Batak Christian Congregations as Part of Self and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Of Indonesia's 1,311 ethnic groups, one of the largest—with a population of 8.5 million (3.6% of the national population)—are the Batak. Several sub-groups are recognized, including the Batak Angkola, Batak Karo, Batak Mandailing, Pakpak Dairi, Batak Simalungun, Batak Tapanuli, Batak Toba, and Batak Dairi. Most Bataks practice Christianity, and they have established numerous churches with their own unique characteristics, including the Batak Christian Community Church (GPKB), Karo Batak Protestant Church (GBKP), and Christian Protestant Angkola Church (GKPA). Still others have congregated in churches that do not forefront their Batak identity, showing a diversity that underscores the diversity of religious life in Indonesia. This study examines Indonesian Batak Christians' decision to congregate in a church using social identity theory as well as intra-cultural communication theory. It underscores that ethnic groups' culture and customs are closely related to these groups' specific identity and holds that personal identity cannot be separated from group identity. This study uses a qualitative approach, with in-depth interviews being conducted with members of HKBP Church, one of the oldest and largest churches in Indonesia and Southeast Asia (Saragih, 2013). It shows that parents who had Christian and Batak identities motivated their children's decision to join the HKBP Church, and that their Batak identity is more substantially used to advance their group than their other identities.

Keywords: social identity, congregations, Batak, Christian

1 Research Background

Indonesia, with a population of more than 236 million, is recorded as having 1,331 ethnic groups (Direktur Jenderal Informasi dan Komunikasi Publik, 2018). One of the largest, with a population of 8.5 million people, is the Batak; several sub-groups are recognized, including the Batak Angkola, Batak Karo, Batak Mandailing, Pakpak Dairi, Batak Simalungun, Batak Tapanuli, Batak Toba, and Batak Dairi. Meanwhile, Protestantism is the second largest of Indonesia's six recognized religions, with 16.5 million adherents (6.96% of the population). In Indonesia, one's religion is often correlated with one's ethnicity, and thus many churches include ethnic and cultural elements, thereby combining religion, ethnicity, and culture.

Such an amalgamation of religion, ethnicity, and culture is seen amongst the Batak, most of whom practice Protestantism. Since the religion was introduced to the area, many places of worship—including churches that cater specifically to certain ethnicities—have been established. These include the Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP), the Karo Batak Protestant Church (GBKP), the Simalungun Protestant Christian Church (GKPS), the Batak Christian Community Church (GPKB), the Christian Protestant Angkola Church (GKPA), the Batak Mission Church (GMB), and the Pakpak Dairi Christian Protestant Church (GKPPD) (Saragih, 2013). At the same time, not a few Batak Christians have chosen to join congregations that do not emphasize a distinctive Batak identity.

Of these, the HKBP Church is among the largest. Its history is inseparable from the introduction of Christianity to the Batak in 1824. By 1871, more than 1,250 Bataks had converted to Christianity through the missionary activities of the German missionary group Rheimsche Mission Geclechaf. One of these missionaries, I.L. Nommensen, established the Dame Church—the first church on Batak land—and through his patience and persistence led many Bataks to Christianity. A Joint Decree, based on a Church meeting, was made on October 7, 1861, to determine the service strategy used by missionaries. This has been celebrated as the birthday of the HKBP (Sipahutar et al., 2019).

Today, almost 160 years later, HKBP is one of Indonesia's largest churches (Saragih, 2013). HKBP uses the Indonesian and Batak Toba languages in its worship, and traditional Batak culture is often practiced in church activities. Therefore, it combines religion with culture, creating a unity that is intended to positively impact the congregation. It is hoped that members will not only focus on spiritual worship, but also recognize and love traditional Batak culture (Media Nasional Obor Keadilan, 2019). This directly evidences the existence of a social identity, one built upon the dual foundations of Christianity and Batak ethnicity, through which individuals attempt to identify themselves as being from a group with the same emotions and values (Sarifah, 2016).

