few big developing Javanese/Balinese cities.

The embracing of Islam in the region played a part in the evolution of the Batak's race, whereby some accepted the faith and evolved,

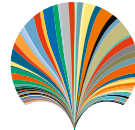


just like elsewhere in the region, and some "hard cores" that never did accept Hinduism nor Buddhism. Always a "touchy" subject when it comes to the spread of Islam in the region, as to when and from where exactly it came. Without delving in too much into this, this publication does stress on its influences and importance, but not compromising on the focus of the Batak culture at hand.

It is understandable for scholars and enthusiasts to focus on the great Majapahit empire when going back into the history of Indonesia and the rest of the archipelago. The abundance of references from the Majapahit empire and the lack of it with empires pre-dating it, makes this publication's noteworthy work more meaningful. One has to take many factors into consideration when going back in history, and this publication's factoring in of numerous events that occurred, which is most noteworthy. Whether it is geographical or language or others, the meticulous way things are being "rolled out" is truly a reference in itself.

Hats off again to the research done to locate, and delicately link the rather recently exposed Chinese references of the region pre-dating Majapahit. Truly valuable indeed, and can be a stepping stone for others to explore into further.

Adni Aljunied
Member of the Board IFICAH



Ancestor cult and blade art - how do these fit together?

Within the framework of my collaboration with IFICAH, I have the great privilege of having been given access to a selection of art and cultural objects, some of them spectacular, from different cultural aspects and to be able to carry out scientific and curatorial work with these objects. The exhibitions and publications produced by IFICAH, in which these objects have allowed an interested public to get a closer look at them, have three main objectives: to promote understanding and interest for other cultures in general, to convey the inherent aesthetics of material forms of expression, and to inspire a different perception through a thematic approach on a sound scientific basis and in helping to develop a keen eye. This enables much to be understood about the supposedly "curious" or "peculiar" that results from our scepticism towards what is foreign to us, a feature which is common to all people. For the opportunity to participate in this mission, I would like to thank all those who make this foundation work possible, but above all Mrs. and Mr. Daniela and Günther Heckmann, from the bottom of my the heart (and not wait until the end of this article or this book).

The title of the publication in front of you brings together two topics that seem to have little thematic overlap at first glance. What have blades, or blade objects, which form an integral part of the object categories presented and discussed here, to do with ancestors? In other words, what have the small sculptures that often, but not always, adorn the grips of

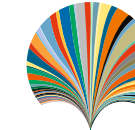
these blade objects to do with the blades in the narrower sense? The "Western" interested party (be it a collector, a scientist or an art lover or, at best, everything in one person) also wants to know exactly which detail of the figures bear what contents or statements. Why does this grip figure have a topknot and the other not? What does the hand posture of some figures mean? What is this strange being on which the figure is sitting, and why are the figures in this often bizarre concentration arranged one on top of the other or in rows? It is a fact that, in the very first approaches to the theme of Batak art, to which the blade objects obviously also belong, one will be confronted in the relevant literature, or on the Internet, with the terms "ancestor" or "ancestor cult". Sometimes the figures have an almost Polynesian appearance; they sometimes seem almost like miniature editions of the famous moai on the Easter Island. The distinctive features with accentuated cheekbones, the majestic upright posture, the indifferent gaze, and the strangely entranced smile shown by some of the most succinct figures has something sublime, ethereal, aloof, clearly suggesting an other-worldliness.

As the objects were brought together from the various private collections as part of the preparation for the exhibition and publication, it soon became apparent that the details on the grips are to be found in almost identical form on the "magic horns" and "priest staffs" as well as other elements of the material Batak culture. The question inevitably arose: Why

in the world are they to be found on knives (Batak: *piso*, Indonesian/Malay: *pisau*)? And why are these characters created and arranged in the manner they are? And why are the characters so important to understanding the blade culture of the Batak? This publication is dedicated to these questions, and other issues.

For a Batak living traditionally, (incidentally Batak is a term used even as far back as Marco Polo in his travelogues as "Battaer" for the northern Sumatran dwellers and which he had gleaned from Arabian merchants) the explanation would have been obvious in many cases. The figure represents this or that person engaged in this or that action. It is no longer know who the figure was, because although the Batak have their own writing system and have been making books for centuries, the texts they contain are not historical, descriptive or chronical in nature, but are mostly concerned with instructions for rituals, healing processes and similar - processes that are important in everyday life and always have a practical value. What you will not find in any Batak book is an ethnological-sociological explanation like, "The ancestors or deceased relatives are important to the living because they ...". This "because" is simply self-explanatory and self-evident, in the same way as the question, as to why the figures are to be found on knife handles, medicine containers (like the "magic horns"), and priests' staffs, need no explanation.

Why ancestors are important to the living should also be clear to us. What our ancestors have done within their environment has made everything what is today. This "today" is perceived entirely positively within traditional societies that operate cyclically (rather than on the basis of over exploitation), and is a condition worth preserving, and this by bonding to to the wellspring of this state. Past and future are not perceived linearly, but cyclically, because "becoming" and "decaying" are mutually dependent. All primordial creation processes, including procreation, birth and growth of all life forms (and also of the land as the "mother of all things") only make sense if it is understood as an unfinished, constantly renewing process. This world view, which is or should be as valid for "us" as for the Batak, explains why the representation of ancestors, i. e. the relatives embodying the family (post mortem), are ultimately the manifestation of the extant family. In addition, the ancestors in our perception, thus also in our "reality", are not "gone", but in the hereafter, as long as you remember them - that too is an indisputable fact. And everything that happens, for better or for worse (which means harming the living), comes from the hereafter, because there is no such thing as a "rational" explanation for the soulfulness of things or for the starting of processes. Consequently, this means that the ancestors can influence the present-world.



