

Interplay of Christian Missions, Batak Traditions, and Colonial Influence in North Tapanuli, Indonesia in 1861-1940

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14710/ihis.v9i1.25744>

Abstract

This study focuses on the missionary movement of the Rhein Missionary Society (RMG) and its impact on the political and social dynamics of the Batak people. The RMG missionary movement, which began in the 19th century, became one of the key drivers in the spread of Christianity in the Toba Batak region. Additionally, the involvement of the missionary movement alongside the Dutch colonial government brought significant changes to the social life of the Batak people. Therefore, this article highlights the local social and political changes triggered by the Padri attacks, which also influenced the community's acceptance of Christianity. The historical method is used in this article to reveal various responses to Christian missions, ranging from traditional acceptance to integration into Christian traditions. This study also analyses how Dutch colonialism influenced the spread of Christianity, as well as the social, political, and cultural transformations that occurred. These findings offer a new perspective on the interaction between Christian missions, Batak customs, and colonialism in shaping the history of religion in the Batak region.

Keywords: Missionaries; RMG mission movement; Toba Batak; Dutch colonialism.

Introduction

The Batakmission evangelical movement has a long and complex history that marks the development of Christianity in the Batak region, particularly in the Toba Batak area. Batakmission is the result of a collaboration between two missionary organisations, namely the Ermelo Missionaries and the Rhenische Mission-Gesellschaft (RMG) from Germany, which began their missionary work in the Batak region in 1861 (Parlindungan, 2021, p. 16). Initially, missionary activities were concentrated in the Angkola and Sipirok regions. However, the missionary movement faced the dominance of Islam in those areas, which had been influenced by the Padri movement since 1818. This situation prompted the missionaries to expand their scope to the Batak Toba region, which was considered still independent. Ultimately, evangelisation was successful, and by 1930, the number of Batak Toba Christians had even matched the largest Christian population in Indonesia at the time, namely Minahasa (van Bemmelen, 2012, p. 6).

This fact is interesting, considering that Islam had been spreading and developing in western Indonesia since early times, specifically in the interior of Aceh and extending to the

Batak region. When the VOC began occupying Sumatra, a policy was implemented that significantly slowed the development of Islam, particularly in the Batak region. The uncertain situation during the 17th and 18th centuries was exploited by the Dutch and other Europeans to spread their faith. Aritonang and Steenbrink (2008) mention that all elements contributed to the slow expansion of Islam in the Batak region. In other words, what actually happened was that neither Islam nor Christianity was immediately accepted in the Batak region (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008, p. 99).

The spread of Islam in the Batak region has not been evenly distributed after massive expansion, which can be identified and analysed due to geographical factors, among other things. This is because the Batak people are divided according to the areas they inhabit, namely lowlands and highlands. Most Muslims live in the lowlands, namely Mandailing and Angkola, located between Toba and Minangkabau. The spread of Islam in Mandailing was influenced by Minangkabau Muslims during the Padri War, which had a significant impact on the social life of the community. They ceased practising Batak customs, including denying cultural ties with other Batak groups and altering traditional customs (Viner, 1979, p. 88).

Meanwhile, Christianity spread in the Batak region in Silindung by German missionaries, including Rev. L.I. Nommensen, who joined the Batakmission in 1861. The evangelism carried out by the Batakmission at that time received support from local leaders such as Raja Pontas Lumbantobing and Raja Amandari Lumbantobing (Warneck, 1912, p. 20). In its development, the Batakmission not only spread Christianity but also participated in the political dynamics that supported Dutch colonial efforts to conquer the Toba region. This involvement subsequently created tension with other local rulers such as Sisingamangaraja XII, who viewed the missionary movement as a threat to their sovereignty.

The great success of the RMG missionaries was actually more evident in North Tapanuli, which in the early 19th century was outside the influence of European powers. In other words, the region was a safe mountainous area in isolation. In William Marsden's 1783 travel report on Sumatra, it was mentioned that the region had not yet been noticed by Europeans. During the evangelisation process, the Dutch colonial government also did not expand its administrative territory to the eastern coast and the Tapanuli Utara region, including the Karo highlands, until 1904 due to the Aceh War and other issues (Aritonang and Steenbrink, 2008, pp. 528-529).

