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Is there a Batak History?

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Is there a Batak History?¹

Anthony Reid

The 8-10 million Bataks of northern Sumatra are one of Indonesia's most important and intriguing groups. They have clearly been in Sumatra for thousands of years. They have attracted a large number of studies of religion and missiology, and a few good ethnological and language studies. Yet they remain a people without history. It seems a classic case of Eric Wolf's argument, in *Europe and the People Without history*, that the neglect of the history of such stateless people was not just an absence but a distortion.² Ethnographers and colonial officials of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created such categories as highlanders, primitives, proto-Malays, and indeed Bataks as ethnic categories, and assumed their unchanging isolation from the currents of world history. But the Bataks, who were forcibly brought into the scholarly world's consciousness at that stage were, to follow Wolf's argument, already wholly transformed by international influences – their 'isolation' was itself an historical process.

Ashis Nandy makes the more specific charge that it is the statelessness of pre-modern non-Europeans that has denied them a history. In his view, my profession -- modern secular history as practised in the academies -- is inextricably linked as a mode of analysis with the modern nation state and its rise. History traces the lineage and legitimacy of modern states, and distorts our understanding of the past by doing so.³

Highland Sumatra does appear to support his case. Until the twentieth century, the great majority of Sumatra's people, and its complex, irrigated-rice, literate societies, were in the highlands. Yet these are never mentioned in the historical record. Virtually the only way in which Sumatra appears in histories of either Indonesia or the wider world before 1500 (except as a visiting-point of travellers like Marco Polo) is through Sriwijaya, thought to have

¹ This paper was initially delivered as a Public Lecture in the Museum Dahlem, Grosser Vortragsraum, Berlin, in the context of an International Conference on 'Archaeology and Ethnohistory in the Highlands of Sumatra', Freie Universität Berlin.

² Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (University of California Press, 1982), p.3 and passim.

³ Ashis Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles." *History & Theory* 34.2 (1995): 44-66.

ruled a large area from its seat in Palembang between the 7th and the 10th centuries. Concrete evidence on the ground about this state and its people is as scarce as what we know about highland societies in a similar period. Yet because Sriwijaya appeared as a state in Chinese and Arab records, it alone is celebrated in the history books.

Of course I could not resist testing the coupling of “Batak” with “History” in a Google search. Sure enough, the popular items at the top of the Googling process revealed no books or articles on the subject, but rather items such as a new keep-fit training apparatus called a Batak (and which seems already to have a history), as well as a village in Bulgaria, “forever associated with the April Uprising of 1876, one of the most heroic events in Bulgarian history”. The Batak of Bulgaria have a history, it appears, but not those of Sumatra.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The curious absence of Batak history does indeed apply chiefly to the history as written by academics, as Ashis Nandy might have expected. To my knowledge only three professional historians have written dissertations in English on Batak history. All wrote exclusively about the twentieth century, and all regrettably remain unpublished in the original English.⁴ In French there was a unique attempt by Daniel Perret at a more comprehensive history, albeit of the North Sumatra region rather than Bataks per se.⁵ Fortunately church or mission history is better served, especially in German. The publications here include one extremely detailed history of the early Karo mission written by anthropologist Rita Kipp.⁶

The general dearth of histories of any highland people in Indonesia is reflected in the national histories of Indonesia and regional histories of Southeast Asia. The more detailed studies may report the Christianization and incorporation of highlanders into the colonial state at the end

⁴ Lance Castles, ‘The Political Life of a Sumatran Residency: Tapanuli 1915-1940,’ Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1972 (published in Indonesian translation in 2001); Michael van Langenberg, ‘National Revolution in North Sumatra: Sumatra Timur and Tapanuli, 1942-1950,’ Ph.D. dissertation, Sydney University, 1976; Masashi Hirose, ‘Prophets and Followers in Batak Millenarian Responses to the Colonial Order: Parmalin, Na Siak Bagi, and Parhudamdin (1890-1930),’ Ph.D. dissertation, ANU, 1988 (published later in Japanese translation).

⁵ Daniel Perret, *La Formation d’un Paysage Ethnique: Batak et Malais de Sumatra Nord-Est* (Paris: Presses de l’EHEC, 1995).