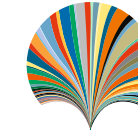


Ancestors are relatives. To be rooted, to know where one comes from, to belong to a certain tradition is of fundamental importance to all people. The ancestors embody their own origin and identity. In traditional societies, one defines one's identity and personality not only from one's individual activities but from one's position in the community. However, this community is not only made up of the living, but also of the ancestors of the living and the as yet unborn. The worship of the forefathers or the ancestors by the offspring is effectively a community-creating and strengthening force: ancestors are the common reference point, and as role models they embody the common values that hold the community together. Ancestors, therefore, not least fulfil an important role model function. With the example of their lives they set the framework for wrong and right in the community in which they are worshipped. It can also be formulated as follows: A community, by worshipping its ancestors, makes clear the values and standards that apply in it.

Almost every ethnic group has means to visualize ancestors with the help of creative techniques (e.g. sculptures, masks, knife handles, etc.). Mythical ancestors who are considered the founders of a lineage or clan are important to the whole lineage community. Sacrifices for the ancestors are regular commitments that cement the community together. These ceremonies express the collective feeling that the ancestor lives with and in the midst of his descendants.

The ceremonies directed towards the ancestors usually are reflected in the social behaviour towards the living elders. Also very common is the concept of rebirth in alternating generations (e.g. the grandfather is reincarnated in the grandson), often made concrete by the giving of names. Ancestors are also considered to be those who, after death, have achieved a status in which they are closer to the divine than those still-living and can mediate in both directions. In this they are similar to saints - for example in the Catholic understanding. The concerns of the believers are transmitted through the ancestors to the deity a matter which this is not the responsibility of just any living person, but of the respective chiefs (priests, clan chiefs) representing their community. Conversely, the ancestors effectively form the channel for the divine life force which must be given to the believers and which is vital in a world where they see themselves threatened by spirits, witches, and other spiritual forces (the causes of disease, hunger, storm, etc.). A good relationship with the ancestors is therefore essential to life and is reasonably regarded as the centrepiece of traditional religiosity.

According to the traditional view, ancestors have a wide range of possibilities making contact with the living and to make their will known. These include supernatural phenomena as well as the interpretation of natural events. Appearances of "mighty" animals, such as large snakes or crocodiles (both common in piso grips), are often interpreted as encounters



with an ancestor. Also, calamities that can affect you in life, such as illness, drought, bad weather, etc., are often interpreted as a punishment of the ancestors for wrongdoings. These interpretations show that the influence of the ancestors is seen as ambivalent - helpful in times of crisis, but also punitive, where norms of the community are violated thus endangering the. All in all, the influence of the ancestors is therefore seen as mainly positive, in the sense of both building and preserving the community.

Piso as a "platform for the representation of ancestors" are a link between the past, that is, the world of the ancestors, and the living. Thus, as individual manifestations within the material culture they are a "hot potato". In addition there is their spiritual and psychological significance, since as a steel, hardened blade, they embody unity, strength and purposefulness. As a last-resort self-defence tool, they potentiate the holder's physical capabilities, convey a feeling of resilience, and thus provide a sense of assuredness.

Piso are therefore important gifts among the Batak. The fact is that *piso* is still a name for significant gifts of all kinds between the families or clans, even for gifts of money (including by online transfer), and for exchanges at family alliances of all kinds. They embody the male element, as cloths, *ulos*, embody the feminine side. That is, figurative *piso* directly embody the continuity of the family by forming a connection

with the departed relatives who "then" themselves did the same, thus guaranteeing the existence of the living, just as the living form the ties to the future through their marriages and bonds. For the family is everything and is the only thing which is ultimately of importance, the only thing which is influenced by adhering to the *adat*, the customary law, and the only thing which is constant in the turmoil of life.

Dr. Achim G. Weihrauch
Advisory Board IFICAH



Medicine horn naga marsarang. Toba-Batak.



How I became a Batak

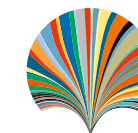
"Hereby I give witness that you have been joined as man and woman as a married couple" - so said the father of the bride, after he had put a traditional cloth, a *ulos*, around our shoulders. In the hall, the numerous guests applauded and repeatedly called out "Horas - Horas!", the traditional Batak form of greeting and congratulation. Then my wife and I were draped with many more *ulos* by the guests to strengthen and to confirm the bond for life.

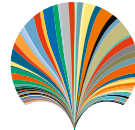
I am a German and a Catholic, my wife is from Indonesia and is a member of the Batak people in North Sumatra and she is a Protestant. We had already been officially married as well as in a church and had two children. In order to further honour our mutual relationship and provide it a special status, we had decided - while living in Germany - to take this step of recognition of, and involvement in, the Batak society. By doing this we were finally expressing respect for the tradition and respect for the ancestors in the homeland of my wife.

