



Lake Toba

# **Batak** textiles of Sumatra

Pamela A Cross

## Batak textiles of Sumatra: Pamela Cross - an introduction

- Life-long passion for textiles, especially traditional techniques
- Obsessive collector of traditional textiles mainly from S E Asia and S W China
- Run information website [www.tribaltextiles.info](http://www.tribaltextiles.info) with associated forum [www.tribaltextiles.info/community](http://www.tribaltextiles.info/community)
- Collected first Batak textile in Medan, Sumatra in 1996
- Visited Lake Toba and Toba and Karo Batak areas in 1997 buying new weavings and some older pieces
- In 2006 had a 'virtual' introduction to a Toba Batak family wanting to sell a textile inheritance of family woven textiles and ritual cloths
- Over next 3 years added 19 family textiles to my collection (Vera Tobing collection), amassed related photos and history going back to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and developed friendship with the family intermediary, Maria DRT Ambesa
- On-going research into the family, Batak textiles and culture
- Whilst researching met Sandra Niessen, probably the foremost expert on Batak textiles, whilst she completed a major publication on Batak textiles to be launched on 15 May 2009 : 'Legacy in Cloth: Batak Textiles of Indonesia'

# Batak textiles: from *namarbaju* to matriarch

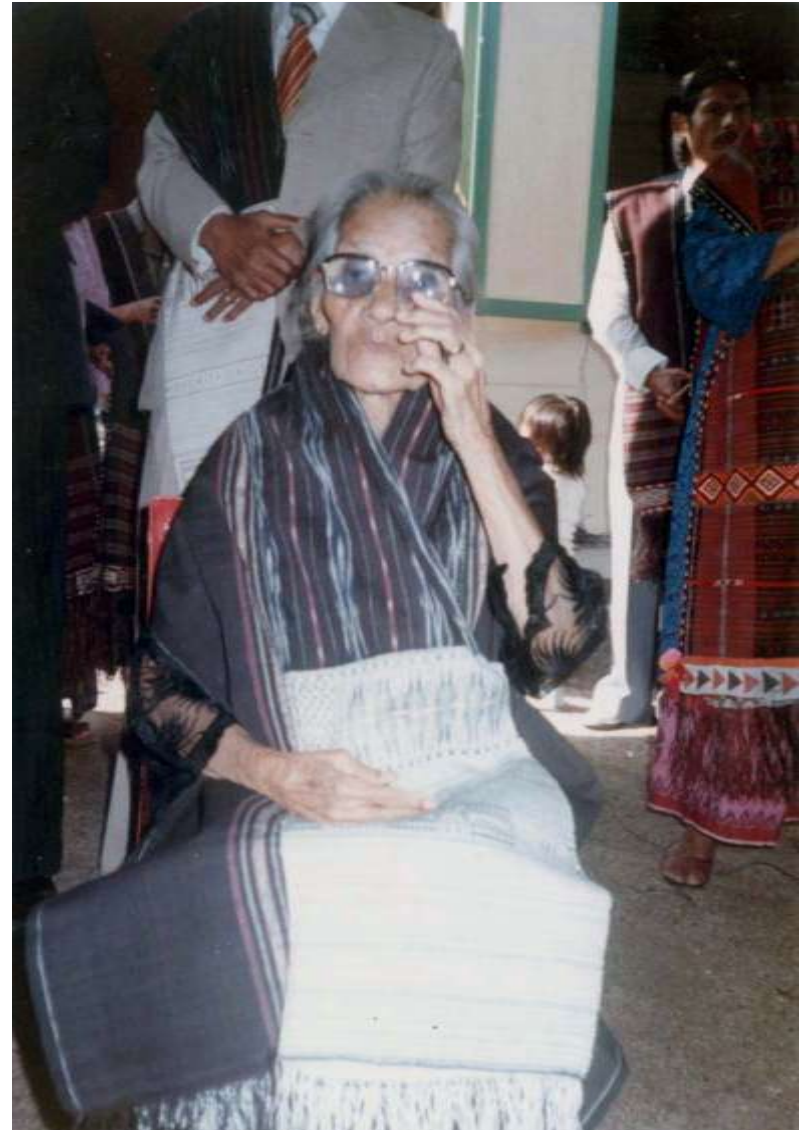
Ernestina br. Hutagalung, 1893-1985



*ragi hotang na marsimata*



*sadum*



*ragidup*

## The Batak: Where and who are they?

Batak lands lie in the mountainous region of North Sumatra - the Bukit Barisan 1,000 km range from Aceh in the north to Lampung in the south.