Therefore, this study focuses on the influence of the Batakmission movement in North Sumatra, particularly in the Batak region, which includes the Tapanuli Utara area from 1861 to 1940, along with the various responses that emerged from both the community and local authorities at that time. As mentioned earlier, despite its isolation, a social life had already been established in North Tapanuli, making it important to discuss the approach taken by missionaries to recognise and gain acceptance from the community. Meanwhile, the arrival of missionaries elicited diverse responses from community leaders, giving rise to various movements. Therefore, the form of involvement of missionaries and the Dutch colonial government in the political consolidation that shaped the social formation of the Batak community is the next topic of discussion in this paper. Meanwhile, the local community's response to the involvement of missionaries as part of the Dutch colonial government in the political and social dynamics of Batak Land concludes the discussion on the influence of the Batakmission movement in North Tapanuli.

Method

This article was arranged using a historical method consisting of four stages, as follows:

heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Notosusanto, 1984, pp. 22-23). Various reviews of missionary records and annual reports of the Batakmission serve as primary sources in this paper. Meanwhile, books, magazine articles, and journal articles are used as supporting sources to provide context and additional information not available in contemporary primary sources. These sources are analysed to describe the development of the Batakmission and its impact on the Batak Toba community by understanding the Batakmission's evangelisation movement, which not only influenced religious aspects but also triggered social and political changes in the Batak Toba region.

Missionary Presence in Tanah Batak: Strategies and Approach

The introduction of Christianity in Indonesia generally began in the 17th century, brought by the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC). Christian missions, both Catholic and Protestant, in Indonesia were intertwined with the era of European expansion into Asia and the colonial period. Therefore, it is not uncommon for Christianity during the colonial period to be associated with the motto "Gold, Glory, and the Gospel," which reflects the motivations behind European exploration since the 15th century (Widyawati, Lon, Midun, 2025, p. 3).

Essentially, the spread of Christianity by the Dominicans, Jesuits, and various other Christian missionaries during the colonial period was explicitly aimed at curbing the influence of Islam. Many indigenous believers began to convert to Christianity, such as in East Flores and the offshore islands that became Catholic, as well as most of Maluku, Minahasa, and the Batak region, which converted to Protestantism. The Rhine River Mission Society or Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) is one of the largest missionary organisations in Germany. This organisation is a merger of smaller missions established since 1799, but it was officially formed through the union of three evangelical missionary societies in Elberfeld, Barmen, and Cologne on 23 September 1828 (Matanasi, 2024). The organisation established its first mission office in the town of Cederberg in 1829, named 'Wupperthal,' which 100 years later became the name of the city of Wuppertal in Germany. The RMG's main base is in the Rhineland and Westphalia. These two regions now encompass the federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate. There, support groups emerged that contributed funds, forming the backbone of the RMG's operations.

Previous missionaries also prepared themselves in various aspects before departing for distant lands. In the context of RMG, they prepared missionaries with theoretical and practical courses on how to deal with countries and regions they were visiting for the first time. This was because missionaries were typically recruited from the lower middle class, so they had not received sufficient theological education. However, the most important aspect of their journey was their passionate religious calling, despite their limited knowledge of the local language and skills (Hard and Tjoa-Bonatz, 2020, p. 937).

