Notes on the Toba Batak (Sumatra)
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par

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I have been now working with the Toba Batak for several months. The thrust of my project is an analysis of Batak art within the general framework I used in my Cuna research. That is, the investigation of the arts as a component of social structure rather than as simply a reflection of social structure. If I understand correctly Professor C. Lévi-Strauss' discussion of the fetishization of the social order, then my intention is a study of how Batak social structure is fetishized in its art, and conversely how that fetishized system in turn affects the social order. Any such study would almost by definition concern itself with the kinship of art as well as the art of kinship given Batak social structure.

I am also interested in the wider question of how the dynamics of the core asymmetrical exchange system have been played out in the unilineal groups of Indonesia. Since the greatest amount of historical and ethnographic literature centers on those groups of Sumatra (Batak, Nias and Mentawei), I am concentrating my efforts here and hopefully will be able to visit all three areas (I have already spent some time in Mentawei and the Karo Batak region). In many ways it seems to me that it matters very little whether one is concerned with the machinations of the system within any one of these societies alone or whether one is interested in the morphological variations of the core system throughout South East Asia in general. The central question revolves around some essential contradiction or instability which “drives” these systems whether in terms of stratification (as in Nias) or in terms of simple expansion (as with the Toba Batak). In any case, I am hoping that by starting within the Batak system the “solution” will become apparent. The question I pose now concerns this and I think is related to Professor Lévi-Strauss’ discussion of the Karo exchange system. In order to frame the question I need to describe some of the features of the Toba Batak as well as their art.

The Toba Batak live in small (4 to 6 households) villages linked under the dominion of a single lineage. Some authors have suggested that the village is formed from a localized lineage with residence restricted to that lineage. I have serious doubts about this, certainly it is not the case today and I suspect that in the past it was never more than an ideal. Usually there are several clans (*marga*) in each village, most often clans which claim descent from a single ancestor and are in a relation of older to younger brother to each other. It is not, however, the clan which exchanges women but lineages. Generally these lineages do not exchange women within the village or the dominion, instead establishing enduring affinal alliances with lineages in distant dominions. Each lineage will have two or three principal wife taking lineage partners and an equal number of wife giving partners. Each dominion is under the aegis of one lineage (*anak raja*) who are descendants of the village/dominion founder. Other lineages and clans living in the area have only usufructory rights to land.

Like the Karo arts the Toba arts are closely linked to the exchange system. The major arts include the woven shawls called *ulos* and the elaborately carved *adat* houses. The *ulos* are most directly related to the exchange system and their iconography is largely comment on the *dalihan na talu* (the trilogy of one’s clan, one’s wife giving clan(s), and one’s wife taking clan(s); like the Karo the name derives from the word for “stone”—particularly the three hearth-stones). Marriage alliances are materially articulated through the presentation of *ulos* from the wife givers to the wife takers at virtually all ceremonial occasions. Like the alliances themselves the presentations are asymmetrical in that *ulos* can be passed only from wife giver to wife taker and not vice versa (thus women and *ulos* move in one direction, money and livestock in the other).

On the other hand, the symbolism attached to the *adat* houses is concerned with either the relationship between the *anak raja* and other co-resident lineages, or with descent within the immediate family. For example, most of the carvings (*gorga*) on the house face deal with the privileges and duties of the *anak raja* (one of the reasons I doubt that villages were ever formed of single lineages is precisely this: why articulate symbolically a relationship between clans if that relationship does not exist?). At the same time, the overall form of the house, its gross architectural features, are largely symbolic of images of immediate or intra-family descent. “Descent” is perhaps an unfortunate choice of words since this symbolism has little to do with descent in its classical notion, but rather with a sort of personal transience. The symbols of architecture are relational symbols of persons rather than groups; of father to son or specific ancestor to descendants rather than clan to clan or lineage to lineage.

Thus there are three major valences or aspects to the two main art forms (which actually embody three distinct aesthetic media: weaving, carving, and architecture); the most perishable and obligatory medium of cloth (*ulos*) representing alliances between lineages based on women, the less perishable and optional medium of house carving (*gorga*) representing the permanent and enduring relations between clans based on non-movable property, and finally the non-perishable medium of gross architectural form representing the transient and
personal relations of intra-lineage descent. (I have not mentioned music but in fact it tends to bridge all three of these forms—and principles—and in some sense mediates them at least in the context of ritual.) How and why these interact is essentially the question I am trying to answer.