⁶ Rita Smith Kipp, *The Early Years of a Dutch Colonial Mission: The Karo Field* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990).

of the nineteenth century, but nothing before that and almost nothing after. One of the recent histories, that of Jean Taylor, has no mention whatever of Bataks.⁷

Bataks themselves have written history, though to a very limited extent in the professional academy. The favourite topic of popular writers was, as in many other regions, the official link between minority ethnicities and the nationalist narrative—a ‘national hero’ sanctioned by the process inaugurated by Sukarno in 1959. Singamangaraja XII (1845-1907) was surprisingly the first Sumatran to make this list, in 1961, after a campaign throughout the 1950s by some of his descendents and affines to make him the pre-eminent Batak hero. He was well-placed as not only the last major resistance leader against the Dutch, hunted down and killed in 1907, but also the scion of the dynasty to approach nearest to sacred king-like status, albeit most respected by the Sumba group of Toba Batak lineages spread around his western-lake redoubt of Bakkara.

The first hagiography was published in 1951 by Adniel Lumban Tobing, who was also the leading figure in a festive reburial of his remains and the erection of a statue in his honour in the Toba Batak heartland, at Tarutung, in 1953.⁸ Further writing in this genre was stimulated by the success of this campaign in having Singamangaraja XII declared an Indonesian national hero in 1961, and a huge statue erected in his honour in Medan (marking the Toba Bataks’ definitive arrival in the regional capital). Mohammad Said was one of the pioneers to build on Tobing’s slim work by marrying Dutch sources with local legend.⁹ Among a plethora of speculative works which followed, the book of Professor Bonar Sidjabat of the Jakarta Theological Seminary sought to establish Singamangaraja’s credentials in the Indonesian academic world.¹⁰

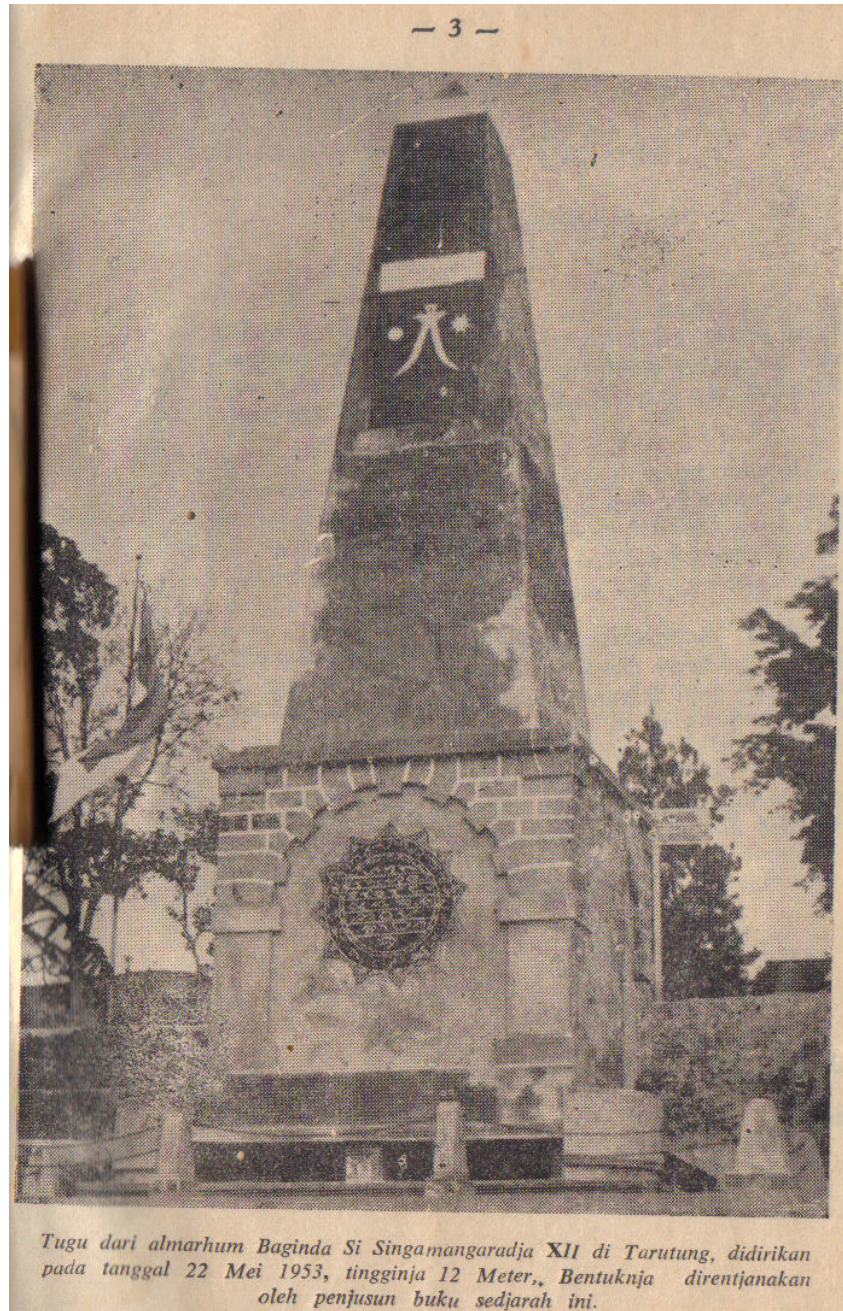
⁷ Jean Taylor, *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁸ Adniel L. Tobing, *Sedjarah Si Singamangaradja I-XII* (Medan: Firman Sihombing, 4th ed. 1957).

