

## Semiotic Meanings of Artefacts in Toba Batak Ceremonies Across Some Regions in North Sumatera, Indonesia: A Study on Variations and Changes

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### Abstract

*Toba Batak ethnic groups have resided in various sub-regions of Toba region of North Sumatera, Indonesia, since hundreds of years ago. They have practiced many ceremonies and used artefacts to support their cultural behaviours in practicing the ceremonies. Ceremonies of Baptism, Wedding, and Entering a New House practiced by the Batak ethnic groups in four sub-regions of Toba region: Sibisa, Limbong Sagala, Sait ni Huta, and Lumban Siagian were taken as the sources of data. This study was intended to find artefacts and meaning variations they put to them across the four sub-regions and changing of artefacts and their meanings across times and the sub-regions. To obtain the objectives, researcher used qualitative research of ethnographic design. The data were collected using interview and documentary techniques. The data were analysed in three cycling steps of data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusion techniques. The research results revealed: 11 out of 36 artefacts have meaning variations; and three artefacts get meaning changes across the four sub-regions. Based on the findings, attempts of preserving Toba Batak cultures are highly recommended by the old to the young generations. Government should facilitate for establishing institutions concerning ethnic cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Semiotic Meanings, Cultural Artefacts, Meaning Variations, Meaning Changes.*

### Introduction

Toba Batak is one of the sub-ethnic groups of Batak in the province of North Sumatera, Indonesia. As well as the other ethnic groups in Indonesia, Toba Batak community has its own traditions and conducted from one to another generation. Besides their own ethnic language, the Toba Batak community have used many artefacts as a means of communication and interaction to support their cultural ceremonies. For them artefacts represent certain meanings.

Investigations on ‘what meaning is/what makes meaning’ have been taken into account within a long history until recently (NÖth, 1995, p. 14). Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce are noted as two pioneers highly concerned with the study of meaning (Semiology and Semiotics, respectively), each of whom proposed contrast theories. Saussure (1983, p. 67) viewed ‘meaning’ as the association of the ‘signifier’ with ‘signified’. The ‘signifier’ represents another object; and the ‘signified’ is the ‘concept/meaning’ of the object. The term ‘concept’ is not referred to the real or physical objects, despite being closely related to that when one talks about an object. It is a reflection of something in mind. It refers to something in the world. No correspondence is between a physical object (signifier) and a sound (signified) (Saussure, 1983, p. 76). For him a sound pattern is merely a ‘material’ element in that it is the representation of the sensory impression. It can be stated communication goes on by mutual understanding of the signifier between the sender and the receiver. The nature of signs (signifier and signified) are two basic elements for them to take into account to make the communication happen. Saussure’s proposal of the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ is his dyadic theory.

In his theory of meaning Peirce (in NÖth, 1995, p. 42) argued that a ‘sign’ is triadic. It is: first, representamen, which stands to a second, called as object, ‘as to be capable of determining third, the interpretant, that is, the interpretation of the sign. For him ‘sign’ is as something which stands to somebody or something (Peirce, in NÖth, 1995, p. 42 & in Chandler, 2007, p. 36).

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In reference to Saussure's and Peirce's contributions to the studies of 'meanings', a great deal of studies and applications have been taken into conduct and developed to what is called as 'social semiotics'. Social semiotics is a "window" to investigating any possible or potential semiotic resources/modes (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010, p. 184) by recording them for meaning making by meaning makers. It is concerned with how people use, represent, and develop the meaning potentials of the resources as well as their understanding of the world, to shape power relations with others and to be interpreted within a sociocultural context (Halliday, in Gualberto, 2019, p. 2). It is privileged as an organizing principle of representation and communication; therefore, it is treated as a central unit of analysis. It is as a set of socially and culturally shaped resources for making meanings based on the regular patterns of semiotic choices in communicative objects and events that are particular to specific communities and cultures.