Whether other asymmetrical marriage systems are unstable or not there can be little doubt that there is a critical element of instability within the Toba system. The entire Lake Toba basin is one massive environmental proof of continued expansion, migration, and shifts in productive forces. Virtually the whole area is deforested with the attendant erosion, loss of soil productivity, climax grass cover, and probable change in water flow. While the standard wisdom of agronomists usually attributes such a state to over-swiddening I suspect that in this case a more interesting explanation applies. There is little evidence to suggest that the human population density was ever high enough to yield this deforestation in terms of agriculture alone (though population density was doubtlessly higher in the past). A more likely approach would consider the enormous lumber needs required for adat houses in which large tracts of forest were cut down to accommodate new villages. Furthermore this lumbering occurred in the context of large scale livestock grazing so that cleared land would have little chance to revert to forest. Clearly neither of these elements, i.e. adat houses or livestock, are “facts of production” or some “ecological” necessity but rather they are culturally determined production factors comprehensible only in the course of a cultural analysis.

Still one must explain how it came about that the Toba Batak population continued to grow or at least expand over space and time at the necessary rate to yield this deforestation (for that matter one wonders why the unilineal groups of South East Asia generally evince a higher population growth rate and degree of structural stratification than their bilateral neighbors). There is some evidence for status differences between wife givers and wife takers (a mild deference is paid the former by the latter), and some linguistic evidence to suggest that this differential was greater in the past (one term for wife giver, parrajaon, derives from the word raja, while the complementary term for wife taker is pargellengon, from the word gelleng meaning “small” and by extension “child”). But the extent that this is the source of some critical inflationary cycle based on bride-price like that described by Friedman for the Kachin seems doubtful. In part it is still an open question empirically which I am working on, but at the moment it seems that the status differences between anak raja and other co-resident clans and lineages are far more pervasive and important.

A more likely locus of instability is the endemic filial conflicts in Toba villages. Outside of the ritual sphere brothers seldom associate or even live in the same village. Commonly this is attributed to conflict over inheritance, claims that the wives do not get along, or arguments over houses. One important structural consideration is the contrasting personal affinal alliances for each brother. Each lineage maintains several primary affinal links on both the wife giver and wife taker sides. The eldest son is expected to marry his MBD but this does not exhaust the candidates specified by the preferential marriage rule. That rule
states that the preferred marriage is with one’s boru ni tulang (daughter of one’s tulang). But in addition to the MB, the FMBS, FFMBSS, FFFMBSSSS, FFFFFMBSSSS are also tulang. Moreover, they are seldom if ever from the same clan or lineage. The preferential arrangement is for brothers to marry with women of different lineages—though daughters of one’s tulang—in order to maximize the number of affinal links (or rather to invoke as many of those already existing links as possible). This is an explicit rule and this rule yields the above mentioned fact, viz. that one’s tulang comes from several lineages (with the possible exception of a first born male, who is the son of a first born, who is the son of a first born, etc.). Thus it is not simply an on-the-ground fact but a conceptual ideal that several affinal links exist in each direction; neither Batak practice or theory would imply that the preferred marriage results in strictly paired alliances. From this it follows that each individual brother will fall into a somewhat different ceremonial and productive set of alliances (the latter based on bride-service) while as a group they share a set of alliances which only partially over-lap with their own personal positions.

Similarly a personal as well as corporate asymmetry divides siblings with respect to the inheritance of property and title. The youngest brother inherits the house, which of course forces other brothers to segment off. On the other hand, the position of raja is neither wholly ascribed nor achieved but passed on to the most capable of the raja’s son. Thus, not only is there a necessary segmentation but a necessary competition between brothers in terms of the succession of the title.

None of these reasons, however, strike me as particularly convincing in and of themselves. At one level long term affinal alliances and property rights tend to ally a set of brothers, while at another level the siblings are divided with respect to housing, title and personal affines—all of which to a certain extent are ego-rather than lineage-centered. If I understand correctly this is parallel to the contradiction within Karo structure (though the cases are not identical in as much as some asymmetrical relations are maintained above the family level both in terms of property rights and ritual in the Toba case).

I suspect but cannot formalize that the three principles mentioned above form the essence of the instability rather than that instability extending out from any one of them. They are clearly ordered relations; marriage alliances embody a mild status differential which is both flexible and enduring, alliances between clans and lineages based on property produce a more pronounced rank difference but much less obligatorily enduring, while the transient and personal relations within the family express the most drastic hierarchy and in some sense endure the least. But the essence of how these principles interact is still unclear to me. I suppose that there is the possibility that I am merely missing the point and that the familial-filial conflict is the prime mover of the instability (with the mythical consanguinity of brother clans within a dominion mediating between the instability of actual consanguines and fusion of affines).