The religious and ethnic diversity of Indonesia is a fascinating subject for study, and the variety evident in the Christian church reflects the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity"). This study recognizes the decision to congregate as having a critical influence on social identity, and thus aims to determine how congregations' decision to participate in the HKBP church is part of self-identity.

2 Previous Research

Many prior studies have examined social identity, both within ethnic groups and in other contexts. Baharuddin and Rachmah (2019) examined *reog*, a cultural performance that originated in the city of Ponorogo but spread throughout Indonesia. *Reog* is a communal art that mixes magical incantations, dance, and *gamelan* music. They investigated the group dynamics through which social identities—a sense of belonging, pride, and care in various social membership categories, even without close personal relationships—are formed, using a qualitative approach that combined in-depth interviews, document analysis, and observations. They concluded that performances of *reog* in Surabaya offer an understanding of communities' use of creativity and cultural innovation to preserve the value of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika.

Another study, conducted by Sholichah (2016), investigated the social identity of Madurese students in Yogyakarta. Coming from an island off the northeast coast of East Java, with a population of approximately four million, these students interact with Yogyakarta's dominant culture while maintaining their own regional identity. One informant expressed that he felt more comfortable befriending other Madurese students, as together they can eat, speak in Madurese, and create an atmosphere like their place of origin. They understand Madurese identity as involving cultural values such as confidence, frankness, bravery, extraversion, and loyalty, as well as a strong work ethic and a unique physical appearance. This supports the literature; individuals who feel threatened by society's stigma of their groups tend to try to increase in-group cohesiveness.

Social Identity

Society is structured into distinct social groups with specific power and status relations. Social identity, thus, is an attribute possessed by someone who is part of a social group, one that distinguishes this group from other social groups. There is proximity within social groups, both physical (through meetings and face-to-face communication) and psychological (through shared goals and outlooks). Social identity is part of individuals' self-conception, one that stems from their group membership. It must be distinguished from personal identity, which is associated with individual (rather than group) behavior. People have as many social personalities as they have groups they identify with (Hogg & Vaughan, 2011, p. 216).

When people categorize objects and other people, they perceive similarities and differences in dimensions that they believe to be categorical (e.g., use, importance, or valuable). Turner et al. (in Hogg & Vaughan, 2011) wrote that self-categorization is related to group processes as a whole. People will represent social categories and groups as prototypes, as fuzzy sets of attributes (perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, behaviors) that are used to distinguish groups from other ones. Self-categorization theory, thus, holds that social comparisons determine the prototypical characteristics of groups.

In summary, social identity is different from self-identity. Individual identity is possessed only by persons and is associated solely with that individual. Meanwhile, social identity is possessed by individuals in connection with others. Both are foundational for identity development.

Conceptualizing Social Identity

Jackson and Smith (1999) state that the conceptual and operational organization of social identity is based on four primary dimensions.

1. Perceptions of the intergroup situation (context)

Identification with an in-group is defined, in part, by the intergroup situation. Several researchers have taken similar stances in their conceptualizations of social identity. When an individual identifies with a group, the status of that group will affect others' perceptions of them. Such perceptions make individuals provide assessments both of their groups and of other groups.

2. Attraction to the in-group

Individuals desire to identify with and be accepted as group members, and this results in individual manifestations of the feelings of belongingness and attraction. In general, the in-group is defined as a group that shares the same beliefs and identity as the perceiver. The out-group, meanwhile, is perceived as different than the individual. In-groups tend to be biased, in that they believe that their group is better and more attractive than other groups.

3. Belief in interdependency (common fate)

A group's self-conceptualization is strongly shaped by its collective emotional well-being and perception. Individuals can have an emotional attachment to their social group, and the more positively the group perceives its values, the stronger its identity and self-esteem. When assessments are negative, however, fewer individuals will identify with the group.

4. Depersonalization

Individuals tend to apply group values to their existing values. They fear that, if they ignore these shared values, they will be ostracized (Jackson & Smith, 1999).

Intra-cultural Communication

Intra-cultural communication refers to the verbal and nonverbal messages sent by members of a group to create shared meaning and understanding (Lahey et al., 2004, p. 5). It may also occur between members of a culture who have slightly different values. Such communication is dominated by the community's preferred ways of saying things and organizing thoughts.