There have been a great deal of studies using social semiotic approach. For almost four decades van Leeuwen has examined the phenomena of meaning resources in various areas diverse, as film (van Leeuwen, 1985, pp. 216-232); 1991, pp. 76-114; 2014, pp. 347-410; & van Leeuwen and Boerijs, 2017, pp. 44-46); and children toys (van Leeuwen & Caldas-Coulthard, pp. 355-382). By using social semiotic approach, some other researches have been taken into account, such those as: visual images, magazines (layout, publication), advertising, politics, etc. (Maire & Liarte, 2018, pp. 1405-1423; Hochman, 2014, pp. 1-15; & Mertz, 2007, pp. 337-353).

In cultural perspective social semiotic approach has also been employed. Bin, et.al. (2019) applied semiotic approach to cultural symbol study in relation to business concerns (e.g. trade mark) in visual language in tea packaging design in China. The study analysed materials, textures, shape, colour, writing and typography, the iconography of its package, the representational, interactive and compositional meaning of its package, the Chinese visual language, and the cultural meaning of tea package. They concluded that icon (i.e. the dragon) plays a significant role and affects in designing package of a product. They found that the designer of this package ignored it.

Research on culture entitled "The Cultural Background of Metaphor Umpasa in Batakese Wedding" was conducted in Indonesia by Sinaga and Arvianti (2019) on Batak metaphors in concern with social semiotics. They concluded that metaphor of umpasa (Batak sayings) for Batak community is a way for them to express something. The expressions contained the values which made someone have ethics and the moral in daily life. Similarly, Butar-Butar (2018) took the artefact Ulos into account of her research entitled: "The Aesthetic Study of Traditional Cloth of North Sumatera". In her research she investigated the process of making Ulos as of Batak artefacts and the meanings of the artefact based on the addressees. She found that the process of making that artefact is closely related to the lives of individuals or groups of people as the users. She also underlined that the use of Ulos must follow the norms. It is evidenced in the customary marriage activities of the Toba Batak sub-ethnics, Ulos has to be used in accordance with the purposes, which is represented in physical form, food and speech (Purba et al., 2024).

In addition, based on the researcher's observations, the researcher found Ulos provided to bridegroom has different meanings in Toba and Tarutung regions. Even, in Dolok Sanggul region a certain type of Ulos was used in a certain period of time in the past, but is not used recently.

The studies and observations described above inspired the researcher to carry out a research. The research was aimed at identifying the artefacts and their meaning variations and changes in three different ceremonies: Baptism, Wedding, and Entering a New House across four sub-regions of Toba Batak, covering: Sibisa, Limbong Sagala, Sait ni Huta, and Lumban Siagian in Toba, Samosir, Dolok Sanggul, and Tarutung regions, respectively. Compared to this research, the researches mentioned above, each focused only to find the meaning of a single artefact.

*Theoretical Framework**The Study of Meaning*

Language is crucial due to its roles as a means of communication and interaction (Girsang et al., 2024). An individual thinks, considers, and decides something by talking to himself and others using language (Ngongo et al., 2024; Sinambela et al., 2024). He can meet his goals in the interactions using either verbal (e.g. spoken, written) or non-verbal language (e.g. intonation, gestures, pitches, mimics, or body-movements). Language can play roles due to its potential to represent meanings (Herman et al., 2024).

Semiology/Semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings in a society. Saussure (1983; 2016) stated that semiology is the study of meaning derived from the signs and used in human communication using language. He stressed 'sign' is built by two parts (dyadic): the association of the 'signifier' (form/object) with the 'signified' (concept/meaning) (Saussure, 1983, p. 67). Saussure put human's social interaction is mediated by expressing signs, within which the signs referring to the object is in associative manner, that is, in mind. For him, signs does not relate with any physical object, but a reflection of something, despite being closely related in that when one talks about an object. Nevertheless, the term 'concept' is more appropriate since it can refer not only to the tangible physical objects in the real world, but also to those as abstract objects or ideas. It is acceptable in those, such as: 'happy', 'warmth', 'value', etc. Further, Saussure (1983, p. 66) added the 'sound pattern' is not actually a physical sound, but merely the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by his senses. For him the 'signifier-signified' relationship is arbitrary (Saussure, 1983, p. 76), allowing language to be flexible, constructed, and changeable. It is worth stating that both the signifier and the signified are understood as encoded in context. To illustrate, the word uttered 'fire' and 'hot', for instance, have relationships in the signifier and the signified. It is made meaningful in context. In one context, 'fire' might refer to 'flame'. But in another, it might refer to something as 'a command of shooting someone or something'. The word uttered comprises the 'form/word'. These two basic elements are those that make the communication happen. However, it can only work if the participants in a given community has a common-shared comprehension of the signifier and how the signifier goes to the signified in some way.