Myth has original Batak homeland on shores of Lake Toba, the result of enormous volcanic explosion, in the middle of a giant caldera 1,000 metres above sea level.

The Batak consist of 6 ethnic groups with mutually unintelligible languages and dialects, different religious concepts, political systems, art, architecture and textiles.

- **Karo and Simalungun** in north and north-east
- **Pakpak/Dairi** in north-west
- **Toba** in the centre
- **Angkola and Mandailing** in the south



Toba Batak village



Karo Batak house



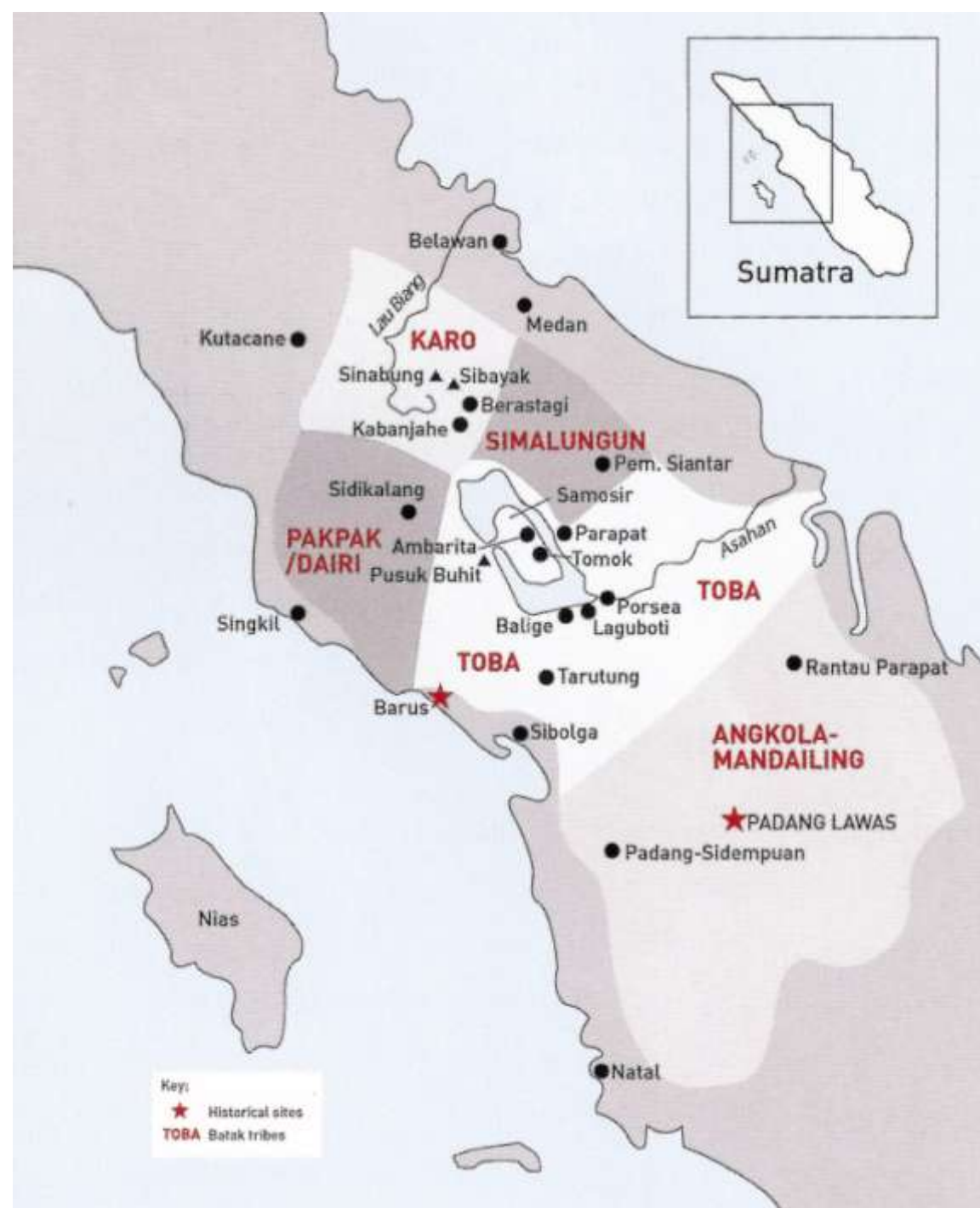
# The Batak: where and who are they?