The rules of the Batak and the family environment are far more complex (and complicated) than we are familiar with in Europe's secular and rational West. Interpersonal cohesion and family rituals follow traditional rules, which are the basis for a prosperous life and one focussed on the well-being of the community, which organizing it accordingly.

The traditional rules and laws are embraced within the term *adat*, which we would call "tribal

law". Groups central for the preservation and the revival of the tradition are the clans - called *marga*. In our case it was about the connection between the *marga* Simanjuntak and Pardede.





The Batak

The Batak are considered to be an ancient Indonesian people. They live in the North of the island Sumatra in the region around Lake Toba. This inland lake – three times bigger as Lake Constance - is not only the largest lake in Indonesia, but also in Southeast Asia. It is also considered to be the largest volcanic crater in the world. About 70,000 years ago, a fire-breathing mountain exploded, spewing out material which can be found over the whole globe. The caldera filled up with water and another explosion created the island of Samosir within the lake. Its size and the isolated location high in the mountains may have contributed to the fact that Lake Toba acquired a strong mythical and spiritual role in the daily lives of the inhabitants and still continues to do so today.

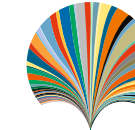
Speaking of dimensions: With approximately 445,000 km², the world's sixth largest island, Sumatra, is significantly larger than Germany with its approximate 357,000 km², but with around 50 million inhabitants it has a smaller population than Germany with approximately 80 million. The equator crosses the island which has a length of more than 1800 km. It is home to one of the largest rainforest areas of the Southeast Asian tropics. The Leuser National Park in North Sumatra was set up to control the wild, ruthless and mostly illegal deforestation of the primal forest and thus to establish a sanctuary for, among others, orangutans, rhinos, tigers, elephants and crocodiles. Nowhere else is there a comparable habitat and settlement region with the aim of preserving flora and fau-

na in the face of climate change and the radical destruction for profit by human hands of the natural habitat. Since about 1980, Sumatra's rainforest has been halved in size! Sumatra's rainforests were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2004 as a natural monument. Frequent disasters characterize the forces of nature in response to the tectonic plate shifts. Well-known are the eruption of the Krakatau volcano at the end of the 19th century, the effects of which were felt until Europe, the catastrophic tsunami of Christmas 2004 and most recently the Sinabung volcano eruption.

The Batak are divided into five groups or tribes - Toba, Karo, Simalungun, who are largely Christians, and the Angkola and Mandailing who are mainly Muslim. In all, the Batak number some six million. The Toba Batak form the largest and at the same time most widely known group. Last but not least, the proselytizing to Protestant Christianity (primarily by the Rhenish Mission from Bethel and Barmen) may have contributed to the fact that Batak people were able to achieve a good basic education and grow up in stable health. My *marga* Pardede, my family, belongs to the Toba Batak.

Here I'll squeeze in a brief excursion into the traditions and everyday life of the Batak, in order to provide a better understanding of the living conditions.

The rich fertile volcanic soil is the basis for high-yield agriculture. In the coastal regions fishing



is practiced. In the course of the Dutch colonial period large plantations for rubber, tobacco, tea, coffee, cocoa were created especially in the north. At the same time the first oil wells were discovered in the South. Nowadays palm oil is the central crop for industrial use - and is also the cause of ruthless deforestation of the rainforest. This has also meant that habitats of ancient indigenous ethnic groups are affected or destroyed.

For a long time, Sumatra was known as the "Gold Island" because the precious metal was already extracted as early as the Middle Ages. The mineral resources could make the inhabitants rich; in fact, however, it is mostly the international industrial concerns who are the beneficiaries of the depletion of the natural resources.

Since the Batak lived isolated in the highlands for a long time, agriculture (rice) and livestock were their primary source of income. Today, tourism provides an increasingly important basis for an economic livelihood.

In the first millennium CA, alongside nature religions, Buddhism and Hinduism influenced Sumatra. Recent research shows that at that time even the highlands had trade relations reaching at the least as far as the coastal regions and also beyond Sumatra. As a consequence, foreign beliefs were also known there.

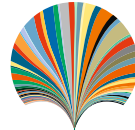
The Batak originally developed a strong ancestral culture within a patriarchal society. According

to traditional legends, all Batak descend from Si Raja Batak, who came to Earth from Mount Pusuk Buhit by Lake Toba.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Protestant Rhenish Mission has mainly been involved in the Christianization of the Batak. Today, the majority are followers of the Batak Church Huria Kristen Batak Protestan founded in 1917; There are also Catholics and Muslims. A small group of the Batak cling to the belief in Si Singamangaraja as the Messiah, the Parmalim. On the one hand, they reflect the traditional beliefs and practices, notably those of the Toba Batak and on the other hand their activities stem from the time of anti-colonialism as a counter-movement to proselytizing by Europeans.

Characteristic of their culture are the rules and consequences of ancestor worship, which is reflected in many rituals and even when belonging to a religion these retain a high significance. Expressions of this are the regulations from birth through marriage and family founding to the reburial of the bones of deceased ancestors. Gondang music (with drums, gongs, flutes and two-stringed lutes), songs and the classic dance tor-tor are lively expressions of highly active traditions. A special role is played by the Opera Batak, which embodies both entertainment and socially critical elements.