⁹ Mohammad Said, *Singamangaradja XII* (Medan: Waspada, 1961).

¹⁰ Prof. Dr. W.B. Sidjabat, *Ahu Si Singamangaraja* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1982.)

Fig. 1: Monument to Singamangaraja XII erected 1953 in Tarutung



Note: The motifs apparently selected by Adniel L. Tobing, the seal (below) and flag (above) of Singamangaraja XII, evidently both derived from Acehnese models.
(From Tobing, *Si Singamangaradja I-XII*, 4th ed., 1957).

The increasing role of Singamangaraja XII in Toba Batak popular self-identification was based largely on this success on elevating him to the official national pantheon, and therefore into the national textbooks read by all Indonesian school-children. For later generations educated in Indonesian national schools, he became the sole Batak historical figure. His lineage, although historically shadowy before the nineteenth century, could also represent a simulacrum of a state, a key for later Batak intellectuals to try to read the 'state' back into their earlier history.

In the 1957 reissue of his original 1951 book, Adniel Tobing put a version of this legendary lineage into print, beginning with the miraculous virgin birth of the progenitor of the line.¹¹ The imaginative engineer Mangaradja Parlindungan took speculation of this kind to new heights in his 1965 book, *Tuanku Rao*, of which more later. Batara Sangti, a Toba Batak government official (*wedana*) who had accepted the task in the 1950s of writing an 'official' history of Singamangaraja XII, finally produced his book well after Parlindungan's, in 1977. This was the first book to call itself a 'Batak History', and was hailed by its publisher with the words, "until this time it can be said that there was no book of 'Batak History' of a general and complete kind, which was on a level with the histories of the kingdoms that formerly existed in the northern Sumatra region and/or Indonesia".¹² He took the portentous step of providing dates for these shadowy figures, by the simple device of allowing thirty years between the birth dates of each of the twelve. By this means 'history' was pushed back to the imagined birth of the first SSM in 1515.¹³

The most interesting figures in linking Batak sources with international history-writing are two Batak intellectuals to whom we must return. Mangaradja Parlindungan has puzzled both historians and the Batak identity industry ever since his remarkable book *Tuanku Rao* was published in 1965.¹⁴ He reconstructed Batak history based on evidence he claimed his father and the Dutch BB-ambtenaar and Batak-kenner C. Poortman had assembled, reconciling oral and written Batak sources, many of them mysteriously lost for any other researchers, with the data available in Acehnese and Dutch writing. Secondly, there was the poet Sitor Situmorang,

¹¹ Tobing, *Si Singamangaradja I-XII*, pp.14-19

¹² Batara Sangti, *Sejarah Batak* (Balige: Karl Sianipar, 1977), p.3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹⁴ Mangaradja Parlindungan, *Tuanku Rao: Terror Agama Islam Mazhab Hambali di Tanah Batak, 1816-1833* (Jakarta: Tandang Pengharapan, n.d.[1965]).

who began to take an interest in Batak history when in a kind of exile in Holland in the 1970s and '80s. His first writings on Singamangaraja XII were compatible with the tradition of Dutch ethnography, and to ensure the association did not sully his credentials, he never mentioned Parlindungan or Poortman in his work.¹⁵ After his return to Indonesia, however, he developed the idea of “the institution of Singamangaradja as the principle of Toba unity”. He sought to qualify Lance Castles’ reading of ‘statelessness’¹⁶ through the notion of the ritual community or *bius*, 150 of which were individually sovereign throughout the Toba Batak territory, yet formed a kind of federative unity through the Singamangaradja. He made a bold use of Batak mythology to construct what he called “The socio-political history of an institution from the 13th to 20th centuries.”¹⁷

‘BATAK’ IN THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Historians are anxious to find voices that speak directly from a vanished past rather than through the medium of multiple generations of memory. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence from within, and the information of travellers from without, are their preferred keys to the proto-historic past. There is no doubt that we are at a terrible disadvantage in this respect with highland peoples such as those in Sumatra. Tomé Pires, our most reliable recorder of all manner of states and societies in sixteenth-century Southeast Asia, merely records “There are many heathen kings in the island of Sumatra and many lords in the hinterland, but, as they are not trading people and known, no mention is made of them”.¹⁸

As with all shadowy protohistories, the question arises with Batak whether we are on safer ground tracing the history of a place, the domain currently dominated by the six major Batak ethnolinguistic groups of today’s North Sumatra province, or of a people called Batak or

¹⁵ Sitor Situmorang, ‘The Position of the Si Singamangarajas from Bakkara in Relation to the Three Main Marga-groups: Borbor, Lontung, and Sumba,’ in *Cultures and Societies of North Sumatra*, ed. Rainer Carle (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1987), pp.221-33.