Distribution of the six Batak groups.

Due to extensive migration and intermarriages the borders are arbitrary because they are often based on chronologically and geographically narrow fields of study.

**Sibeth, A., and Carpenter, B. W., (2007), *Batak Sculpture*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet p.20, illus.**

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## The Batak: who are they?

➤ descendents of **first Austronesians** (once known as 'Proto-Malay', first Malays), Mongoloid people migrating to SE Asia perhaps 6,000 years ago from SW China & Taiwan. Other descendents may include Dayaks of Borneo, Toraja of Sulawesi - outstanding weavers using body-tension looms and warp *ikat* patterning.

➤ also thought to be a later **migration from Dong-son** in Tonkin (Vietnam) introducing bronze to Indonesia around 700 BC (Maxwell, 1990: 240). Metal drums provide a record of motifs – spirals, curves, meanders – found in most important Batak ritual textiles and in decorations on houses.



➤ **Indian influence:** Niessen, 2009: 55-59, discusses academic debate on Indian influence on Batak which she sees – direct and indirect - for one to two millennia. Influence may be seen in textiles, writing, name of Karo sub-clan (Sembiring), magico-religious culture.

➤ trade with Srivijaya, Hindu-Buddhist kingdom to south (Palembang) C7<sup>th</sup> - C11<sup>th</sup>

➤ trade with Tamil settlements on east and west coasts of Sumatra which wrested control of trade from Srivijaya in C11<sup>th</sup> – Niessen suggests possible influence on weaving techniques by settlement of Tamil soldier/weavers (Toba *ragidup*, *pinunsaan*; Simalungun *bulang*, her 'Indian cloths' with tripartite central field).

## The Batak lands: the last two centuries...

19<sup>th</sup> Century – significant incursions into the Batak lands caused major upheavals in Batak life and culture:

- Religious penetrations overturned much of the religious life of the Batak:
  - *Padri* – fanatical Muslim sect from south (1821-37) – caused, with Dutch influence, conversion of Mandailing and Angkola to Islam and even denial by them of Batak heritage and disassociation with ‘barbaric’ north; brought chaos to Toba Batak lands.
  - 1864 the establishment of the first Christian church in Silindung valley - Toba Batak lands south of Lake Toba - by German missionary, Ludwig Nommensen and progressive Christianisation of the Toba Batak.
- From 1835 the Dutch increasingly colonised the different Batak groups until, by 1908, annexation of all the Batak lands was complete.
- Today, although the Batak lands remain their heartland, the Batak are dynamic and enterprising and have spread outside their traditional lands across Indonesia and overseas. However, there remains a dualism between the traditional and the modern which can be seen in their retention of the use of traditional textiles in major life-changing ceremonies.

## Batak textiles:

Textiles created predominantly for clothing with each clan having its own unique dress code and set of clothes. Most knowledge of Batak textile traditions based on museum collections from C19<sup>th</sup> and early C20<sup>th</sup> and early accounts of traders, scholars and collectors.