Characteristic for the style of living and working of the Batak is the house construction with the conspicuously curved roofs and elaborate car-



vings. In general, the stilt house is divided into three levels: Below it is the area for livestock, in the middle (accessible via a stairway from the outside) the large undivided living and working space for the inhabitants and above - under the roof - the place of the ancestors.

A special feature of their textile art is the hand-woven *ulos* cloths. They are about 60 - 70 cm wide and up to 200 cm long. Highly elaborate and artistic, expressive and illustrative patterns are woven into the cloths and, in some cases, embroidered. They usually tell a story that can be understood through the knowledge of the motifs and colours. The *ulos* accompany the Batak from birth to marriage, through to death and burial.

The craftsmanship and skill involved in their making, as well as the use of knives, swords and other weapons are evidenced clearly by this catalogue and the exhibition.

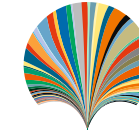
Early reports of the Batak, such as that of Marco Polo, mention headhunting and cannibalism. The German scientist Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn (the "Humboldt of Java") was active in Sumatra from 1840 to 1842 as a medical officer of the United East India Company (VOC) of the Dutch colonial power, where he carried out scientific and geographical studies and also explored the "Batta countries". He, in common with subsequent missionaries, also reported cannibalism. It is probably undisputed that the Batak in the past practiced a so-called "court cannibalism"

to capture the soul and power of those killed following serious crimes.

Legends and unsubstantiated stories in the 19th century helped to demonize the Batak. Another interpretation emphasizes that the Batak wanted to frighten the foreign invaders with supposed headhunting, with the intention that they should stay away from and not venture into this inhospitable and dangerous region. Whatever the case, to this day, tourism campaigns flourish by serving up such gruesome stories.

After a number of scientific expeditions, a continuing contact with Europeans was established by missionaries about 150 years ago. The Dutch were interested in economic gain from plantations in the lowlands and in the coastal area, but tolerated and encouraged the activities of the missionaries in order to indirectly consolidate their power and influence. The Dutch in the region around Lake Toba did not profit directly in the economic sense. They could, however, guarantee the "manpower" of the Batak. Otherwise, the colonial interests were centred more on the huge plantations in northern Sumatra.

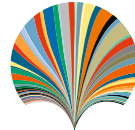
The work of the predominantly Protestant missionaries from Germany had very "beneficial" consequences: The education and health care above all have helped the Batak to a prominent role. An above-average number of lawyers, doctors, military personnel and scientists come



from North Sumatra and contribute to the social development of the Republic of Indonesia. The commemoration of the actions of the missionary societies since the 19th century is, among others, a cause for us to be reminded of the connections with Germany.

Alongside an increasing industrialization (palm oil, fish farming in Lake Toba, mineral resources), tourism plays a major role. Lake Toba is a significant tourism project in Indonesia.





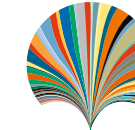
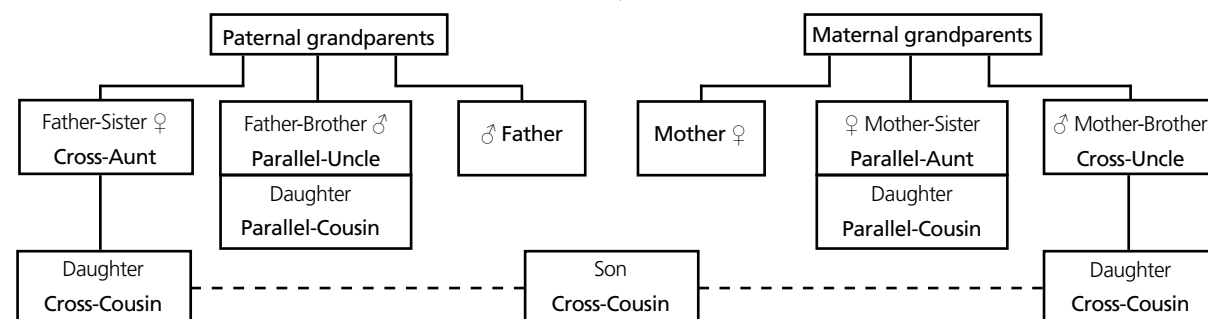
Founding a family

Originally marriage was based on the agreement of two extended families - the *marga*, also known as the clan. The bride and groom are bearers of a rational and functional decision-making process and as individuals not questioned about the degree of their affection for one another.

After my wife and I had decided to perform a traditional Batak wedding, I was primarily involved in learning a great deal. How do we define the responsibilities and dependencies within the extended families, what role do we have as a married couple, how should we behave and what do we need to do to ensure a smooth ceremony?

When we informed our relatives and friends in Germany we were going to perform a third version of our vows, there was a lot of interest and expression of the desire to be present. Thus, in August 1988, a group of about twenty people came together, who were then all present in Sumatra as my family members, as members of my German *marga*.

The first official step was my acceptance into a Batak *marga*. For this I had to be "adopted". This step - as well as the following - are to be seen within the context of traditional and spiritual processes. The application and recognition of the necessary rituals are an expression of social position. They are not a part of the judicial legal framework of state legislation.



My father-in-law's sister had two daughters - thus the family lacked a son in the sense of the classically patrilineal succession. And so it was fitting that I was available as a future "son and heir". Cross cousin marriage in this ethnology calls this relationship of the groom the mother-brother-daughter. In fact, we are not blood relatives, but we fit into a genealogical worldview.