Evangelism in the North Tapanuli region, such as among the Angkola, Toba, and Simalungun Batak tribes, and Simalungun, was carried out extensively and effectively by RMG missionaries from Germany who had entered the Bayak region since 1861, led by the great missionary Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen (1834-1918) who arrived in Sumatra in 1862 (Aritonang and Steenbrink, 2008, pp. 529). The primary objective of the RMG mission, also known as the Barmen Mission, was in Africa, where it began in 1829, in China in 1846, and in Kalimantan from 1836 to 1859. This institution also sent a number of missionaries to several regions in Indonesia, including Sumatra starting in 1861. The indigenous religions practised by the peoples in the areas they evangelised were labelled as kafir (infidels). This also applied to the beliefs of the Batak Toba people. On the other hand, the RMG missionaries had already

realised that the evangelists who had arrived in coastal areas or regions already under Dutch control had failed because the majority of the population in those areas had already embraced Islam. Therefore, they decided to carry out evangelism in the inland regions of Batak Land. The Tarutung region, referred to by the Dutch colonial government as an independent area or *onafhankelijk gebied*, became the first area visited by the RMG mission. The arrival of the mission in the Tarutung region then marked the beginning of a new evangelisation in the Sumatra region known as the Batakmission (Siahaan and Agustono, 2021, p. 2678). However, RMG was not the first or only mission to enter the Batak region in the nineteenth century. Nommensen did not work alone in North Tapanuli, but alongside P. H. Johannsen and August Mohri, who had already been engaged in evangelisation in southern Batak (Aritonang and Steenbrink, 2008, pp. 530).

Since RMG selected Tanah Batak as a location for evangelism, missionaries spread out across several areas, such as Klam who accepted Sipirok as his place of service, Betz in Bungabondar, and Van Asselt and Heine who pioneered evangelism in the northern part of Tanah Batak, which was still uncontrolled by Dutch colonial rule. They targeted the densely populated regions of Toba and Silindung as areas for evangelism. On the other hand, the Dutch colonial government did not oppose the missionary activities, as they fully supported evangelistic efforts (Siahaan and Agustono, 2021, p. 2679).

The Silindung region and the entire Batak area around Lake Toba began to undergo many changes starting in 1824. These changes began with the arrival of the Padri people in Mandailing, who brought Islam with them in 1821. The Padri people recruited Mandailing people into their forces, which continued to move northward toward Angkola Sipirok and Batak Toba (Sahrul et al., 2024). The forces of Si Singamangaraja X, who resisted the Padri attack in Angkola Sipirok, were defeated. The Padri attack brought about significant changes in the local history of the Batak Toba people. These changes profoundly shaped the direction and purpose of the social, political, economic, and religious lives of the Batak people residing in Batak Toba, including their orientation of faith toward Si Singamangaraja as the King-Imam, and the desire to achieve progress and honour through the power and civilisation of the colonial forces and missionaries. This was particularly evident among the Batak Toba in Silindung, the southernmost part of Batak Toba, which suffered the most from the Padri attacks. In this context, it can be argued that colonial power was accepted and internalised as something “comforting” and acceptable by the indigenous community through their daily experiences. Therefore, on the other hand, the indigenous community must be acknowledged as having been produced as subjects who are submissive and recognise themselves as colonised (Anas, et al., 2025).

It must be admitted that the Batak people under Dutch colonial rule were a conquered entity. Geographically, the concept of the Batak as a nation during that period disappeared because their territory had mixed with the Malay people in the East Sumatra Residency and with Aceh in the Aceh Residency. Meanwhile, the Tapanuli Residency, in terms of its administrative system, had become part of the Dutch colonial government in the Dutch East Indies under the authority of the Governor-General, Governor, Resident, and Demang. The last recorded Batak king who continued to actively fight for the sovereignty of Batak land was King Si Singamangaraja XII (Silalahi, 2025, p. 10).

Basically, missionaries working outside their home countries will prioritise learning the local language because they are aware that language is critical. Although there are many studies on missionaries that have highlighted the difficulties faced by missionaries in this endeavour due to the challenges of language learning, it is acknowledged that these challenges

can hinder missionary work. Although missions related to language and culture are sometimes controversial, they are very important and relevant in the interaction between the church and local communities. Criticism of the role of the church in eliminating local cultures and languages is an undeniable phenomenon in Christian missions around the world. Additionally, the historical connection between mission and colonialism, such as fostering cultural hegemony, cannot be ignored (Widyawati, Lon, Midun, 2025, pp. 1-2).