Contrast to Saussure's perceptions on 'signs', Peirce (in Nöth, 1990, p. 42; & in Chandler, 2007, p. 36a) emphasized 'sign' is something which stands to somebody or something to convey meanings (Eco, in Chandler, 2007, p. 2). 'Sign' is triadic, that is. a unity of what is represented (the object); how it is represented (the representamen); and how it is interpreted (interpretant) (Peirce, in Nöth, 1995, p. 42). For Peirce (in Chandler, 2007, p. 3) sign possesses its own characters and it is observable, resulting from its daily uses in the social and cultural interaction in a given situation. The term 'a given situation' implies the potential of any sign to be dynamic, depending on the contexts the sign is encoded. Peirce's view also suggests that it is the task of every members of community to seek for, acquire, and make the meanings through the situations and culture of the community.

Sonesson (in Michlich, 2018, p. 2) described the characters of sign through icon, index, and symbol. The icon is a sign where the representamen resembles its object, the thing being represented, has a physical resemblance to the signified, the thing being represented (e.g. a photograph). The index is a sign where the representamen is in proximity with the object. It covers those as 'natural signs' (smoke as a sign of fire, thunder, footprints, echoes, non-synthetic odours and flavours), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse-rate), measuring instruments (weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level), 'signals' (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing 'index' finger, a directional signpost), recordings (a photograph, a film, video or television shot, an audio recorded voice), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting, catch-phrases), and the neighing of a horse. In relation with icon, indexical signs have close relationship with icon and are more likely to be read more natural than symbolic signs when making the connection between signifier and signified has become habitual (Chandler, 2007, p. 41).

A symbol is a sign where the representamen is related to the object in terms of "habit" or convention. Symbol has no resemblance between the signifier and the signified. The connection between them must be culturally learned (Peirce, in Bradley, 2016; Wantoro & Cahyadi, n.d). A text as a symbol consisting of

arbitrary signs (e.g. language in general; specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences); numbers, Morse code, traffic lights, and national flags are some instances of symbols (NÖth, 1990, p. 46). For Peirce the three categories of representamen are not exclusive one to another (in Sudarsono, 2023).

The dyadic and triadic theories develop to Social Semiotics. It is a branch of the field of semiotics which investigates human practices of signification in specific social and cultural circumstances (Hodge & Kress, in Moerdisuroso, 2014, p. 82) and attempts to explain meaning-making as a social practice (Thibault, 2004, p. 209). Social semiotics views 'signs' in a different perspective, which according to van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3), as approach to seeking, using, and understanding how people are enabled to communicate using a variety of means or modes in particular social settings. It is concerned with how people use, represent, and develop the meaning potentials of the resources as well as their understanding of the world, to shape power relations with others (Bezemer, 2009, p. 1) and to be interpreted within a sociocultural context (Halliday, in Gualberto, 2019, p. 2).

Since social semiotics considers 'meaning' as highly significant in social communication, meaning making based on the (semiotic) resources (modes) becomes crucial to study, especially on how the resources are organized to make meanings in order to succeed the communication in a society. This fact leads to stating the point that meaning is central to social semiotics, through which it is rooted in the social and real life experiences of the people who make meanings (Andersen, et.al, 2015, p. 143).