¹⁶ Lance Castles, ‘Statelessness and Stateforming tendencies among the Bataks before Colonial Rule,’ in *Pre-Colonial State Systems in Southeast Asia: The Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Bali-Lombok, South Celebes*, ed. Anthony Reid and Lance Castles, (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 1979), pp.67-76.

¹⁷ Sitor Situmorang, *Toba Na Sae: Sejarah Lembaga Sosial Politik Abad XIII-XX* [1993], (2nd ed., Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2004), p.20 and passim.

¹⁸ Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires* [1515], ed. A. Cortesão (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), p.165.

identifiable in some other way. And if the latter, what does this concept mean before the period of national self-definition in the twentieth century?

In terms of place, physical remains have so far offered us three major urban complexes in the North Sumatran area prior to the Islamization of coastal ports. All must have been important gateways for the trade of the interior highlands, though on the borders of what is thought to be Batak territory today. Starting with the oldest, they are:

- The camphor and benzoin port of Barus on the west coast, flourishing from the 8th to 13th centuries, and recently excavated by a French-Indonesian team led by Claude Guillot;¹⁹
- The Buddhist temple complex of Padang Lawas, near the upper Baruman River in the south, which dates from the 11th to 14th centuries. The ruins lie as far from the sea as one can be in North Sumatra, in what is an unproductive grassland in modern times, but is at a low point in the Bukit Barisan mountain range which may have been a transit route for early traders.²⁰
- The east coast port of Kota Cina, near Medan, which flourished from the 12th to 14th centuries, and must have had a role in the presumably Karo-Batak kingdom of Aru, a major maritime and piratic power from the 13th to 16th centuries.²¹

While archaeology remains in its infancy in this area, it is safe to conclude that these would have been sites through which Indian (especially), Chinese, Javanese and other influences entered the Bataklands at this time, if not before. Kota Cina is usually associated with the influx of Hindu elements among the Karo, and Barus among the Toba Batak. But Padang

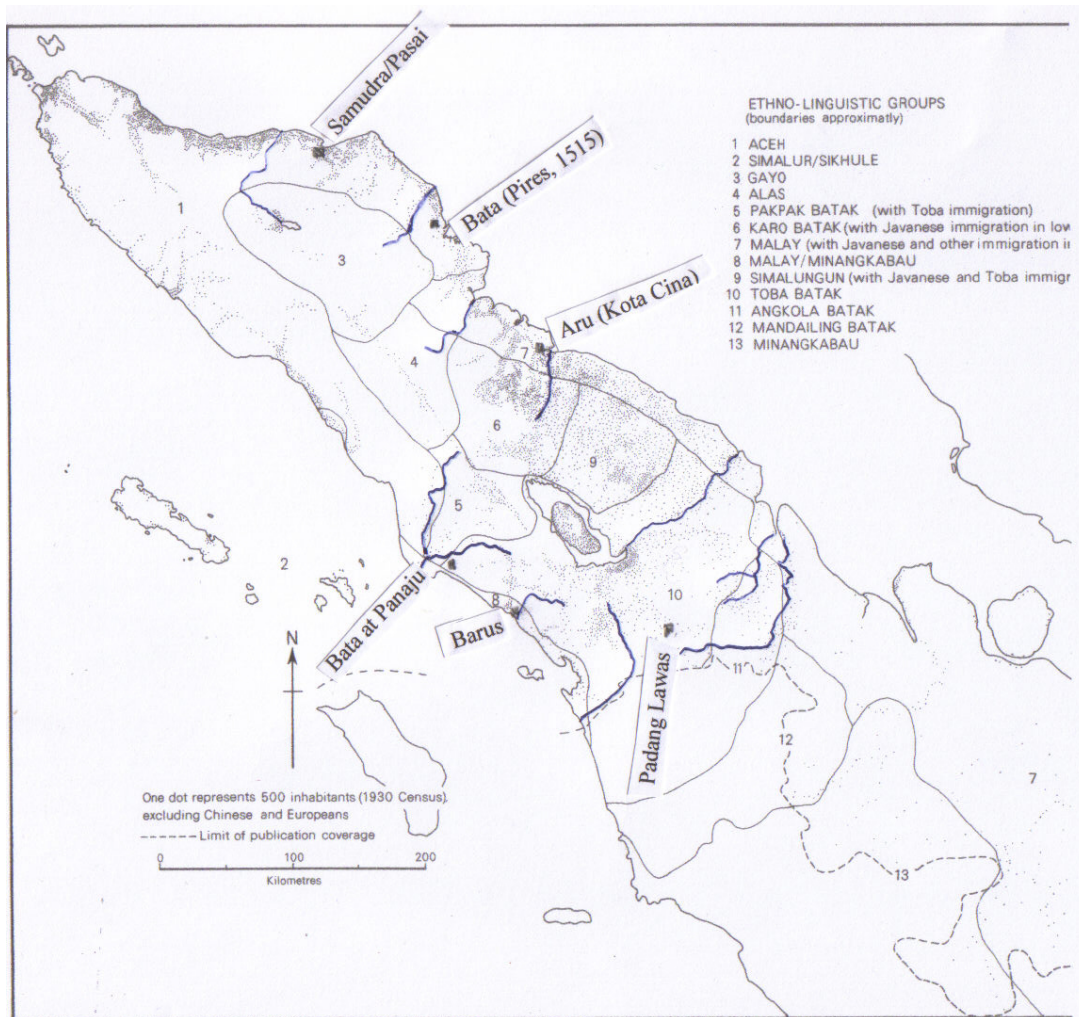
¹⁹ Claude Guillot (ed.), *Histoire de Barus*, 2 vols. (Paris: Association Archipel, 1998-2003).