In the left side diagram only two daughters of the four children of the parents are cross-related to the son and therefore interesting as a spouse:

"In the centre of the arrangement is the nuclear family of father, mother and son, and alongside are the siblings of the parents with their daughters, the cousins of the son; The son is in turn, as their cross-cousin, the coveted spouse for his two cross-cousins, whereby, depending on the culture, he will favour the daughter of his father's sister or his mother's brother. "

[Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/crosscousine_marriage]

So the Pardede as adoptive parents took me in place of a son. This ceremony was symbolized, in a manner of speaking, by a rice baptism in which my new parents blessed me - and my wife too - with a handful of rice on my head. Present were our two daughters, my German relatives and friends who had made the journey, representatives of Simanjuntak and Pardede, a women's church choir, the pastor

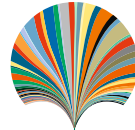
(as an attentive observer) and many inquisitive neighbours. A large group where all wanted to witness how a new member was accepted into the Batak society.

The solidarity and interdependence of the Batak clans are defined by a triangular relationship, *Dalihan na tolu*:

- the bridal party (*hula-hula*), for us the *marga* Simanjuntak
- the grooms party (*paranak / dongan sabutuha*), the *marga* Pardede
- the extensive group of relatives of the bridegrooms side (*anak parboru*)

This constellation maintains a close family cohesion and secures material, social, ideal and spiritual relationships and identity. At family celebrations - especially in the case of marriages - each side assumes alternating roles which cut across generations. Marriage within a *marga* is forbidden. Many Batak can name their ancestors as far back as the 15th or 16th generation.

Three stones that are used as a fireplace for preparing food are an appropriate symbol for the stability of such a triangular relationship. More recently it is often replaced by an iron tripod as a place to cook - and indeed cooking pots are more stable on them than on four legs. This philosophy *Dalihan na tolu* (the three stone hearth) forms the backbone of both the relationships within the extended family



and also as an attitude towards life aimed at ensuring material and social security.

Following the adoption, the bride price negotiations took place because the Simanjuntak cede their daughter only for a (symbolic) dowry to the Pardede. Representatives of both *marga* led the negotiations using eloquent speeches and lively discussions. Even if all participants were already aware of the irrefutable result, they nonetheless adhered to the rules of the exchange of arguments. The two-day long encounters were mostly conducted in the local Batak language, which I could not follow, although I speak Indonesian. The sequence of the upcoming festivities was also arranged during this process.

The "wedding ceremony" finally took place within the framework of a great celebration. The Raja *adat*, the master of ceremonies from the bride's side, led the day long procedures. The evening before, a buffalo had been slaughtered, and the preparations for the guests' supper continued through the night. Our fellow travellers from Germany meanwhile were instructed in the basic steps of the *tor-tor*, the traditional step dance.

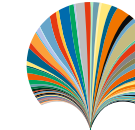
After the elaborate process of dressing in traditional costumes (with *ulos* and jewelry) and with the arrival of my wife and myself the ceremony could begin. To start off a *gondang* (orchestra in the traditional formation with

drums, gongs, flute and small lute) played and the visitors danced in ever changing constellations. The female guests of the bridal party contributed rice. They bore the gifts on their heads in wicker baskets in a long procession into the hall, thus supporting the *marga* of the groom, because they were responsible for the preparation of food.

After one or two hours of this colourful and spirited start, the newlyweds were placed on a stage in the hall, and thereafter could watch the ceremony unfold from there (such an elevated position is not common because it is originally assumed that everyone meets sitting on the floor (this was a concession to the style of modern festive function rooms). The central event was the gift of certain parts of the buffalo, Jambar, to the various representatives of the *margas*.

This custom is based on fixed allocations, according to the status of family members. For us it was surprising that despite traditional rules of the meat allocation, there was still sufficient reason for heated discussions as to who then was actually to be given which part of the buffalo.

Since the costs of festivities are shared between the *marga* – according to rules which I couldn't understand - the subsequent collection and distribution of cash was again accompanied by a major effort and many debates. The rituals of exchange between the parties of the giver and

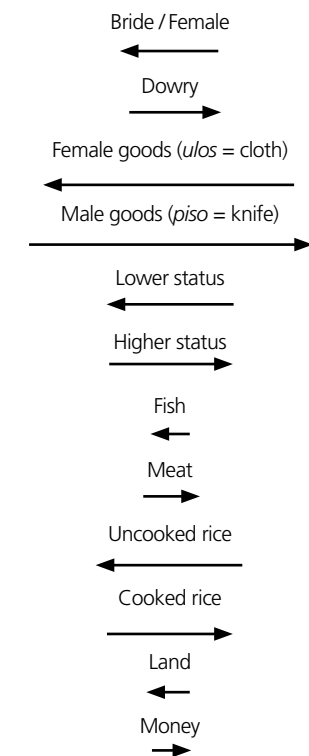


the receiver of the bride are predetermined: at its' core is the transfer of *ulos* and *piso*, as well as fish and meat, etc.

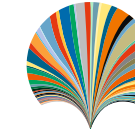
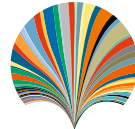
In well-presented speeches it was finally stated that the *margas'* decision to join the bride and groom was in order. Again and again this was confirmed by "horas" shouts and the wellmeaning "ematutu", "so be it!". The guests as witnesses of the marriage, as well as the ancestors, were now duly informed that a new family had been founded.