### *Cultures*

Culture has been defined in hundreds of different ways ranged from anthropology, education, politics, to many other disciplines (see: Larson, 1984; Newmark, 1982; Gambier, 1999; Tylor, 2006; Pusch, 1981; & Steiner, 1984; Herman et al., 2019). A typical definition proposed by Harris (in Spradley, 2016, p. 5) is "the culture concept comes down to behaviour patterns associated with particular groups of people, that is, to 'customs,' or to a people's 'way of life'". Further, Spradley (2016, p. 5) declared culture refers to the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behaviours (Purba et al., 2023). He stressed members use their culture differently. Even, two different groups could have different interpretation on the same event or cultural tokens.

### *Artefacts and Meanings*

#### *Artefacts*

Although the definitions of "artefacts" vary to a certain degree, they have in common that artefact is defined as resulting from human activity (Margolis & Laurence, in Siefkes, 2012, p. 69). In philosophical field, for instance, Hilpinen (in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022) describes artefacts as objects made intentionally, in order to accomplish some purpose and have natural objects as their source, are assemblies of components, and the raw material of these components is based in natural objects.

In cultural semiotics, Posner (in Siefkes 2012, p. 69) defined artefacts as intentional or unintentional consequences of human action. However, he argued drawing the line between intentional and unintentional results is difficult. It is because human actions usually have a whole range of results (from primary aims to results that are never considered), including some that are consciously taken into account and could have been avoided, but are not primary aims of the action. Siefkes (2012, p. 70), further, described 'artefact' is not only that which is permanent, but also includes that is transient (e.g. the sound someone produces when walking on a hard surface), events (e.g. concerts, festivities) and texts (e.g. verbal utterances). Similarly, Renfrew and Bahn (in Lapp, 2022, p. 420) described material culture (artefact) as objects and buildings—even words and sounds—that are products of culture. It can be stated that 'artefact', is any 'object' created or modified by a human culture, such as a tool, ornament, or other objects showing human workmanship or modification as distinguished from a natural object.

*Artefact Meanings*

An artefact is invested with different kinds of meaning in daily-life situations. When it is used in cultural representations; their cultural role is complex and ties in with mental representations and social structures in a number of ways (Siefkes, 2012, p. 68). Artefacts would get their meanings through making them as signs (semiosis) (Siefkes, 2012, p. 81). As an object is perceived merely as a tool and some kinds and as human product, artefact per se has nothing to do with meaning. This means that artefacts must become signs so as to get the content of the sign (or meaning)

There are two ways of making artefacts as signs: 1) context-dependent: and 2) interaction with artefacts (Siefkes, 2012, pp. 71-75). Artefacts in ‘context-dependent’ or ‘metapragmatics’ (McGee & Warms, in Mertz, 2013, p. 9) act as sign vehicles that at the same time gain the sign contents or meanings. It is concerned with the surrounding conditions on which meaning is depended. Using context a word or even a larger discourse brings singular and clear meanings. Similarly, artefacts may not mean much unless they are placed in a particular environment. Attributing meanings to artefacts is a way of rendering the relationships between artefacts and their contexts sensible and coherent.

“Interaction with artefacts” is referred to how individuals perceive and do to the artefacts. This principle comes to two types: 1) function-based interaction; and 2) meaning-based interaction. Function-based interaction or ‘teleological interaction’ is an interaction in which artefacts are used for specific purposes (including aesthetic pleasure or entertainment) (Siefkes 2012, p. 73). This type of interaction is connected with different kinds of sign processes. For instance, a ‘pen’ can be connected and indicated in the design (a pen indicates its function through its pipe for ink, the length, the colours, etc.). By perceiving an artefact based on the two criteria, it gets its content as a sign. However, Miller (in Lapp (2022, p. 412) stated artefacts carry diverse meanings, and their functions can mutate: they do not “always do this or are that.