²⁰ This point is made by Miksic in *Ancient History: Indonesia Heritage* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, nd [1996]), pp. 98-9.

²¹ A.C. Milner, E. Edwards McKinnon, and Tengku Luckman Sinar, 'A Note on Aru and Kota Cina', *Indonesia* 26 (1978), pp. 1-42.

Lawas remains mysterious, and the new work there may prove it to be a more important key to a state-forming 'path not taken'.²²

Map 1: Population (1930 Census), Ethnic Territories as of Early 20th Century, and Historic Sites Indicated by Archaeological Remains and Portuguese Accounts



²² A Franco-Indonesian team led by Daniel Perret has commenced excavations at Padang Lawas, which may at last shed more light on this complex.

The only element of ‘Batakness’ spectacular enough to be noted in the earliest sources is their cannibalism. Foreign sources note its presence in Sumatra long before the appearance of the term ‘Batak’ or any other feature which could be identified with it. Ptolemy was the first, around 100 CE, to record the presence of cannibalism in what he identified as an island cluster of Barusae, presumably Sumatra. Following him a long series of Arab, Indian and European sources, including Marco Polo, attest to the existence of cannibalism in the island, including on its more accessible north coast. Nicolo da Conti was the first European, in 1430, to use the term Batak (*Batech*) for this cannibal population in Sumatra.²³

The term Batak appears even earlier in Chinese sources, but as a polity or place, not a people. Chau Ju-kua (1226) has an obscure reference to Bo-ta as connected with Sriwijaya, while the Yuan (Mongol) dynastic chronicle mentions Ma-da next to Samudra (Pasai), both offering tribute to the Imperial court in 1285-6. Ma-da would be pronounced Ba-ta in Hokkien, the likely language of Chinese trader informants.²⁴

This thirteenth-century Bata appears to have survived to the beginning of the sixteenth century, the first great watershed in Batak self-definition because of the confrontation with Islam. About 1515, before the rise of Aceh, Tomé Pires described a loosely Muslim kingdom in the same area.

The kingdom of Bata is bordered on one side by the kingdom of Pase and on the other by the kingdom of Aru (*Daruu*). The king of this country is called *Raja Tomjano*.²⁵ He is a Moorish knight. He often goes to sea to pillage. He is the son-in-law of the king of Aru. He brought in the ship Frol de la Mar which was wrecked in a storm off the coast of his country, and they say he recovered everything water could not spoil, wherefore they say he is very rich.²⁶

²³ “In ejus insulae [Taprobana=Sumatra], quam dicunt *Batech*, parte, anthropophagi habitant..”, cited in Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (new ed. New Delhi, 1979), p. 74.

²⁴ I owe this point to Geoff Wade.

²⁵ This title may be the same as the Timoraja (‘eastern king’) in the title of the king reputedly encountered by Pinto around 1540; *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, transl. Rebecca Catz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 20.

²⁶ Tomé Pires, pp. 145-6.

