

Negotiation of the Role of Batak Women in the Modern Era: A Challenge to the Domination of the Patriarchy of Dalihan Na Tolu

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Abstract

Dalihan Na Tolu, the cultural value system of the Toba Batak people, has long been the foundation for regulating social relations, particularly those related to the position and role of women. However, the dynamics of modernity, globalization, and women's increasing access to education and public spaces have driven a significant negotiation process against the patriarchal structures inherent in the system. This study aims to analyze how Batak women negotiate their roles in the modern era, as well as to identify forms of resistance, adaptation, and transformation that emerge in response to the dominance of the patriarchal culture of Dalihan Na Tolu. Using a qualitative approach through literature studies and semi-structured interviews, this study found that Batak women now utilize cultural identity, professional capacity, and social networks as negotiation strategies to gain broader agency space both within the family and the traditional community. The results show that although the values of Dalihan Na Tolu still strongly regulate the social structure, there has been a reinterpretation of the concept of "somba marhulahula, manat mardongan tubu, elek marboru" so that women have greater opportunities to participate in decision-making, family economics, and traditional activities. This negotiation process not only reflects the dynamics of social change but also serves as a form of cultural renewal relevant to the contemporary context. This research concludes that Batak women in the modern era are not merely objects of the patriarchal system but have become active actors reinterpreting their position within the framework of Dalihan Na Tolu.

Keywords: Batak Women, Dalihan Na Tolu, Patriarchy, Role Negotiation, Modernity, Social Change.

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Introduction

The Toba Batak people are known for having a very strong social and cultural system rooted in customs, one of which is the principle of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, which serves as a basic structure for regulating social relations, kinship, and the division of roles within the community. This system not only determines an individual's position based on lineage but also influences family governance, dispute resolution, and the implementation of traditional ceremonies. In many studies of customary law in Indonesia, the social structure of indigenous communities is often associated with the power of patriarchal values, which have implications for limiting women's roles in both public and domestic spaces (Fatmawati, Fikri, & Siregar, 2023).

Within the Batak cultural framework, women are traditionally placed in the position of *boru*, which in customary practice plays a crucial role but is often considered subordinate to men. This finding echoes findings from other customary law studies that explain how customary rules often place women in limited positions in inheritance, decision-making, and social representation (Fatmawati, 2020). However, modern social dynamics, educational advancements, and expanded access to economic activities have encouraged Batak women to engage in more progressive forms of role negotiation.

In line with various conceptual developments in customary dispute resolution and restorative justice, previous studies have emphasized that customary law is not static but rather adapts to social change (Fatmawati et al., 2023; Siregar, Fikri, & Silitonga, 2023). These shifts in customary interpretations provide opportunities for Batak women to renegotiate their position, particularly when traditional cultural values meet the demands of modernity. In this context, the integration of a restorative approach and a more inclusive interpretation of customary law has the potential to open up space for enhancing women's roles within the Batak socio-cultural structure.

Furthermore, studies of Angkola customary law and various dispute resolution practices demonstrate that indigenous communities have the flexibility to formulate fairer social mechanisms when confronted with new values, including gender issues (Fikri, Hartiwiningsih, & Rustamaji, 2024). Resolution mechanisms through customary institutions such as the *pangulu* (head of the village) also demonstrate that custom can serve as a vehicle for social reconstruction as long as the community opens up dialogue for change (Siregar et al., 2023). Thus, a rereading of *Dalihan Na Tolu* can serve as an important foundation for examining how Batak women negotiate their roles in the modern era.

Based on this background, this study seeks to examine the dynamics of Batak women's role negotiations amidst the dominant patriarchal cultural structure of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. The study focuses on the forms of resistance, adaptation, and transformation women undergo in redefining their identity and social position. This research also provides an overview of how social change, education, and modern values interact with tradition to create a more equal gender structure in contemporary Batak society.

Literature Review

2.1 *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a Batak Social and Cultural Structure

Dalihan Na Tolu is a social system that regulates the relationships between *hulahula* (female givers), *dongan tubu* (female relatives), and *boru* (female recipients). In an

anthropological context, this system is not merely a ritual guideline, but rather a normative structure that influences the division of roles and social identities. Customary law literature confirms that kinship systems such as Dalihan Na Tolu function as traditional regulatory frameworks that govern social order, including gender hierarchy (Fatmawati, Fikri, & Siregar, 2023).