Group receiving the bride
boru – wife receivers

Group giving the bride
hula-hula – wife givers



(after: Edward M. Bruner, *Commentaries Exchange Theory and Integration*, Honolulu 1981)



My wife and I were invited to a central place in the hall. The bride's father then put a shawl around the shoulders of my wife and me, thus confirming and strengthening us as spouses under the umbrella of a *ulos*. Thereafter we were draped in innumerable *ulos*, each branch of the family being thus included and in this way testifying his consent and our belonging.

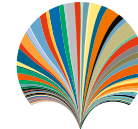
After that, the importance of celebrations was again emphasized in extensive speeches. And finally, the *gondang* orchestra struck up again and all the guests joined in a large *tor-tor* dance. In the evening, when I wanted to check whether there was a certificate, an entry in an official directory, or the like I was met by astonished questioning: "Why a document, a paper? Anyone can write anything on it. You have nearly a thousand witnesses here who can testify to your marriage and that's enough surely?" Well, such an obvious argument may seem strange to us Germans - but here it had a resounding and convincing effect. At the same time, it demonstrated the appreciation of and respect for traditional commitments.

Now it was time for the "young family" Pardede to start the honeymoon. In part our manifold accompaniment of German relatives and friends went on an independent tour of Indonesia, and in part accompanied us. The tour led first to the house of my adoptive parents, to once again demonstrate our thanks and respect. And then we went to the legendary Batak sites by Lake Toba to trace the origins and traditions of, as

well as to visit, the ancestral ceremonial and burial grounds. By the way, thanks to reliable word-of-mouth propaganda and some press coverage, it was not all that surprising that we were greeted like old friends ("These are the Pardede who have just celebrated an *adat* wedding").

The whole ceremonial lasted a good week there, although there had previously been appointments and meetings, defining the rituals (regarding adoption – bride price negotiations - wedding ceremony) and involving a process of several days.

Since then we are seen in Indonesia - especially in the Batakland - as Pardede. In Germany, this has no official meaning and is not recorded anywhere here.



Durability

According to traditional Batak law, we now belong to the *marga* Pardede, and our children also belong to this *marga*, as born Pardede so to speak. My wife is born Simanjuntak and had to leave her *marga* to become a Pardede, but continues to call herself Boru Simanjuntak. Our two daughters thus bear the name "Boru Pardede" - and thus their origin and belonging is clarified.

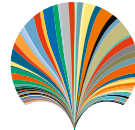
To the direct family of my adoptive parents together with my newly-won sisters, we maintain a relaxed relationship. With the death of my adoptive father, however, I had to assume certain responsibilities. I travelled with my wife to Sumatra at short notice, so that I could attend the memorial service as "family head". This gesture is a natural consequence of the honour I had been extended by being accepted into the *marga* Pardede. The meeting with the extended family for the funeral lasted for a whole day. By doing so I was able to deliver the necessary respect for the ancestors. Had my adoptive Pardede parents now had no male offspring, then the custom offers a way out: An almost human-sized wooden figure is present at the dances of the funeral - *si gale-gale*. This dressed effigy can be "animated" by strings like a puppet. It represents the non-existent son and smooths the way for the soul of the deceased.

Our story is almost over here, but it still has a sequel. Our youngest daughter has decided to have a Batak *adat* wedding with her husband

as well. My German son-in-law will therefore be adopted by the *marga* of my Indonesian brother-in-law. And so the wheel turns full circle, and the recognition, appreciation and continuation of the Batak traditions are guaranteed. My grandchildren will then also bear the name of a Batak *marga*. Thus, we live with the ancestors and shape the intercultural dialogue through a preservation of traditions across continents and with the promise of bearing fruits in the future.

From the point of view of the future bridal couple - they informed their friends about the upcoming *adat* ceremony - their explanation reads as follows:

"We live within the family tradition of the Batak and are connected to their culture. For us this means that we have an obligation to pass this culture, and the rules of the special *adat* ceremony on to our descendants." This is how Timo Lipfert, a native German, responds to the question of why he concerns himself with the Batak culture and wants to take part in an *adat* ceremony. The fact is, the people of the Batak in North Sumatra have special rules for regulating social and family life. Timo is married to Sonja, who was born thirty years ago in Cologne as the daughter of Karl Mertes and Lena Simanjuntak. Sonja can also be described as a "born Pardede", because her father Karl Mertes was adopted, after his marriage with the Batak Lena Simanjuntak, into a Batak clan / *marga* - namely Pardede. The *marga* Pardede adopted the native German because one of his



wife's aunts married into the *marga* Pardede. This aunt of Lena - Karl's "adoptive mother" - has two daughters, one of whom has married into the *marga* Silalahi.

Timo has agreed to being accepted by Pardi Silalahi into his *marga*. This process of adoption into a Batak family clan is a prerequisite for a traditional Batak wedding. The linking of symbolic adoption with the traditional wedding rite is the symbolic endorsement of the vows between Timo and Sonja; it is not a formal legal process, but expresses the recognition of and respect for traditional values and rites in a cross-cultural and intergenerational understanding.