Pires' most specific geographical information is that this Batak possessed the sources of petroleum in the Tamiang-Perlak area, later a precious resource for Aceh. The fact that the king was listed as Muslim and a son-in-law of the Aru king, also in some sense Muslim, indicates that the religious situation was still fluid, the inhabitants of the island recognised themselves by place rather than ethnicity or religion, and that the natural centre for state-like formations for the interior peoples was at their points of connection with maritime trade. But Pinto did not list this presumably hybrid Karo state as cannibalistic; that honour was reserved for the west coast area above Singkil.²⁷

For Mendes Pinto writing of 1539, northern Sumatra had been transformed by the expansion of Aceh along the north coast, swallowing whatever kingdoms there were between its Banda Aceh centre and Aru. This militantly Islamic character of this expansionism was vividly described by Pinto, but is also evident in other Portuguese, Turkish and Acehnese sources on the sixteenth century confrontation between an Aceh-led commercial coalition and the Portuguese, with whom were associated both non-Muslims and kingdoms like Aru whose Islam had rested lightly on the ruling court.²⁸ This confrontation seemed already to have turned the term Batak definitively into a description of a people; a people defined by their resistance to Islam in this militant new form. But it was still a people with a king, "the King of the Bataks", whose capital was at Panaju, now on the west coast, about 8 leagues (50 km) up a river Pinto calls Guateamgim.²⁹ This was presumably one of the west coast rivers to the south of Singkil giving access to the camphor and benzoin land west of Lake Toba. The capital's name Panaju is reminiscent of the kingdom of Pano (Pão) mentioned in the same area by Pires.³⁰

Pinto makes his story of the Bataks a tragic one, with a king first refusing the offer of Islam and determining to fight the Acehnese sultan, then making a treaty and marriage alliance with him, which the sultan treacherously broke by attacking and killing his sons. The Batak king

²⁷ Tomé Pires, p. 163.

²⁸ *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, pp. 20-49. Anthony Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier: Acehnese and other Histories of Sumatra* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), pp. 69-93; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, c.1450-1680* (Yale University Press, 2 vols., 1988-93), II: 143-50

²⁹ *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, pp. 20-25.

³⁰ Pires p. 410 (Portuguese text). In his English translation, p.163, Cortesão gratuitously rendered Pão as Barus, declaring it "obviously a transcriber's mistake".

then assembled a major alliance of local chiefs to fight the Acehnese, whose Turkish reinforcements however proved too much for him. He then retreated far up the river.³¹

This appears to mark the last of coastal ‘kingdoms’ associated with Bataks either by name or life-style. The ports were hereafter all Muslim to some degree, and the people of the uplands who resisted the Acehnese *jihad* were called Batak by them. Thus Barros, writing in mid-century, could report that Sumatra

is inhabited by two kinds of people, moros [Muslims] and gentios [heathens]; the latter are natives, while the former were foreigners who came for reasons of commerce and began to settle and populate the maritime region, multiplying so quickly that in less than 150 years they had established themselves as senhores [lords] and began calling themselves kings. The heathens, leaving the coast, took refuge in the interior of the island and live there today. Those who live in the part of the island facing Malaca are called Batas. They are the most savage and warlike people in the whole world; they eat human flesh.³²

The definition of Bataks as being those who resisted Islam and continued to eat pork was shared by a seventeenth century Aceh text, the *Hikayat Aceh*. It twice mentions Batak as an ethnic group. In a succession conflict of the 1590s it portrays a rebel prince stopping at Barus on the way to challenge his brother at the capital, and recruiting two upriver Batak *datu* (healers), “skilled in the arts of sorcery (*sihir*) and magic (*hikmat*)”, who successfully caused the king to become sick.³³ A second incident is more surprising, portraying the young Iskandar Muda encountering ‘an old Batak’ on a hunt for a wild buffalo, who tricked the prince into giving him a sword and kris, and then scampered off into the forest.³⁴ This presumably says nothing about ethno-linguistic identity, but means only that there were still villagers unincorporated into the Aceh state and religion very close to Banda Aceh, and that such people were called ‘Batak’. This became in succeeding centuries a definition that many

³¹ *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, pp. 20-30.

³² Barros, João de, *Da Asia* (Lisbon: Regia Officina, 1977, reprinted Lisbon 1973), Decada III, Livro V, cap. 1, p. 509.

³³ *De Hikajat Atjeh*, ed. Teuku Iskandar (‘s-Gravenhage, Martimnus Nijhoff, 1958), p. 92.

³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 186-7.