*Meaning Variations and Changes of Artefacts**Artefacts and Their Meaning Variations*

Like words, artefacts have different meanings. Giacomini (in Ajovalacit & Giacomini, 2020, p. 1182) classified meaning variations based on how one perceived, that later results in his interpretation of the artefact. He suggested that one artefact can be perceived based on its function, as a ritual medium, or a myth. In ‘function’ perspective, an artefact is seen: 1) in the way something works or operates; and 2) the natural purpose of something or the duty of a person. As a ‘ritual medium’, an artefact is: 1) a series of actions or a type of behaviour which is regularly and invariably followed by someone; and 2) a set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed consistently and regularly, especially as part of a ceremony or collectively. The last, as a ‘myth’, an artefact is: 1) a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon; 2) an idealised, exaggerated or fictitious conception of a thing or person; and 3) a widely held but false belief or idea. Meaning variations of artefacts are also based on different context and interaction with artefacts (Siefkes, 2012, pp. 71-75; & Spradley, 2016, p. 5)

*Artefacts and Their Meaning Changes*

In semantic and historical linguistics, semantic (meaning) change refers to any change in the meaning(s) of a word over the course of time (Nordquist, 2019). It is also called semantic shift, lexical change, and semantic progression. Campbell (in Heim, 2003) described semantic change deals with change in meaning, understood to be a change in the concepts associated with a word [...]. Also, Blank (in Heim, 2003) described semantic change is a new meaning is added to the already existing meaning(s) of a word and then this new meaning is lexicalised (innovative semantic change).

In the context of (cultural) artefacts, changes of meaning also occur. Siefke’s (Siefkes, 2012, pp. 71-75) ‘context-dependent’ and ‘interaction with artefacts’ that make meaning of artefacts change do not apply to all artefact meanings all the time. Once an artefact gets its meaning, it does not guarantee the meaning

sustains. It may change over the lifetime of artefacts. Boradkar (in Siefkes, 2012, p. 77) identifies meaning changes between three stages of artefact existence: in production, artefacts are designed and manufactured; in distribution, they are advertised, displayed in stores and shipped to customers; in consumption, they are used, stored, modified, and finally disposed of. The meanings that are created in the three stages vary, depending on the different perspectives and intentions of the people involved.

Meaning changes occur due to two categories of factors: linguistic forces and extralinguistic forces (Blank & Koch, 1999, pp. 1 – 16). Linguistic forces are factors within the system of the language spoken (e.g metonymy, metaphors, and ellipsis). In contrast to linguistic forces, extralinguistic forces are factors in semantic change that are caused by social or historical factors (e.g psychological forces, sociocultural forces, and cultural encyclopaedic forces).

## Research Methodology

This research was a qualitative study using a descriptive ethnography approach. Ethnography is a research approach that refers both to the process and method according to which research is carried out and its outcomes (Shagrir, 2017, p. 9). It is to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world. He also emphasized field work ethnography concerns to study what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different. Ethnography learns from people rather than studying people (Spradley, 2016, p. 3). The objects of this study were the artefacts used in Toba Batak ceremonies: Tardidi (Baptism), Ulaon/Unjuk/Pamasu-masuon (Wedding), and Mamasuki Jabu (Entering a New House) ceremonies. The data were collected using interview and documentary techniques in Toba Batak sub-regions: Sibisa, Limbong Sagala, Sait ni Huta, and Lumban Siagian. The data were analysed using Miles', Huberman's, & Saldaña's (2014, pp. 31-32) proposal, covering: 1) data condensation; 2) data display; and 3) drawing and verifying conclusion.