The first meeting between missionaries and the Batak Toba rulers took place in 1824, hosted by King Ompu Pintubosi. At that time, the Batak Toba people welcomed the arrival of British missionaries Burton and Ward from the British Baptist Church. The two missionaries were honoured as distinguished guests with a feast and traditional dances (*tortor*) in accordance with local customs. Burton and Ward explained to everyone present the purpose of their visit. They then delivered a sermon on creation, the Ten Commandments, and the path to salvation. Burton and Ward stated that the people responded positively to the message and expressed a desire to understand more of what they had heard. The people then requested that Burton and Ward stay among them so they could understand the teachings before accepting them. Burton and Ward appreciated the cultural traditions of the Toba Batak people, which demonstrated a high level of skill. This was interpreted as a sign of dynamic community life, concern for health, and harmonious family relationships. This is because, fundamentally, a group and network develop based on shared socio-cultural aspects. These aspects are important as part of an assessment of local vulnerability and capacity to adapt to the arrival of outsiders in their area (Wannewitz and Garschagen, 2024, p. 2).

When missionaries first arrived in the Batak region, the Batak people already had their traditional beliefs, which included the idea that their Supreme God was manifested through various images, leading them to believe they could see God in different places and call upon Him by different names. Philip Lumban Tobing, who has extensively studied the Batak Toba religion, assumes that behind these different images lies the idea of the fundamental unity of the Supreme God. In other words, this belief is identical to the cosmos and the total order that God is present everywhere and His power is evident in everything (Angerler, 2016, p. 306). Of course, the arrival of missionaries was a new concept for the Batak people at that time.

The arrival of missionaries to the Batak region undoubtedly had a significant impact on the local community. One of the most notable influences was the introduction of Western education among the indigenous population of Tapanuli, including Barus and Sibolga. They utilised the missionaries so that when they established their schools, they did not need to bring in additional teachers. The first missionary school was founded by G. van Asselt in Sipirok (South Tapanuli) in 1857 and in Silindung by Ludwig Igwer Nommensen in 1864. The establishment of these schools coincided with the establishment of churches (Tanjung, 2024, p. 82). However, in an effort to gain acceptance from the Batak community, missionaries, as part of the Dutch or other Europeans who came with the colonial government, also became involved in political consolidation at that time.

Impact on Batak Society: Politic Consolidation and Formation of Batak Mission

Both colonial countries and Indonesia as a European colony were actually interconnected. The fact was that it was difficult to draw a line between the spread of religion and colonialism, even though missionaries and colonial officials did not always have the same interests, as was the case in most of Maluku, Minahasa, and the Batak region when they became Protestant. It cannot be denied that both Protestant and Catholic ideologies played an important role in the implementation and acceptance of foreign rule. On the other hand, it was almost impossible

to balance the colonial government's goal of conquering and exploiting the indigenous population for profit with the idea of establishing a non-European Christian civilisation. All of these conflicting goals then resulted in different strategies for dealing with the indigenous population. Therefore, the colonial government exploited local customs to counter Islam. Meanwhile, missionaries sought to replace indigenous structures, ideas, and especially religion with Christianity and European community concepts (Schroter, 2010).

The involvement of the Dutch colonial government in the politics of North Sumatra can be seen when the Dutch colonial government was forced to intervene in the resolution of the Padri War by pacifying the two conflicting regions. The civil conflict that occurred in West Sumatra and Batak Tapanuli was caused by a failed rebellion in Mandailing and became the final peak of violence in a period of conflict that lasted for almost 40 years. The Padri attacks, disease outbreaks, and Dutch intervention, which led to the extermination of most of the Tapanuli population, divided the Tapanuli region into two parts, namely the northern and southern parts. In the northern part, most of the population practised animism, while the southern part, which was under Dutch control, was predominantly Muslim (Zakaria, 2017).