The couple already have a daughter, Kaliah and suggested to Sonja's parents then, that they too would like to marry, in the second generation, following the Batak rituals. They have known each other for many years and want to use this ceremony to bridge the gap between different ideas of life, virtues, traditions and ideals. This includes, among others, the responsibility of relationships within the family, but beyond that also the traditional wedding procedures. "We want to affirm this commitment to the *adat* of the Batak because my parents put it into practice" - Sonja stated - "because they have very different family and cultural backgrounds, and they show how one is able to both maintain and combine traditions, Timo adds: "Yes, my parents-in-law often told us about Indonesian everyday life and especially the traditions of the Batak. So it is familiar to us. That is how I learnt

that the Batak have a rule by which only Batak can marry each other. For me, it's interesting on the one hand how easy and unproblematic this is, and on the other hand, how it is treated very earnestly. "

The cohesion and interdependence of the Batak *margas* are defined by a triangular relationship, *Daliha* na tolu:

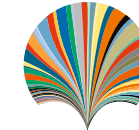
- the bridal side (*hula-hula*), in this case the *marga* Pardede–
- the grooms side (*paranak / dongan sabutuha*), here the *marga* Silalahi
- the widespread family relations of the party accepting the bride (*anak parboru*)

This constellation maintains a close family cohesion and secures material, social, ideological and spiritual identity and relationships. Each of the parties at family celebrations - especially in regard to marriages – has a role which passes on from one generation to another. Marriage within a *marga* is not allowed.

The cultivation of traditional values and behaviour - this is how the term "*Adat*" is best translated - shapes the everyday life of traditional Batak. One of the main goals of the *adat* is the preservation of the ideological and material heritage, including the rules for passing it on.

Our decision to have a Batak *adat* wedding is, so to speak, a continuation of the traditional family background.

In June 2018, this traditional ceremony will



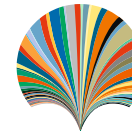
be held as a public event to introduce and explain the Batak culture to local, national and international guests. Participation in such a ceremony is intended as a contribution to the explanation of the Batak way of life. This can help in addressing and winning tourists. Finally, it is also a contribution to the international organization of a "Batak Day" every year in June, introduced last year. And so, all participants can make a constructive and practical contribution to the intercultural dialogue.

Karl Mertes
Chairman German-Indonesian Society Cologne





Batak village, around 1920



Piso Batak „A blade like a brush stroke“

Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to take a closer look at a physical cultural asset which is largely un-researched, in respect of its origins and its significance. The core topic will be the *piso*, that is, a type of blade of the Batak in North Sumatra. Although the *piso* in the main are knife- and sword-like objects, which on first inspection appear to have relatively clearly defined ranges of application– in contrast to the houses and village buildings which are known for their elaborate style, and for which the Batak are better known –, it will be shown that these objects, as an expression of the Batak culture, when observed more closely, reveal an extensive range of forms and types.

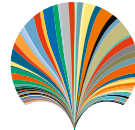
This imbues them with a far-reaching and diverse significance, rooted in diverse areas of the Batak culture (and even much further afield). This fact allows us – or rather demands of us – that we regard *piso* as cultural assets, which take on a significant role within the material and immaterial cultural heritage of South-East Asia.

The title of the publication before you is itself an example of an especially characteristic and an unmistakable expression of this category of object, but we will show, that *piso* have a much broader range and variety of forms than is generally known. This variety of forms can be explained by the long and complex history of North Sumatra and in each of its respective forms embodies particular aspects of the cultures of this continent.

Although the *piso* blades themselves awake particular associations within everybody with an interest in Indonesian culture, they have, until now, been the subject of very little scholastic attention. They are nonetheless regarded by society as a highly developed form of craftwork and as a sophisticated and prestigious example of the art and culture of Indonesia.

All who have visited an ethnographic collection or exotica displays have almost certainly at least once seen the grips and scabbards, often ornamented with figures, on the elegantly curved “knives”, which are highly regarded as eye-catchers in all collections, whether private or public. Everyone involved with South-East Asian art in the region of “Sumatra” immediately recognizes the long knives with the grips and scabbards decorated with “ancestral” or “animal” figures, which, along with the *keris* (Kris) of the Javanese and Malays, some weapons from Aceh and the *mandau*-sword of the inhabitants of Borneo belong to the most well-known bladed weapons of South-East Asia, due in no little part to their being easy to recognize.

The *piso* is one of the most important handicraft achievements of the Batak and plays an important role in the traditional form of society and way of life. These knives and swords, although until recently generally ignored, nevertheless belong to a category of objects within the material culture of one of the best known ethnic groups of South-East



Asia. The meagre level of research is all the more puzzling, since the Batak, the inland inhabitants of North Sumatra represent an ethnic group whose numerical, economic and political strengths makes them one of the most influential ethnicities within the international community which is made up of the island states of South-East-Asia. This is the result of the historical background and certainly also as the result of the manner of the establishment of contact and influences, which occurred relatively late on, namely in the second half of the 19th century, mainly through missionaries.

The relatively thin body of material relating to *piso* (*piso* = *pisau*, Indonesian/Malaysian “Knife”) is primarily the result of two factors. First, the Batak only became the focus of European interests relatively late (around the second half of the 19th century) long after firearms had entered center stage in the armed conflicts with the newcomers. The Batak had been using this later category of weapons for several centuries, as a result of their contacts, in part intensive, with Indian and Islamic realms, where the use of firearms developed more or less simultaneously with the European countries.