## Findings and Discussions

### *The Types of Artefacts and Meaning Variations Used in Toba Batak Ceremonies Across Toba Batak sub-Regions*

The data analysis revealed 11 types of artefacts that get meaning variations. They covered: 1) Panahu/Ulu/Parsanggulan/na Marngingi (the upper head of pork); 2) Osang-osang (the jaw of pork); 3) Aliang-aliang/Liat-liatan (the neck of pork); 4) Soit/Tulan (the groins of pork); 5) Upa Sira/ Upa Suhut/Ihur-ihur (the backpart of pork); 6) Ulu ni dengke mulak (the in-return of pork); 7) one driedly-cooked fish; 8) three driedly-cooked fish; 9) Dengke na tinanggalan (some cut driedly-cooked fish); 10) Batak traditional woven clothes: Ragi Hotang; and 11) Ragi Hidup . For instances, the artefact 'Osang-osang (the jaw of pork)' in a Baptism ceremony signifies 'a respect toward the mother's brother of the baby's father as a request of prayer that the baby's parents may be blessed with grand-children in the future' in Sibisa sub-region. Whereas, in Limbong Sagala, Sait ni Huta and Lumban Siagian sub-regions, that artefact represents 'an act of respect toward the host's parents/ brother-in law'; 'an act of respect toward the brother parties of the wife's parents'; and 'an act of respect toward the host's parents-in law', respectively. The analysis of data showed the variations occur based on: the different regions; how artefacts are perceived and interpreted (Giacomin, in Marco & Giacomin, 2019, p. 1182; Siefkes, 2012, pp. 71-75; & Spradley, 2016, p. 5).

### *The Types of Artefacts and Meaning Changes in Toba Batak Ceremonies Across Toba Batak sub-Regions*

As described previously, a semiotic meaning change is a change of one meaning to another new one over the course of time (Nordquist, 2019; & Blank, in Heim, 2003). Lapp's (2022) also evidenced that the meaning of an artefact can change. Blank's and Koch's (1999, pp. 1 – 16) categorized the causal factors of meaning changes were linguistic and extralinguistic forces.

There were three artefacts getting meaning changes identified in this research: 1) 'Tandok' (the woven mendong bags); 2) 'Tintin Marangkup' (certain amount of the dowry for the brother of the bride's mother); and 3) 'Sulang/Sang-sang' (the chopped pork). Each signified 'degradation'. Under 1970s Tandok, into

which rice was put, was made of mendong and in Sibisa. However, since 1970s, it is made of plastic. The speech moderator of Sibisa stated that Tandok made of mendong represented “original quality” meaning. In contrast, the plastic-made Tandok’s signifies the “degradation of the quality”. In Sibisa, under 1970s/1980s, Upa Tulang in 10% of the amount of the dowry. It is Batak norm-based and represented “a high respect” of the bride’s parents toward the brother of the bride’s mother. However, since 1970s/1980s, it has changed based on the bride’s mother’s own will. This phenomena changes the sense of Upa Tulang to lack of respect toward the brother of the bride’s mother. ‘Sulang/Sang-sang’ in Lumban Siagian under 1970s signified a sense of high respect of toward the invitees in wedding ceremonies. But, since 1970s the former meaning of the artefact has changed or degraded. It represents “a lack of respect” meaning). The findings showed that artefact meanings could shift. It occurs over the course of time (Nordquist, 2019; Blank & Campbell, in Heim, 2003). The analysis data also revealed the causal factors of the ‘degradation of the meanings of the three artefacts were respectively due to: 1) the scarceness of the raw materials; 2) time saving; and Toba custom influences. All these meaning changes are categorized into the extra-linguistic factors (Blank & Koch, 1999, pp. 1 – 16).

## Conclusion

The factors of perceptions and interpretation as well as context-dependent and interactions with artefacts used in Toba Batak ceremonies by the sub-ethnic groups of Toba Batak in the sub-regions mentioned above result in the meaning variations of the artefacts. The findings served evidences that the factors greatly influence how a particular community perceive and interpret an artefact. The different perceptions and interpretations are typical to each of the sub-ethnic community in each sub-regions of Toba Batak. The differences are of the identity of the sub-ethnic group customs. As well as words, the artefacts used in Toba Batak ceremonies change their meanings to the new ones over the course of time. It was due to the extra-linguistic factors. The phenomena indicate the dynamic of the artefact meanings. It is highly recommended the old motivates and educates the young generations of Toba Batak in Toba Batak customs as a way of preserving them. The old can suggest the young to be the members of certain Batak organizations. The government should facilitate and support for establishing local cultural institutions to prevent the extinction of cultures. The researcher realized this study might be still out of expectations, in the techniques of collecting data and analysis, or even the scopes. It is recommended that other researchers carry out studies for further and better results.

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