Intra-cultural communication is built on the assumption that members share relatively similar experiences and interact in relatively specific manners (Kecskes, 2015). Understanding other cultures through intercultural communication, thus, is relatively more complex. People choose their cultural

institutions from a wide range of possibilities, using specific configurations to create varied cultural patterns. Cultural patterns are unique, not universal, and humans have difficulty seeing and accepting the artistic designs of other groups (Novinger, 2001).

3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, using a constructivist paradigm to observe and understand how social behaviors or events happen. Data were collected through structured interviews, during which informants were asked several open-ended questions, thereby providing space for variations in the answers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000/2009, p. 504). Interviews were conducted with four informants of three different HKBP congregation in Jakarta, Indonesia: Flora and Adrian from HKBP Suprapto; Nola from HKBP Menteng; and Diana from HKBP Kelapa Gading.

4 Results and Discussion

This study focuses on four dimensions of social identity theory: perceptions of the intergroup situation (context), attraction to the in-group, belief in interdependency (common fate), depersonalization, and intracultural communication.

1. Perceptions of the Intergroup Situation (Context)

Perceptions of the intergroup situation occur when individuals enter and identify themselves with the group, the status of which affects individuals' perceptions and assessments of the in- and out-group. When asked regarding their decision to join a congregation, all the informants cited their background. They indicated that, when they were children, their parents brought them to worship at the HKBP Church and registered them with the church. Members of the HKBP Suprapto congregation stated:

> *I have been registered as a member of HKBP since I was a child, with my parents. So, starting from a young age, I have attended the HKBP Church, and until now I am still a member of HKBP. ... It has been around 31 years. (Adrian, personal communication, September 18, 2020)*

I didn't choose to join HKBP. When I was born, my parents brought me to the church, and they were already HKBP members. … I am now 43 years old. This means that I have spent 43 years as a member of HKBP. (Nola, personal communication, September 17, 2020)

Informants indicated that they had been HKBP members for 30 to 40 years. Thus, their parents and family were critical starting points for their inclusion in the group.

Because HKBP emphasizes its Batak cultural identity, many members (or their ancestors) joined the Church based on their Batak identity.

Yes, I belong to the HKBP congregation because I am Batak. I am ethnic Batak, so I go to church there. I think that's the main reason why my parents chose to join HKBP. (Diana, personal communication, September 15, 2020)

Yes, maybe that was the reason my parents entered HKBP. HKBP is a Batak church, so people with a Batak identity looked to join the church. But I don't think that's it. … [W]hen our parents were bringing us to HKBP, maybe we couldn't compare or choose, but now that we're grown up and can analyze HKBP Church, other churches, and their worship. … [O]ur focus is on becoming a congregation and worshiping together. This does not rule out the possibility that we can choose to become members of another church. (Flora, personal communication, September 15, 2020)

These results show that informants' Christian and Batak identity stimulated them to join the HKBP Church. Although the initial decision was made by their parents, who brought them to worship at the Church, they have decided to remain members of the congregation. Some had visited or even worshipped at other churches, including those not characterized by a Batak identity, to evaluate their practices. Nevertheless, they decided to ultimately remain HKBP members.

Informants indicated that their parents' choices were based on a sense of compatibility, a desire to choose a church with Batak characteristics. This suggests that ethnic identity was a primary factor, and that congregation members' perception of the HKBP Church was shaped primarily by its distinct Batak identity.

2. Attraction to the In-group

Individuals desire to identify with and become accepted in certain groups and manifest a sense of belonging or attraction. Informants indicated that they were attracted to the HKBP Church due to its unique characteristics.