William Marsden (1793), John Anderson (1826) refer to Batak clothing as:

- two woven cotton cloths of a harsh and wiry nature – larger one wrapped around the waist, narrower one worn as a shoulder cloth – worn by both men and women
- plus a strip of bark cloth or bundle of yarn around head and as sash.
- higher status and wealthy men wearing traded cloths & clothing especially Malay *baju* and striped woven headcloths from Aceh

Originally Batak grew, were self sufficient in, and exported cotton producing the wiry and stiff rectangular cloths commented on above. Long history of internal trade in cotton – raw and thread. However, by early C20<sup>th</sup> most cotton was imported either as thread or as cloth. Karo Batak especially attracted to soft cotton cloth from India which they dyed blue and wore in traditional style.

Natural dyes originally used included:- blue/black: indigo *Marsdenia tinctoria* (Batak: *salaon*); red: *Morinda citrifolia* (Batak: *bangkudu*).  
Traditional three colours: black/blue, red and white (natural).



Tropenmuseum 2006



## Batak textiles:

Toba Batak  
clothing – late 19<sup>th</sup>  
century

woman wears  
*ragidup* around her  
torso over *baju*



man wears  
*bolean*  
shoulder cloth,  
*sibolang* hip  
cloth.

High-class (Toba) Batak family. Collection: Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum für Volkerkunde, Cologne.  
Batak Cloth & Clothing: A Dynamic Indonesian Tradition, Sandra A. Niessen, 1993: page 86

## Batak textiles: weaving techniques and terms explained:

- **warp** threads – the long threads running away from the weaver
- **weft** threads – crossways threads going from right to left/left to right
- **body tension loom** – tension applied to warp by the weight of weaver's body
- **continuous warp** – warp wrapped in continuous, circular thread
- **warp faced** cloth - more warp than weft threads per sq cm; warp threads dominant in finished cloth and weft threads largely hidden
- **warp patterning**: stripes, *ikat*, supplementary warp
  - **warp *ikat***: ancient patterning often found with simple, body tension looms. A resist dyeing technique, frequently on cotton, where the warp threads are tightly bound in small bundles to resist the dye (e.g. Toba *sibolang*, *surisuri*, *bolean*)
  - **supplementary warp**: additional warp creating pattern or 'floating' above ground weave (central edges of side panels, Toba *ragidup/pinunsaan*).
- **twining** - a simple form of weaving, out of a loom, in a weft direction twisting two or more threads around warps or groups of warps and usually forming a pattern. e.g. major patterning at ends of *ragi hotang*. Thought to be a very ancient technique.
- **exchanging warps** of central panel:
  - **warp extension** by adding in new, white warps during weaving – Toba *ragidup*
  - **warp substitution** with new white warps replacing initial warps which are cut off – Simalungun *bulang* (Niessen, 1988/89).
- **supplementary weft** - weft added to ground weave to form pattern *ragidup*, *ragi hotang*

## Batak textiles: key Toba Batak textiles



➤ earliest textiles are thought to be the blue, indigo cloths decorated with warp *ikat* which have high ritual importance: *sibolang* (most important), *surisuri*, *bolean*.



➤ most significant ritual textile is the *ragidup* (Silindung valley) / *pinunsaan* (Porsea), the 'Indian cloths' with their tripartite central field with the two end panels of supplementary weft joined by either warp extension, *ragidup* or sewn, *pinunsaan* and incorporating Dong-son designs and different male and female ends with designs 'read' by a knowledgeable elder.



➤ another important ritual textile is the *ragi hotang*, often worn by men at ritual ceremonies. Decoration incorporates stipple warp *ikat*, warp stripes, supplementary weft at the ends and broad bands of twining above the fringe. This twining was originally executed by men who also painted and carved the Toba Batak houses.



➤ *mangiring*: a maroon cloth with warp stripes and warp *ikat* arrow designs, possibly influenced by Indian trade cloths. Shoulder cloth of young girls and gift from maternal grandparents as carrying cloth for first baby.