In Batak society, roles in Dalihan Na Tolu have been historically standardized, inherent in a patriarchal structure, where men are positioned as holders of customary authority while women are relegated to positions more closely tied to domestic and ceremonial obligations. Nevertheless, research shows that customary rules have interpretive flexibility when faced with social change. This opens up opportunities for studies examining the dynamics of women's role negotiations within them.

2.2 Patriarchy, Inheritance Law, and Women's Authority in Customary Law

Fatmawati's (2020) work on civil inheritance law highlights how inheritance rules influence women's capacity to access economic rights and family resources. While her study did not focus specifically on the Batak community, the findings are relevant because inheritance in many indigenous communities in Indonesia is influenced by patriarchal norms that place women with limited access to inherited assets.

In the Batak context, women traditionally lack inheritance rights to family customary land, which limits their economic standing and social bargaining power. Literature on gender relations in indigenous communities shows that access to economic resources significantly impacts women's ability to negotiate roles. Therefore, understanding inheritance law is crucial in assessing how patriarchal structures influence Batak women's agency.

2.3 Adaptation of Customary Law and Strengthening Through a Restorative Approach

Studies by Fatmawati et al. (2023) and Fatmawati et al. (2024) on restorative methods in customary dispute resolution demonstrate that customary law has strong reconstructive capabilities. The restorative approach not only serves to restore social relations but also provides space for the reinterpretation of customary norms to suit the needs of the times.

In the Batak context, reinterpreting the values of Dalihan Na Tolu can occur when communities face conflict or social tensions that require just and inclusive resolution. Restorative mechanisms provide opportunities for women to be more actively involved in these processes, as they emphasize dialogue, participation, and equality among legal subjects. Thus,

the restorative approach is a crucial concept in understanding how customary change can open up space for the negotiation of women's roles.

2.4 Customary Institutions, Dispute Resolution Mechanisms, and Women's Negotiation Space

Research on the role of the pangulu (village head) in resolving disputes in Nagori Silau Paribuan (Siregar, ARM et al., 2023) shows that customary institutions do not operate in a rigid manner, but are heavily influenced by the interpretations of local customary leaders. Pangulu decisions often reflect social values and community preferences, making them an important arena for changing customary rules.

Meanwhile, a study of Angkola customary criminal law by Fikri, Hartiwiningsih, and Rustamaji (2024) demonstrates how customary values can be integrated into the national legal system. Such integration requires a reinterpretation of customary norms to align with modern principles of justice, including protection for vulnerable groups such as women. This literature supports the argument that customary institutions can serve as sites of negotiation where women have the opportunity to gain agency if the community is willing to open a dialogue.

2.5 Social Change, Education, and the Formation of Batak Women's Agency

Contemporary literature on women in indigenous communities shows that education, economic independence, and exposure to global values play a significant role in expanding women's negotiating space within customary structures. Fatmawati et al. (2023; 2024) emphasize that female actors often utilize these social changes as cultural capital to resist customary rules deemed discriminatory.

In the modern Batak context, women who have attained higher education, are employed in professional fields, or have extensive social networks have a stronger bargaining position within the extended family and traditional forums. By combining traditional values with modern capacities, Batak women are able to create less direct yet effective forms of negotiation, such as negotiating positions in traditional deliberations, participating in family decision-making, or influencing their children's educational values.

2.6 Conceptual Synthesis of Previous Literature

From this literature, it can be concluded that there is a close relationship between customary law, patriarchal structures, and women's agency. Daliha Na Tolu creates a hierarchical social structure, but customary law has interpretive capacity that enables change.

Restorative mechanisms and customary institutions provide an arena in which this reinterpretation can take place. Furthermore, modern social change provides women with the social capital to negotiate their roles in creative and adaptive ways.

This synthesis serves as a theoretical framework for research on the negotiation of the role of Batak women in the modern era, while also confirming the gap in previous research regarding how the negotiation process takes place concretely.

Research Methodology

The research methodology is an important foundation in guiding the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings to answer the research focus on negotiating the role of Batak women in facing the patriarchal dominance of Dalihan Na Tolu. This research uses a qualitative approach by considering the characteristics of the socio-cultural phenomena to be studied, namely subjective experiences, adaptation strategies, and the dynamics of customary values in contemporary Batak society.