Although the Dutch had occupied the Indonesian archipelago since the early 17th century, colonialism did not truly take hold until the 19th and early 20th centuries. This changed the technical and economic aspects of society, as well as the psychological dynamics between Western superiority and social concern, which gave rise to a new awareness of a 'civilising mission' and increasingly active colonial policies. This policy was later known as the Ethical Policy, officially announced by Queen Wilhelmina in 1901. The argument at the time was that as a country proud of its Christian heritage, the Dutch government had a moral obligation to integrate a moral mission into its policies towards the colonial population. This policy was seen as a new form of dedication from the Dutch colonial administration to develop schools, medical services, transportation, and other infrastructure improvements for the welfare of the indigenous population. Alongside missionary activities, particularly in Islamic areas, missionaries also sought to promote health and education (Hesselink, 2015, pp. 147-148).

The arrival of the first missionaries in Batak Land was not much different from when Dutch missionaries first arrived in Java. Initially, they could not speak the local language, so communication was conducted in Malay, Dutch, or with the help of Javanese catechists as intermediaries. At that time, these Javanese catechists were mostly Protestant and all male. They later educated more catechists by establishing a small school in Semarang. This strategy successfully led hundreds of Javanese to embrace the Christian faith under the Catholic mission (Wulandari, 2024, p. 97).

Previously, the formation of Tapanuli as one of the main parts of the Batak world cannot be separated from the migration process of the Batak people from their homeland in the Toba highlands. Based on Batak genealogy, it is described that the Batak people are descendants of the Batak King who originated from Mount Pusuk Buhit on the western side of Lake Toba, located between the provinces of Aceh and West Sumatra today. The Batak Karo, Pakpak, and Simalungun tribes are predominantly concentrated in the northern region, while the Angkola and Mandailing tribes are located in the southern region (Toha, 2024, p. 60). The Batak people generally acknowledge that they are all descendants of the Batak King. In several sources and previous studies, there is no evidence to refute the argument that the Batak ethnic group originated from the Toba region, and it consistently shows that the migration of the Batak people occurred from around Lake Toba to the area now known as the Tapanuli region (Tanjung, 2024, p. 82).

Many researchers have revealed that the migration process has caused the fragmentation of the Batak ethnic group into several Batak ethnic subgroups. In Loeb's (2013) study, one of the findings was that researchers divided the groups based on dialect, resulting in the Batak ethnic group being divided into six subgroups, namely, Karo Batak, Pakpak Batak, Toba Batak, Angkola Batak, Mandailing Batak, and East Batak or Simalungun (Loeb, 2013, p. 20).

In its development, the colonial government then formed an administrative region called the *Afdeeling Bataklanden*, with Tarutung as its capital. The area included Silindung, Samosir, Humbang, and Toba, which were later merged into the Tapanuli Residency with Sibolga as its capital, which was first established in 1842. The territorial reorganization said to have occurred because the colonial occupation was considered stable in Tapanuli, there was isolation of Islamic forces in the north and south of Tapanuli, and control of Sibolga Bay as a colonial shipping route (Damanik, 2018, pp. 62-63). In the mid-19th century, the colonial government established a school in the Tapanuli Residency, including in Manadailing and Angkola. In this context, the RMG held a monopoly on education within its jurisdiction. That educational monopoly persisted until 1914 when public secondary schools were established in Balige and Tarutung. The RMG's educational system had a significant impact on the vertical mobility of the indigenous Batak population. As a result, tens of thousands of young people left the agricultural sector and worked in the tertiary sector (Hidayat and Damanik, 2018, p. 75).

The arrival of European missionaries, interspersed with the implementation of colonial projects, also resulted in population migration to Asahan, in addition to other factors such as population density, limited agricultural land, and difficulties in life. The migration that occurred as a result of social conflict caused by Dutch colonialism was initially carried out by young people or groups of families, tribes, and descendants. Most of them worked as farmers, a small number as traders, or labourers in plantations owned by the Dutch colonial government. These migrants came from various hometowns such as Sibisa, Balige, and Porsea (Ritonga and Abdoellah, 2020, pp. 102-103).