➤ *sadum*: originated as a fashionable shoulder cloth in the Silindung valley, has become an acceptable ritual textile for women. Influenced by Angkola Batak *parompa sadum*

## Batak textiles: key textiles

Toba Batak blue  
warp *ikat* cloths

*sibolang*



These textiles are thought to  
be 60-70 years old



*bolean*

## Batak textiles: key textiles

Toba Batak *pinunsaan* from Porsea comprises 5 sections sewn together



female *pinarhalak*



male *pinarhalak*

*pinunsaan* commissioned by Vera Tobing in Huta Banua (World village), Porsea, in 1983 when she had her 'Vera's Ulos' business





# Batak textiles: key textiles

## Toba Batak *ragi hotang*



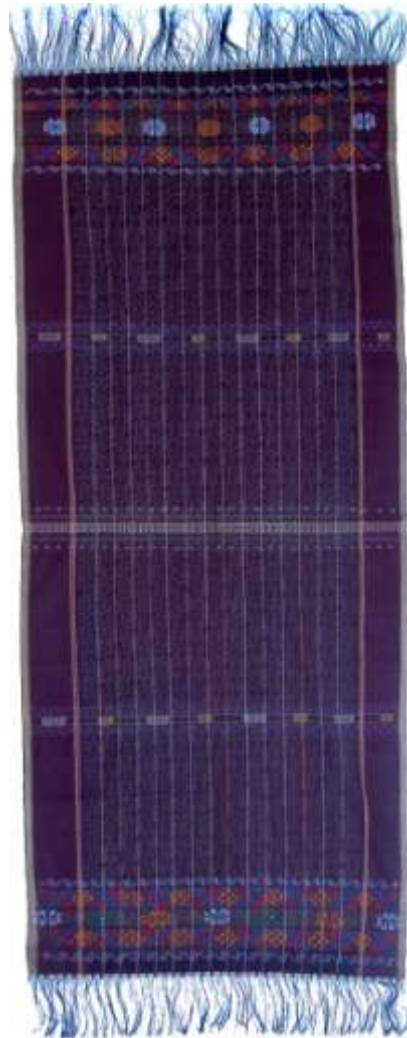
## Batak textiles: key textiles

*mangiring*



*mangiring* woven by Ernestina br. Hutagalung  
around 1909

*namarpisoran*



*na marpisoran* woven by Ernestina br. Hutagalung  
around 1909

[www.tribaltextiles.info](http://www.tribaltextiles.info)

*sadum*



*sadum* woven by Tianur br. Hutabarat  
around 1940

## Batak textiles: gift exchange

Across Indonesia textiles play an important role in gift exchange at major life-change ceremonies. Gittinger, 1990: 18-21 writes of their importance both for their real value and their symbolic value as product of women. In many Indonesian groups textiles retain aura from sacred origins in myth and legend. The Batak believe textiles connect humans with the spirit world, protect the soul of wearer; used in divination.

Similar traditions across the Batak groups. Those of Toba Batak most documented and will be used as illustration here. Although Toba Batak introduced to Christianity in mid C19<sup>th</sup> they have retained much of their ritual life and for every ritual some use of indigenous cloth is prescribed and indispensable (Niessen, 1993: 112).

Gift exchange is controlled by customary rules and practices (*adat*) between descent groups (*marga*) or patrilineages of 'bride-givers' (*hula hula*) and 'bride-takers' (*boru*). Marriage automatically establishes the relationship between the groups.

➤ Gifts from bride-givers: **ulos** - generic name for hand-crafted textiles. *Ulos* may contain other items but there remains a requirement for actual textiles (Gittinger, 1990: 18-21).

➤ Gifts from bride-takers: **piso** – means knife although knives rarely given rather goods such as buffalo, pigs or money.



## Batak textiles: major ceremonies

Major ceremonies where gifts are exchanged and traditional textiles may be worn:



- **weddings**
- **7<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy**
- **funerals**
- **transfer and re-burial of bones**



➤ **Weddings:** originally most of the textile gifts from the bride's family would have been woven in the family although there is a long tradition of trading textiles between local *marga* and those further afield specialising in particular key textiles. Many textiles given by *hula hula* (bride-givers) at a wedding to participants and guests, in particular:

➤ *Mangulosi*: the union of the marriage itself is represented by the act of *mangulosi* (blessing) wrapping the bride and groom in a single textile, often a *ragi hotang*, to give blessings for a harmonious and fruitful marriage

➤ *Ulos pansamot*: the groom's mother is wrapped in a *ragidup* (the most important Toba Batak textile) by the bride's father. This represents linking the two *marga* and symbolises the sharing of the superior soul-force (*sahala*) of the bride-givers to strengthen the soul force of the bride-takers in times of sickness or adversity (Gittinger, 1990: 20).