> *Yes, in my opinion, it has its own uniqueness. As long as I have been part of the congregation at HKBP, when we meet congregants in the church, we must first call them by their Batak surname. (Nola, personal communication, September 17, 2020)*

> *Yes, the Church's uniqueness is because of its Batak ethnicity, but this does not mean that it excludes other people, who are not Batak, if they want to worship or join. We do not discriminate. Culture is included in worship and church activities, yes, but without violating the rules and norms of the Church. Like, for worship, there are five services. There are special ones that are entirely in the Batak language—the songs, the music, the sermons—and there are other worship services in Indonesian. Even Sunday school and categorical worship also include Batak songs. At Christmas, thanksgiving events (gotilon), and other times we use Batak customs, and we embrace Batak culture— traditional dancing (manortor)—in worship, meetings, and services. We also apply Batak tribal customs, such as using the terms amang [father] and inang [mother], and sintua [elder], to call our priest. When we meet, it's characteristic for Bataks to ask about the genealogy of the family name; from amang and inang, we can get tulang [uncle], nantulang [aunt], or ito [brother] and lae [sister], or even pariban [cousin]. So, we feel closer; it turns out we are siblings of the same family. (Flora, personal communication, September 15, 2020)*

As the informant explained, despite its Batak identity, the HKBP Church is not closed to individuals from other ethnic backgrounds. Ethnic identity is neither a requirement nor a necessity for becoming a congregation member, and individuals who are not of Batak heritage still participate in services and events. Congregants from non-Batak backgrounds did not feel excluded from worship services, and indeed HKBP frequently collaborates with churches that do not share a Batak identity.

When deciding to join a congregation, informants also considered cultural characteristics. At HKBP Church, worship often includes songs in the Batak language, and Christmas and thanksgiving celebrations often include traditional clothing, Batak musical instruments (such as flutes and *gondang* [drums]), and

traditional dances (*tor-tor*). In their daily lives, when communicating and interacting with others, members of the congregation use customary terms such as *amang* [father] and *inang* [mother]. When congregation members meet individuals who share their family name, they use special kinship terms. Such unique characteristics have shaped the collective identity of the HKBP Church.

Another reason for congregation members' choice of the HKBP Church is its accessibility. HKBP churches can be found in all of Indonesia's major cities, and thus it is easy for members to find one convenient to them. The results show that individuals with a family history of HKBP membership, as well as those with a personal interest in membership, tend to decide to remain with the congregation.

3. Belief in Interdependency (Common Fate)

If they feel comfortable with the group they are joining, HKBP Church congregants tend to stay with the group and communicate with their peers.

> *Yes, because in our minds, we are all Batak, plus when we know we are brothers and sisters (share a family name), we are more familiar, as is typical of Batak customs in general. Maybe that is the reason for emotional closeness. But that does not mean that we are only comfortable with other Bataks. It's not as if the Church is exclusive to Bataks, right? 'You should be close to Bataks, who are allowed to be congregants here, or you have to be friends with the Batak?' No, we are open to diversity. We are all brothers, because Indonesians are not only Batak. (Flora, personal communication, September 15, 2020)*

> *Of course, through communication … how do you create emotional closeness? There must be. That is to say, precisely because we are both [Batak], we must be more careful and avoid hurting one another. It's even worse [if we hurt] family like that. So, I'm just used to it. Just the same, or even more guarded, because, in HKBP, everyone's family is like that. (Diana, personal communication, September 15, 2020)*

Members of the HKBP Church perceive an emotional closeness with other members, as they share religious beliefs and (mostly) cultural identities. Congregants who share the same family name feel an even greater sense of proximity. This highlights the shared intracultural values within the group, including faith, ethnicity, language, and culture, all of which make them comfortable and familiar in communicating with others and continuing their group's existence. Congregants feel emotional closeness, though it does not result in them excluding other ethnic groups.