Bataks accepted. Nineteenth-century witnesses assert that when Minahassan missionary teachers, and Chinese traders, penetrated into Batak areas for the first time they were also considered Batak, since they ate pork.³⁵

“ISOLATION” OF THE LONG 18TH CENTURY

The aggressive expansion of Islamic Aceh in the period 1520-1630, at the expense of all the varied coastal states, ensured a separation not only between Bataks and Islam, but also between Bataks and the port-states of the coast. Batak “statelessness” can be dated from this period, when states came to be associated by Batak with an aggressive ‘other’. This statelessness was however qualified. The Karo and Simalungun on the east coast, and the Toba Batak on the west, each preserved from the earlier period a certain memory of state, often linked through tradition with Aceh. Thus the four Sibayak who had a certain ritual primacy in the Karo area, and the four Raja who held a somewhat stronger position in the Simalungun area, were popularly believed to have been inaugurated during the period of Aceh hegemony over the coast.³⁶ Parlindungan claims Toba sources from Bakkara chastised the Karo and Simalungun for erecting their own states and thereby falling away from the Sori Mangaradja dynasty, but it is very doubtful there was ever such a sense of common identity among the different ethno-linguistic groups.

Many Toba Batak traditions also linked a principal of sacred descent with the coastal kingdoms they remembered – Aceh and Barus. The latter was long recognised as a crucial port for Toba Batak, and therefore some ritual tribute was to be expected. Joustra was struck by the surprisingly uniform set of traditions about the Barus link with Bakkara and the Singamangaraja line,³⁷ though I will present it here in the form of the Barus Hilir chronicle edited by Jane Drakard. This describes the journey of the founder of the Muslim dynasty of Barus Hilir, Sultan Ibrahim, through the Batak territories prior to establishing his kingdom on the coast. First in Silindung, and then at the Singamangaraja’s sacred place of Bakkara, and finally in the Pasaribu territory, the local chiefs pleaded with him to stay and become their

³⁵ Daniel Perret, *La Formation*, p. 60.

³⁶ M. Joustra, *Batak-Spiegel* (Leiden: van Doesburgh, 1910), p. 23; Rita Kipp, *Dissociated Identities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 215-17; Simon Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind: Old and New in Karo Religion* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1994), pp. 63-4.

³⁷ Joustra, *Batak-Spiegel*, pp. 25-26.

king. At Bakkara he urged the Bataks to become Muslim, because then they would be one people (*bangsa*) with him and he could stay as king. The Bataks responded apologetically, “We do not want to enter Islam. Whatever else you order we will obey”. He therefore moved on, but not before fathering a child by a local woman, who became the first Singamangaraja. In each place agreements were sworn to by both sides, establishing the long-term relationship between upland Batak producers on one hand and coastal Malay traders on the other. These included establishing the ‘four penghulu’ of Silindung as a supra-village institution linked to the Barus trade.³⁸

Since Barus and other ports on the west coast were themselves frequently under Aceh suzerainty, it is not surprising that Aceh also figured in Batak memory. Its ritual pre-eminence over the Singamangaraja line was acknowledged in various ways in the better-known nineteenth century, including the Singamangaraja’s seal and flag, both of which appear modelled on those of the Aceh Sultan (see fig. 1). This link, mythologised in the mysterious Batak progenitor-figure Raja Uti who disappeared to Aceh, may go back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century links.

For Parlindungan, however, and the Batak manuscripts of the ‘Arsip Bakkara’ he claims as a source, there was another powerful connection with Aceh in the late 18th century. He claims that these documents reveal a treaty of friendship between the otherwise unknown Singamangaraja IX and Sultan Alauddin Muhammad Syah, known to have ruled Aceh uneasily from 1781 to 1795. The treaty purportedly agreed that Singkil was Acehnese, the Uti Kanan (Simpang Kanan?) area Batak, and Barus a neutral zone. But the Acehnese cannon which sealed the deal caused such havoc among some elephants at Bakkara that Singamangaraja IX was killed by one of them.³⁹

As so often with Parlindungan’s fanciful stories, there seems to be something of substance in this. In the 1780s, the Singkil area was developed for pepper-cultivation, and the limits of Acehnese control became an urgent concern. Acehnese raided the British outstation of

³⁸ Jane Drakard, *A Malay Frontier: Unity and Duality in a Sumatran Kingdom* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1990), pp. 75-80.

³⁹ Parlindungan, *Tuanku Rao*, pp. 486-7.

Tapanuli (Sibolga) in 1786, and the British responded by attacking some Acehese forts.⁴⁰ This was indeed a time, in other words, when Acehese would have sought to lock Batak suppliers and traders into their networks rather than the British ones.