This approach was chosen because gender and customary issues are complex, contextual phenomena that often cannot be reduced to numbers or quantitative variables. Consistent with previous research on customary law and restorative mechanisms (by Fatmawati, Fikri, Siregar, and colleagues), a qualitative approach allows for exploration of the meanings constructed by communities and research subjects in everyday practice.

3.1 Research Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. This approach was chosen because the research aims to understand the process of negotiating the role of Batak women within a complex socio-cultural context, particularly regarding the application of Dalihan Na Tolu norms in everyday life. The qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the subjective experiences, perspectives, interpretations, and social practices of women in negotiating customary values.

Qualitative methods also allow for in-depth analysis of cultural dynamics, customary practices, gender relations, and forms of adaptation or resistance to patriarchal systems. Through a descriptive-analytical design, this research not only describes phenomena but also analyzes the patterns of negotiation that emerge in response to hierarchical customary values.

This approach is in line with various previous studies on customary law, dispute resolution, and adaptation of customary norms reviewed by Fatmawati, Fikri, Siregar, and

colleagues, which show the importance of a deep understanding of the social and cultural dynamics in indigenous communities.

3.2 Research Location and Subjects

This research was conducted in several areas that have a fairly strong Toba Batak population and are active in carrying out traditional practices, namely:

1. Medan City, as a multicultural urban center inhabited by many Batak women who have experienced social transformation through modern education and work.
2. Toba and Samosir Regency, as a representation of traditional areas with Dalihan Na Tolu practices that are still strong in social, ritual and family life.
3. Simalungun Regency or South Tapanuli, as a region with variations in the application of Batak customs and the existence of traditional institutions such as pangulu which are relevant to the context of social negotiations.

The research subjects were determined using a purposive sampling technique that took into account the relevance of experience and social position. The subjects consisted of:

- Batak women aged 25–55 years who are married or unmarried, and have experience of being involved in traditional activities, extended family, or community forums.
- Traditional figures (Raja Parhata, pangulu, or clan figures) who understand the structure of Dalihan Na Tolu and play a role in the social regulation of the community.
- Female academics or activists who understand gender issues in the Batak indigenous community.

The number of participants is adjusted to the research needs, generally 15–20 people, according to the principle of data saturation in qualitative research.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques are carried out using the following methods:

a. In-Depth Interview

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the narratives of Batak women's experiences in negotiating their roles within the family, traditional ceremonies, work, and community. This technique enabled researchers to capture subjective nuances, subtle forms of resistance, and women's strategies of adaptation to patriarchal customary rules.

Interviews with traditional leaders were also conducted to understand the traditional perspective on the position of women in Dalihan Na Tolu.

b. Participatory Observation

Researchers observed traditional activities such as weddings, funerals, and other celebrations to understand how women's roles are carried out in practice. Observations enabled researchers to see contradictions between normative traditional rules and actual practices within the community.

c. Documentation Study

Documents related to Batak customs, such as customary books, academic writings, family archives, and customary institution regulations, were used as supporting data. Previous literature discussing customary law, restorative justice, and women's social dynamics was also used to strengthen the analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis model which involved several stages:

1. Data Familiarization

Researchers read and reviewed all interview transcripts, field notes, and customary documents to understand the initial context and patterns.

2. Coding

The data was coded based on initial themes such as: the position of women in Dalihan Na Tolu, forms of negotiation, forms of resistance, customary practices, changes in values, and the role of customary figures.

3. Identifying Main Themes

These codes are grouped into broad themes, for example:

- Batak traditional patriarchy,
- transformation of women's roles,
- symbolic and practical negotiations,
- extended family dynamics,
- modernity and education,
- reinterpretation of customary values.

4. Analysis and Interpretation

Researchers interpret these themes to understand how Batak women construct their negotiation strategies. The interpretations are based on sociocultural theory, customary law literature, and contextual analysis of Dalihan Na Tolu.

5. Data Validation

Validation was carried out through source triangulation (interviews with women,

traditional figures, observations), method triangulation (interviews–observations–documents), and discussions with key informants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation.

This analytical method was chosen because it provides flexibility in understanding social patterns that are not always explicitly visible, and is suitable for studying cultural phenomena such as role negotiation in indigenous communities.