4. Depersonalization

Where group members feel comfortable and equal, they tend to share specific values and characteristics. This occurs because they fear being isolated and ostracized from the group. As two interviewees stated:

> *I have seen and experienced … and perhaps [others] at some other churches … people pay attention to how we dress when we go to church. For example, in my hometown, mothers tend to wear* kebayas *during worship, even though this does not seem to be happening in Jakarta and other places. Because we want to worship, we should dress neatly and politely, not wear sandals, t-shirts, pants, or short skirts. In addition to our identity as Bataks, we are also guided by the Bible's instructions and the Church's regulations. (Flora, personal communication, September 15, 2020)*

> *Once in a while, and within reasonable limits, our dress can change, but not to the point of violating church norms and regulations. (Adrian, personal communication, September 18, 2020)*

The HKBP church congregation does not violate groups' existing norms, values, or identities. Congregations are guided by religious regulations, known as *siasat gereja*, that outline rules that congregation members cannot violate. Christian law regulates every attitude and behavior in Christians' lives. In this manner, the congregation maintains the norms and values that focus on religion, and this occurs because they fear being isolated from the group. In other matters, such as the clothing worn during worship, the HKBP Church emphasizes etiquette; mothers usually wear *kebayas*, fathers wear button-up shirts, and young men and women are expected to dress neatly and politely. Such clothing habits have been continuously implemented and adapted by the congregation.

5 Findings

The four dimensions of social identity theory—perceptions of the intergroup situation (context), attraction to the in-group, belief in interdependency (common fate), and depersonalization—and intracultural theory highlight how individuals perceive the group. Congregants identify themselves with a group, conducting an assessment by comparing the group with others before joining an HKBP congregation. Informants indicated that their parents had first brought them to worship with HKBP, and as adults they decided to remain members. Informants also underscored the importance of identity in church selection; many suggested that their parents had chosen their church

based on their ethnic identity. According to Greenfield and Marks (2007), religious and social identity contribute to individuals' frequency of participation in formal religious activities and their subjective psychological well-being.

Congregants saw that HKBP conducts worship with Batak cultural elements, including Batak-language terms and songs. Batak culture is also included in certain events, thereby enabling congregants to learn, and become familiar with the culture. These similarities not only sustain the congregation, but also strengthen it. This contrasts with Francis et al. (2016), who found that individual churches offer various provisions that generate congregations with distinctively different psychological profiles.

Congregants joined HKBP because they perceived an attractive or common identity. Informants indicated that HKBP has implemented Batak culture without violating the norms taught by Christianity. Although congregants recognize surname and lineage when interacting and communicating with others, this does not make the congregation closed. Rather, it remains open to non-Batak congregants, who are welcome to worship and join the Church, even though non-Batak worshippers are relatively few. HKBP congregations also frequently work in conjunction with neighboring churches, including those that do not share their Batak heritage.

Belief in interdependency (a common fate), meanwhile, explains that the individuals who join a church or social group tend to feel comfortable and close to others. This is also true in HKBP, where congregants have a sense of closeness and harmony with others, especially those who share their family name. In Batak tradition, two people who share the same surname are considered family, even when they are not close relatives. Intracultural communication within the congregation is both assertive and comfortable, reflecting the results of Wright and Young (2017), who found that religious beliefs and values have essential meaning in identity construction.

In the depersonalization element, when a congregant joins HKBP, they tend to embody the group values and remain members. They are monitored and limited by Church regulations, which outline the values that should be recognized and the practices that should be avoided. HKBP congregants do not ignore the importance and uniqueness of the HKBP church. This reflects the findings of Pegg and Burton (2006), who showed that local festivals can enable the Church to be perceived as an integral part of, rather than separate from, community life.

The above analysis and discussion show that different identities can be embraced and practiced by HKBP congregants, whose social identity manifests as a combination of religion and ethnicity. Kinship is a strong motivator for congregants' decision to join and remain in the HKBP Church, as their religious, cultural, and ethnic identities distinguish them from their fellow Indonesians.

6 Conclusion

The above analysis and research results show that congregants' decision to join the HKBP Church is generally motivated by their parents, who had both a Christian and Batak identity. HKBP has been able to endure, 160 years after its founding, due to the emotional and kinship ties within its congregation. Although congregants' Batak identity is more substantial than their other identities, the HKBP Church has embraced diversity, welcoming congregants who do not share its Batak identity. The social identity formed by members of HKBP is used to advance their congregation, promote positive self-development, and ensure support for members and the Church, even as they promote tolerance and mutual respect for diversity. Although the congregation has united individuals with different goals, interests, and backgrounds, it has not generated negative perceptions of other churches.

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