Let me throw in a further fanciful vignette, if only to further undermine what remains of the idea of Batak “isolation” during the long 18th century. In 1858 a Frenchman or Eurasian called De Molac told a Pondicherry newspaper that in the last quarter of the 18th century “his family settled in the most savage part of Sumatra, established magnificent agricultural establishments there, acquired great influence among the natives and succeeded in reforming their customs”. The head of the family “had recently been elected chief of the confederation of Bataks, a Malay people whose lands border Dutch possessions and the kingdom of Aceh.”⁴¹ While no doubt largely invented, this story is sufficiently consistent with the supernatural inferences drawn about 19th century visitors to the Batak highlands, including Burton and Ward, Van der Tuuk and Modigliani, that we should not be surprised if such a pattern began earlier.

PADRI INCURSIONS

The nineteenth century was another time of great upheaval for the Bataklands. The Christianisation of its last three decades is rather well documented by western and Batak writers, but the traumatic Padri invasions remain poorly covered. By far the most detail is provided by Parlindungan, and is therefore highly suspect. Yet this episode is so important that it demands serious attention. Batak sources agree that some of the most militant of the Islamic marauders who brought fires and sword to the Toba area were themselves newly-converted Bataks. Singamangaraja X was killed by a militant Padri they called Si Pokki, around 1830 according to most authorities. Parlindungan however puts this event in 1819, and traces the source of the hostilities to cleavages within the Singamangaraja lineage itself, with Tuanku Rao presented as an alienated Batak turned militant Muslim.

⁴⁰ Lee Kam Hing, *The Sultanate of Aceh: Relations with the British, 1760-1824* (Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1995), pp. 67-75. The British record on this seems unlikely to have been available to Parlindungan, though it may have been to his alleged source, Resident Poortman, who he says was an official in Singkil around 1900 and in retirement made a trip to British archives in 1937.

⁴¹ *Le Moniteur Universel* (Paris), no. 104, 4 avril 1858, page 467.

In any case, this event marked the historic emergence of the Singamangaraja dynasty as a symbol of Batak unity against outside threats. It begins a period of upheaval as these unprecedented threats assail the mountain strongholds one after the other. And for these upheavals of the early nineteenth century there are enough traces in the *pustaha* as well as European sources to create the stuff of real historical debate.

CONCLUSION

So, is there a Batak history?

Yes, there have been some ingenious attempts by Batak authors to extend the known story back in time to the sixteenth century, even if this has not yet made a significant impact on the received history of the professionals. Yet even these Batak labours remain a somewhat perverse attempt to make Batak history more like every other civilizational story, with a respectable state to give it meaning.

Should not the glory of the Bataks be rather their success in managing without states, and the real challenge of the Batak historian be to show how social and economic history could for once be written without the distorting lens of state-imposed hierarchies?

It is not an easy task, but I believe that there is much that can be done. Let me end with just three avenues which seem particularly promising, if challenging.

The difficult Batak manuscripts, the *pustaha*. They have so far seemed so difficult and so ahistorical as not to repay sustained effort to master their contents. Yet the claims of Parlindungan/Poortman are so suggestive, those of Sitor Situmorang so ingenious, that somebody ought to follow these tracks systematically, to establish what can be known about the connections with Islam, with Aceh and Barus, and with the east coast; what can be said about the Padri incursion and the social upheavals they brought, and what was the dynamic of Batak society in that century before Christianisation.

The ‘underside’ of history can be accessed through the slaves who found their way to Melaka, Padang, Batavia, Penang and Singapore. There is an unfortunate avoidance of this feature by nationalist historians, though the documents are richer on slaves than any other non-elite

category. It may well be, for example, that the Sumatran slave who accompanied Magellan around the world, Enrique, was as much a Batak as anybody at that time.⁴² Penang in 1835 counted 561 Bataks among its population, and some did enter into court and other records before being assimilated into Malay or Chinese populations.⁴³

A fuller examination of material culture, including the textiles which Sandy Niessen used to such effect; the systems of trade and exchange which effectively united the coastal regions and the interior of Sumatra in an efficient four-day market cycle;⁴⁴ and the ritual systems which helped establish the coherence of Batak society.

By these and other means our successors may eventually reveal through Batak history how to truly write a history without states. I wish them well.

⁴² Magellan and Pigafetta agree that Enrique was a Sumatran, purchased by Magellan in Melaka around 1514. Yet curiously it is Filipinos and Malaysians who have competed to claim him, never Sumatrans to the best of my knowledge.

⁴³ James Low, *The British Settlement of Penang* (1836, reprinted Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1972), pp. 126, 290-91

⁴⁴ George Sherman, *Rice, Rupees and Rituals: Economy and Society Among the Samosir Batak of Sumatra* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 36-47.