## Batak textiles - major ceremonies:



### wedding: *mangulosi*

groom and bride wrapped by the bride's mother in a modern, metal thread, *ragi hotang*, uniting the couple

2006: wedding, Bintang Irene br. Tarihoran

### wedding: *ulos pansamot*

mother of the groom wrapped in a Silindung *ragidup*, the gift from the mother of the bride, uniting the two families





## Batak textiles: major ceremonies

### ➤ ***ulos ni tondi* (soul cloth) given at the seventh month of pregnancy**

One of most significant textile gifts given to a Batak woman by her parents is the *ulos ni tondi* when she is seven months of pregnant with her first child.

The *ulos* comes from the bride's *marga* bringing with it the superior soul force of her lineage. She will wrap herself in it at times of childbirth or sickness when her own powers are weakened or endangered. The beneficial powers extend to her children whom she may wrap in it at times of danger.

Frequently the textile given is a *ragidup/pinunsaan* (pattern of life). The mother-to-be has a say in the choice of cloth, the most important gift from her parents. The motifs in the central end fields were frequently 'read' by a knowledgeable elder.

## Batak textiles - major ceremonies:

### wedding:

given as *ulos pansamot* by the parents of the bride, Tianur br. Hutabarat, to Ernestina br. Hutagalung, wife of Theodorik L. Tobing, and mother of the groom, Tahi Sumurung L Tobing

1942  
*ragidup* from  
Silindung valley



### seventh month of first pregnancy

given as *ulos ni tondi* to Tianur br. Hutabarat by her parents when she was seven months pregnant with her first child, Vera br. Tobing

1943  
*ragidup* from  
Silindung valley



## Batak textiles: major ceremonies

➤ **funeral:** important ceremony. The ritual is very much a celebration, especially if the person who has died has many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



*ragi hotang ragi hotang sibolang sibolang surisuri bolean ragi hotang sadum sibolang  
women wearing various sadum na marsimata*

**1972: funeral, Theodorik L. Tobing (1891-1972)**

# Batak textiles - major ceremonies



*ragi hotang*

*ragidup*

**1985: funeral,  
Ernestina br. Hutagalung, (1893-1985)**



*sadum*

*ragidup covering the body*



*ragi hotang*

*various sadum*



## Batak textiles: major ceremonies

➤ **bone transfer and reburial:** major event bringing together all the kinship groups and strictly regulated by *adat*. May happen decades after the death. Very expensive for the family as several days of ceremonies, dancing and feasting for all the linked *margas*. The bones will be dug up, cleaned and wrapped in a high-ranking traditional cloth such as a *sibolang* or *surisuri* before placing in small coffin. The guests will wear important cloths such as *ragi hotang*, *ragidup* and *sadum*. Detailed description in Sibeth, 1991: 82-84.



*ragidup*     *sadum*     bones wrapped in *sibolang*     *ragi hotang*



*ragi hotang*     *ragi hotang* over coffin     *sadum*

**1982: bone transfer and reburial, Maria br. Hutagalung (18?? - 1956)**



## Batak textiles: weaving today

Today weaving is concentrated in a handful of Batak regions, especially around Lake Toba and in the Silindung valley. Weaving is no longer for home consumption but for the market. There remains a considerable demand for cloths for ritual events.



Labuhan: Toba Batak market stall

Most weaving is by the Toba Batak, always the most accomplished weavers, for themselves and, as for at least a hundred years, the Karo and Simalungun markets.



Kabanjahe: Karo Batak market stall

The Karo no longer weave but still use traditional textiles for their ceremonies. Their textiles were once indigo but now are mainly red.