The territory in question, the inland regions of North Sumatra was, in the main, able to resist colonial domination and administration due to its jungles, impassibility and the resistance of the inhabitants. It was only relatively late on that missionaries (who were evidently less

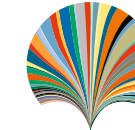
interested in weapons than travelling business men, military and aristocrats) were able to partially access the region.

The second reason is that the swords and long knives no longer played a central role, technically seen, in the intertribal and often ritualized resolution of conflicts and their importance had acquired a different focus.

In order to be able to understand the subject of the material culture of the Batak in the wider sense, and that of its metalworking in the narrower sense, one has to approach it in different ways. It is naturally of key importance to take at least a fundamental look at the basic factors of the Bataks living environment.

Above all, however, the historical background and the general conditions that have led to the emergence of the categories of objects discussed here are decisive. Immediately intertwined with this are the meanings of the individual elements, in particular the design features of blade, grip and scabbard, which are never randomly designed in the ethnological/cultural-historical context. They are not the individual creations of a craftsman, but a specific canon of forms and styles with their contents bearing specific meaning.

External aspects such as form, material, construction etc. are hardly to be separated from inherent immaterial statements, such as symbol content, specialized applications beyond



everyday use as a cutting tool, heirlooms with socio-cultural and cosmological significance (Indonesian: *pusaka*).

Pusaka is a term for an heirloom with a multi-faceted, but non-focussed range of meaning, which, however, is occasionally clarified by an additional term. Although *pusaka* is often used for family heirlooms, it can also, for example, refer to an inherited moped. To differentiate an inalienable family heirloom as such, it is referred to as *harta pusaka*.

In the emergence of a functional form subject to haptic requirements, where it is the subject of its original usage-oriented needs, such as the knife in the general sense, several aspects come into play.

These are, firstly: What is the device used for or what is it useful for? (tool, weapon, prestige object, etc.). Secondly, what parameters (material availability, cultural transfer, technology) have led to its creation? Third, this raises the questions about when and why did this happen? To answer these questions, one has to address the subject in many ways, starting with the basic conditions relating to production, relating to the history of the manufacturers and bearers through to the iconography of the design features.

It is therefore necessary to approach the core topic of the *piso* in a concentric and holistic way. In this publication, we do not want to

deliver a further “classic” ethnography of the Batak, which would in any case hardly be a valid statement, since the Batak are as much the the subject of modern demographic trends, urbanization, migration, service society, decline of traditional clan and family structures as the other ethnic groups such as Western society.

The purpose of this publication is to explain the cultural-historical developments and connections that can explain the origins of these objects in their entirety and in detail. And above all, the goal is to familiarize the reader with the very individual aesthetics of the *piso*.



I Environment of the Genesis of the piso

1 North Sumatra - land and people

The Batak form one of the most significant ethnic groups in Indonesia in terms of population (about 5,7 to 8,4 million people, depending on the method of counting), the settlement area and its significance within the complex history of Indonesia. They inhabit the Northwestern part of Sumatra (Indonesian: Sumatera) in the general area around the Toba Lake, which is the largest inland body of water in Indonesia. Sumatra is the fifth largest island in the world with approximately 473,500 square kilometers.

The highest point is the mountain Kerinci within the Barisam mountain range with 3,805 meters altitude. The length of the island is 1,790 kilometers, and at its widest point is 270 kilometers. In the South, Sumatra is close to the island of Java, which is separated from it by the Sunda Strait. In the north Sumatra is separated by the Strait of Malacca from Malaysia. Sumatra is closest to mainland Southeast Asia, and therefore has probably always experienced influences from the North and west as the first metropolitan area in the archipelago, in parallel with Northwest Java.

In the past, Sumatra was mostly covered by tropical rainforest, but today it is severely affected by deforestation - in the last 35 years, Sumatra has lost almost 50 percent of its forest resources. Since 2008, the Indonesian government has been trying to protect the remaining forest resources, to date with only partial success for the reasons known. That aside, there are now over 10 national parks.

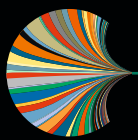
The geomorphological division of the island into the mountainous west and the flat east can be described as formative - both were formerly relatively impassable regions. The Eastern part, due to its swampy terrain, is not greatly influenced by agriculture, but is increasingly characterized by petroleum production and palm oil cultivation. From the Barisam mountain range in the West, the rivers carry mud and sediment into the lowlands in the East and produce large areas of permanently moist alluvium with the corresponding phenomena associated with this.

The land of the Batak is, in its geomorphology, the result of one of the greatest disasters of recent geological history. About 75,000 years ago, a volcano erupted in North Sumatra, spewing out some 1,500 to 2,000 cubic kilometers (i.e., twelve-digit tons!) of material - lava, ash, pumice, and unimaginable amounts of dust and smoke. The tufa deposits or layers that arose from the ash reach as far as the Bay of Bengal and Sri Lanka. The impact must have been global in its scope. The eruption was far more devastating than the Indonesian volcanic eruptions in the 19th century, which triggered catastrophic summers even in Europe due to the ash entering the atmosphere with many social side effects some of them bizarre (dark romanticism, mysticism, doomsday scenarios, etc.).

Even then, Northern Sumatra was inhabited by humans, as stone artifacts prove, but it is clear







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