Results

4.1 Batak Women's Negotiation Strategies for Dalihan Na Tolu Norms

The research findings show that Batak women in the modern era no longer position themselves as passive recipients of the patriarchal structure of Dalihan Na Tolu, but rather as active actors in formulating various negotiation strategies to secure their social space, voice, and authority. These strategies emerge in response to social change, educational developments, economic needs, and increasing awareness of women's rights within the national customary and legal systems.

1. Negotiation through Education and Capacity Building

Education is a key tool used by Batak women to strengthen their bargaining position within customary structures. Women who pursue higher education are able to position themselves as sources of new knowledge within their families and communities. With increased legal, social, and cultural literacy, women gain the legitimacy to offer their views in customary and family forums, previously dominated by men.

Many informants acknowledged that education gave them the courage to speak up, question customary decisions that disadvantage women, and propose more equal alternatives. Women working as lecturers, teachers, nurses, prosecutors, or entrepreneurs have been able to shift the traditional stereotype that women are confined to the domestic sphere.

2. Negotiation through Economic Roles in Families and Communities

Economic contribution has been a significant factor in transforming Batak gender relations. Women who work and earn an income give them symbolic and practical authority in family decision-making. Some women even become the breadwinners of their families, so their views can no longer be ignored in customary deliberations.

Economic capacity has empowered women to negotiate more effectively for inheritance rights, participation in traditional ceremonies, and management of family assets. They are beginning to reject subordinate positions and demand roles commensurate with their contributions.

3. Negotiation through Redesigning the Meaning of Traditional Roles

Batak women do not completely reject Dalihan Na Tolu, but rather reinterpret the meaning of these traditional elements. The paradigms of "anak boru," "kahanggi," and "hula-hula" are flexibly reconstructed to fit the modern context. For example, in some traditional ceremonies, women are now given the opportunity to express opinions, recite prayers, and even direct the proceedings if they are deemed to have greater competence.

These changes are not seen as a violation of tradition, but as a form of adaptation that maintains the relevance of tradition in modern society. Women act as agents of renewal, ensuring that tradition remains alive and functional without losing its fundamental values.

4. Negotiation through Formal Legal Realm and Rights Awareness

Knowledge of national law, particularly regarding women's protection, inheritance law, and customary mediation, also strengthens Batak women's bargaining power. Some women choose formal legal channels to resolve conflicts such as inheritance rights, domestic violence, or discriminatory customary practices. Integrating customary law with national law provides women with the opportunity to choose the most equitable resolution mechanism.

This legal awareness aligns with the development of restorative justice concepts in Indonesian customary law, as highlighted in contemporary legal literature (Fatmawati et al., 2020; 2023; 2024). Women utilize this approach to negotiate their roles in family conflicts without violating customary norms.

5. Negotiation through Social Organizations, Communities, and Digital Spaces

Social media and modern Batak women's communities (United Batak Women, diaspora communities, church groups) have become new spaces for women to build solidarity, share experiences, and develop narratives about equality within tradition. Digital spaces accelerate the dissemination of knowledge and expand support in the face of patriarchal oppression.

This strategy means that women no longer feel alone in facing customary injustice, but rather become part of a collective movement that fights for a more gender-just adaptation of Dalihan Na Tolu values.

4.2 Reinterpretation of Customary Values at the Family and Community Level

The research findings indicate that the reinterpretation of Batak customary values in the context of Dalihan Na Tolu occurred through an adaptive process that took place at both the family and community levels. At the family level, change occurred personally and gradually through daily interactions. Batak women, especially those with higher education and significant economic contributions, began to have a stronger bargaining position in household decision-

making. The role of men as the center of family authority was no longer accepted as absolute; instead, a shift toward more egalitarian relationships occurred. In family customary practices, women are now more frequently involved in planning customary events, expressing opinions, and coordinating activities, something that in the past was entirely the domain of men. Many families provide space for women to take on symbolic and technical roles in customary activities without being considered to violate the values of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. This process demonstrates that custom is understood flexibly as a moral framework that can be reinterpreted in a modern context.

Reinterpretation is also evident in the way traditional values are transmitted to the younger generation. Mothers, as the primary educators in the family, play a crucial role in shaping children's understanding of a new, more inclusive version of Batak customs. Values such as respect for the *hula-hula* and the responsibilities of *anak boru* (children's responsibilities) remain, but their meaning has undergone a transformation: respect is no longer understood as submission within a hierarchical structure, but rather as a manifestation of mutual respect within the extended family. Thus, the family becomes the primary laboratory where traditional renewal takes place through daily practices, language, and decisions.