Some limited Simalungun weaving continues of their *bulang* woman's headcloth, one of the 'Indian textiles' referred to by Niessen, and their *surisuri* shoulder cloth.

The Pakpak/Dairi are not known to have ever woven.

The Angkola and Mandailing did weave but very little remaining; weaving revival in Sipirok (Angkola) – the Toba Batak *sadum* took its decorative features from the Angkola *sadum parompa*.

## Batak textiles of Sumatra:

Research into 'my' Batak family - their history and culture - will continue to be published and updated on the web, see:

[http://www.tribaltextiles.info/articles/Batak/Vera\\_Tobing\\_collection.htm](http://www.tribaltextiles.info/articles/Batak/Vera_Tobing_collection.htm)

See the **References** published in association with this lecture for further information on Batak textiles and wider Batak culture.

For an on-going discussion of textiles from south-east Asia (and elsewhere) see the [www.tribaltextiles.info/community](http://www.tribaltextiles.info/community) forum - and **come and join us!**

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\* Thanks to frequent email and telephone correspondence with Dr Sandra Niessen over the last three years I have received considerable personal communication about the Batak and their textiles which, together with her books and article listed above, has informed my study of Batak textiles. I am very grateful for this help, however, any errors or misunderstandings are my own.

**1821-37** *padri* wars; Dutch increased control

**1864** – Raja Amandari saved life of missionary Ludwig Nommensen; founding of 1<sup>st</sup> Christian church in Toba Batak Silindung valley by Nommensen (Sahit Ni Huta)

**1908** Dutch completed annexation of Batak lands; Ernestina br. Hutagalung weaving in Huta Harean, Silindung valley

**1942** wedding of Tahi/Tianur *ulos panasmot*

**1943** Tianur 7<sup>th</sup> month pregnancy *ulos ni tondi*

**1972** funeral of Theodorik L. Tobing

**1982** reburial of Maria br Hutagalung

**1985** funeral of Ernestina br Hutagalung

**2000** wedding of Maria br Tarihoran

**2006** wedding of Irene br Tarihoran

## **Lumban Tobing family (originally from Sahit Ni Huta, Silindung valley)**

### **1-Raja Amandari Sabungan Lumban "Ompung Sumurung" Tobing**

(saved life of Ludwig Nommensen, 1864, gave land for 1<sup>st</sup> Christian church)

.... 2-Isak Tobing (-)

.... 2-Jakobus L. Tobing (-)

.... +Maria br. "Nai Horja" Hutagalung (-1956, reburial July 1982)

..... 3-Theodorik L. Tobing (2 May 1891-2 September 1972)

..... +Ernestina br. Hutagalung (1 August 1893-19 January 1985)

..... 4-Tahi Sumurung L. Tobing (3 March 1919-13 January 1995)

..... +Tianur br Hutabarat (3 February 1923-15 April 1994)

..... 5-Veronica Pintauli br. "Vera" Tobing (23 October 1943-)

..... +Tarihoran (-)

..... 6-Sondang E br. Tarihoran (-)

..... 6-Anthony M H Tarihoran (-)

..... 6-Edyson S Tarihoran (-)

..... 6-Maria D R br. Tarihoran (1966-)

..... +Eben Ambesa (-)

..... 6-Rudy S P Tarihoran (-)

..... 6-Bintang Irene br. "Irene" Tarihoran (1970-)

..... +Aminuddin Hutasuhut (south Tapanuli). Hasibuan (-)

..... 5-Simon H L Tobing (-)

..... 5-Petrus S P L "Parulian" Tobing (-)

..... 5-Fransiskus A T L "Frans" Tobing (-)

..... 5-Edward Pardmean L "Pardamean" Tobing (-)

..... 5-Elisabeth Imelda br. "Melda" Tobing (-)

..... 4-Barita br. Tobing (-before December 1989)

..... +Manullang (-)

..... 4-Oloan br. Tobing (-)

..... +Hutagalung (-)

..... 4-Dari Walter L. Tobing (-1994)

..... +? br. Sipahutar (-)

..... 4-Helena br. Tobing (1939-)

..... +Lubis (-)

..... 3-Tobing (-)