The Batak Perspective: Interpreting and Responding to Missionary and Colonial Interventions

Before the arrival of missionaries, the Batak people already had a worldview that encompassed almost all aspects of their lives. The religion that existed previously also encompassed culture, language, economy, and politics, and all of these formed a single entity called adat (custom). Based on the previous description, the spread of Christianity in Indonesia, particularly in North Sumatra, coincided with European colonialism and modernisation, which indirectly represented the existing political powers. Therefore, when Rhenish missionaries began working in Batakland in the 19th century, the Batak people they encountered had a unique civilisation that was foreign to Europeans. The direct encounter between Batak adat, missionaries, the Dutch colonial government, and European modernity resulted in a real struggle on the ground regarding how Christianity should be integrated into Batak culture. However, this struggle was not immediately accepted by the community (Sihombing, 2023, p. 48).

Before the mission was able to be fully received by the Batak people, there was a view that the presence of missionaries in Batak Land was considered a threat, leading to their rejection by Singamangaraja XII, who believed that the mission was a colonial Dutch strategy to control the Batak Toba region. As a result, Si Singamangaraja XII's distrust of the Dutch became one of the factors leading to the Batak War, which lasted from 1878 to 1907. The war erupted due to the rejection of missionary activities in Batak Land, despite some areas in Batak

Land having already embraced Christianity. The instance of rejection was rooted in the desire to protect the ancestral beliefs passed down through generations. However, on the other hand, the arrival of missionaries in the Batak region brought significant changes beyond the conversion to Christianity, such as shifts in their social and economic systems (Anwar, 2024, pp. 45-46).

The Batak War ended with the death of Si Singamangaraja XII in battle in 1907. As a highly respected figure among the Batak people, his death had a profound impact on communities in North Sumatra. The death of Si Singamangaraja XII marked the beginning of the Toba Batak people becoming a larger political entity under Dutch colonial rule in 1910. This was accompanied by the opening of roads in 1915, starting from the rapidly developing coastal plantation areas to the Balige region, which led to interaction between the Simalungun area and the Toba highlands (Ikegami, 1997, p. 660).

For the social life of the Batak Toba community, the arrival of missionaries alongside Dutch and other European plantation entrepreneurs marked the dynamics of ongoing competition. This occurred because the Dutch strengthened the status of the Malay people (the Deli Kingdom) to increase the amount of plantation land leased to plantation owners. As a result, the Batak Toba ethnic group was increasingly affected by the growth and development of plantations (Khairani, 2023, p. 88).

In terms of belief, the missionaries changed the Batak people's perception of the Supreme God of the Batak Toba since the German missionary, W. Koding, stated that the god believed to be 'completely abstract' in 1885. In Loeb's interpretation (1935), the missionary added that the Supreme God of the Batak Toba is merely a passive deity in the lives of the people (Angerler, 2016, p. 306).

Simpulan

Social, political, and religious dynamics in the Batak region have been influenced by various events that have shaped the social structure of the Batak people to this day. The Padri Army's attack in 1818 created trauma for the Batak people, although some areas were successfully conquered. On the other hand, there was a shift in beliefs and acceptance among other Batak people towards outside influences. The Padri War succeeded in converting the Batak people in the lowlands to Islam. However, the Dutch colonial government's control prevented the further spread of Islam in the Toba region through missionary movements by Europeans who came to Sumatra. The missionary movement from Germany eventually expanded beyond the spread of the Gospel, playing a role in political involvement in the Batak region. Although the process of accepting the missionary movement did not occur quickly, this missionary movement successfully promoted the growth of Christianity in the Batak region.

That acceptance was made possible by the support of the Dutch colonial government, including the development of missions and infrastructure such as churches, schools, and hospitals. Although there were differences of opinion and resistance from some parties, such as King Si Singamangaraja XII, the contributions of missionaries such as Nommensen show that evangelism was not merely the spread of religion, but also part of a broader effort towards modernisation and social change.

Overall, the Christianisation of the Toba Batak people reflects the complex interaction between local traditions, colonial influences, and religious missions. The Batak people's initial rejection of the evangelisation movement ultimately forced them to accept change, followed by support from influential local leaders, demonstrating how religion, culture, and politics are intertwined in shaping the history and identity of a nation.

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