At the community level, the reinterpretation of customary values occurs through broader social dynamics, including within clan associations, church organizations, women's groups, and local customary communities. Modern Batak communities in urban areas often adapt customary practices to be more streamlined, efficient, and less burdensome for female members. Some communities allow women to serve as event coordinators, speakers at customary meetings, and even mediators in family conflicts—roles previously exclusively reserved for men. These reforms arise from the community's recognition that competence, not gender, is the primary consideration in upholding customary values in the modern era. Furthermore, Batak women's groups, both offline and online, contribute to the reinterpretation of customary practices by promoting an understanding of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, which emphasizes balance, equality, and social harmony, rather than the dominance of one party over another.

Overall, the reinterpretation of Batak traditional values at the family and community levels illustrates a dynamic process of cultural negotiation. Women are central actors in adapting customs to the demands of the times without severing their traditional roots. This process has resulted in a more adaptive, relevant, and inclusive understanding of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, addressing the role of women in the modern era.

4.3 Restorative Approach as a Space for Gender Equality in Customary Practices

The research findings show that a restorative approach is one of the most effective mechanisms for creating space for gender equality in Batak customary practices, particularly within the traditionally patriarchal framework of Dalihan Na Tolu. The restorative approach, which emphasizes dialogue, relationship restoration, and the participation of all affected parties, enables Batak women to be more actively involved in resolving family and community conflicts. This approach shifts the focus of problem-solving from the dominance of male figures as the sole authority to a more inclusive and participatory deliberation process. In some cases, women are given the opportunity to express their perspectives on customary conflicts, whether related to inheritance, kinship relations, or the implementation of customary rituals, so that their voices are no longer sidelined as is common in traditional deliberation patterns.

The integration of a restorative approach with customary values also allows for a reinterpretation of the meaning of Dalihan Na Tolu. The principles of *somba marhula-hula*, *manat mardongan tubu*, and *elek marboru* are reconstructed not as hierarchical structures, but as a network of relationships that emphasize balance and mutual respect. Through a restorative-oriented customary mediation forum, women can express their conditions, needs, and experiences equally without fear of rejection or being considered a violation of norms. This approach strengthens women's legitimacy in the decision-making process because they are viewed not merely as cultural objects but as subjects with moral, social, and knowledge capacities to restore family harmony.

Furthermore, a restorative approach allows for the resolution of customary conflicts without leaving behind the injustice or resentment that often affects women, particularly in issues of inheritance, domestic violence, or the division of customary roles. This mechanism presents a more humane and contextual resolution model, consistent with previous research findings on the effectiveness of restorative methods in indigenous communities (Fatmawati et al., 2023; 2024). The involvement of customary leaders, women, and extended families in open dialogue results in decisions that not only maintain customary stability but also recognize women's rights and dignity. Thus, the restorative approach functions not only as a conflict resolution technique but also as a cultural transformation strategy that opens up space for gender equality within Batak traditions.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that Batak women in the modern era are no longer passive actors within patriarchal customary structures, but rather active subjects negotiating their space,

roles, and authority within the framework of Dalihan Na Tolu. Through education, economic contributions, legal literacy, and the use of social media and women's communities, they have successfully developed effective negotiation strategies to expand participation within their families and customary communities. This negotiation process is not confrontational, but rather involves reinterpreting customary values to maintain alignment with the cultural principles upheld by the Batak people. This reinterpretation, both at the family and community levels, demonstrates that customary law is not static, but rather dynamic and continually adapts to social developments.

This research also confirms that the restorative approach is a strategic mechanism that can promote gender equality in customary practices. By creating space for dialogue, restoring relationships, and equal participation between women and men, the restorative approach strengthens women's legitimacy in customary decision-making processes. The integration of Dalihan Na Tolu values with restorative principles creates new meanings that are more inclusive, harmonious, and justice-oriented. This demonstrates that Batak customs have a strong adaptive capacity to remain relevant amidst modernity.

Overall, this study concludes that negotiating the role of Batak women is a form of constructive cultural transformation. Women not only adapt to custom but also play a role in shaping the direction of its development. These findings provide an important contribution to the study of gender, customary law, and the dynamics of social change, while also providing a foundation for developing cultural policies that are more responsive to gender equality in Batak society.

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