

**Inter-Subjective Cosmology: Local Wisdom On Environment**  
**(A Study Of Manuk Gantung Ritual Of Toba People, Sumatera)**

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**Abstract**

This paper will discuss indigenous tradition of Toba people of Sumatera. It will specifically discuss how Toba people conceptualize the protection and sustainability of environment based on their indigenous tradition. Toba indigenous tradition is characterized by “inter-subjectivity” cosmology, which means that human beings and other beings who live in the environment are all “subject.” Relationship between humans and environment is perceived as “inter-subjective” relation. This paper will show how Toba people construct their inter-subjective cosmology through their concept “*tondi*,” prevalent in Toba rituals in which data of inter-subjective concept are collected. *Tondi* for Toba people is a kind of “life force” that determines the existence and life of a being: human and non-human beings. Human beings relate to other beings like trees, Water, mountains and so forth because those beings have *tondi*. The existence of *tondi* in a being constitutes the subjectivity of the being. Furthermore, Toba people understand that the life of human beings could only be guaranteed if *tondi* of other beings are protected, of if the environment in protected. This paper will analyze a ritual of “manuk gantung” trough which the notion of *tondi* and of inter-subjectivity is conceptualized and reproduced. This paper, following Nurit Bird-David (1999), will finally argue that the Toba indigenous concept of environmental protection is local wisdom of Toba people that deserves more attention as an alternative to thinking about solving environmental crisis of the present time.

**(Keywords: Subject, Inter-subjective, *Tondi*)**

## A. Introduction

*“Cogito ergo sum”*

“I Think Therefore i am”

Rene Descartes said it to explain about human existence in the world. He said it to utter the role of idea and the ability of man to thinking. He believes because of the abilities, the human existence become concrete. This idea becomes famous because human is respected as like his position. Unfortunately as long as the times gone this concept only make human as the owner of the authority to control the nature. There are many impacts because of the development of that concept. The changes certainly bring many problems not only for the human idea but also for nature and relations between humans.

The tendencies of human acts already like the authorities and make the nature as tools. The tools which have function as instrument to satisfy the human desire. From this perspective we can see human positioning them self as the owner of everything. They can control everything and use it as like they want. Certainly, the biggest influence is for the nature.

The Influence can be seen in how human positioning the nature as the object. They can use it as like they want. In the last that perspective not only brings progress for the industrialization side but also problem for the environment (Rasmussen, 2003). They exploited the soil, trees, forest, water, mineral resources and so forth. Usually human did it to get profit. The greedy of the human for the profit make them ignore the existence of nature as the life giver. Certainly it results to deforestation, water pollution, global warming and so forth. They do not care anymore toward existence of nature. Certainly in the end it will be effect to the human life. The human life will threatened because of their act it self.

Actually, this is not new issue. There are many parties attempt to involve for prevent and solving this problem. The awareness processes have been done by many elements, like international organization, governments, Non-government Organization and so forth.

Larry L. Rasmussen noted in his written that the struggle for awareness about the environment begin in 1972, when M. I. T was announced the report about the impact of the environment. At that time, some scholars like Beteson and John Cobb also fight for this issue. Through written a book which titled *Is it too late: A Theology of Ecology*, they attempt to advocate about environment problem. In addition to, in 1990 there are some scholars which make public letter to religious leader. It did as the response and support for the resistance toward environmental damage (*Ibid*, 220-221)

Not only western society, local people (Indigenous) as the small party who always get the worst impact from the damage caused also involve at that advocating action. Certainly they have different way to fight for that issue. We can saw in several days ago, 10 September 2014, Dayak Benuaq society (one of the indigenous sub-ethnic in Kalimantan) resistance to all of companies that exploiting their natural resources in Muara Tae (Kompas, September10, 2014). The resistance not only had shown through complaints to government but they also conduct ritual ceremony to ask helping from the ancestor spirits to solve their problem. They use local tradition to solve their problem. Through those rituals, they also hope ancestor spirits will condemn wrong parties.

In some cases, there are many efforts which done by local people to stop destruction of nature. Mostly, they fight because their concept plagued by profit minded which belongs to company. Mostly, their concept see everything not only from utilities perspective, they also see it from relationship perspective (way of life). Batak society is one of the tribes which have that idea. *Batak* is one of the tribes that domiciled in Sumatera Island. There are many kind sub-culture of Batak. The idea which will talk in this paper is derive from Batak Toba. They recognize as Tondi. To analyze this notion so the author will use the conception which said by Bird David in her Text about Relational Epistemology.

## **B. Theoretical Framework**

The idea of relationship actually has been explained by Nurit Bird-David when she was conducting research about Nayaka people. Bird-David conducted research in South India and she observed the religious life of Nayaka people in there, such like their relations with the supernatural being, their worship and also their idea in construct a relationship to the nature. Actually she got much influence from many scholars such like EB Taylor, Claude Levi Strauss and Irving Hallowell (Bird-David, 1990). Even they have different stand point in perceiving the phenomena of the local people.

Bird-David starts her analysis from Personhood concept which firstly strived by Hallowell. Hallowell observed that the Ojibwa sense of personhood which they attribute to some natural entities, animals wind and stone etc., “Is fundamentally different from modernist one” (*ibid*). From this perspective Bird-David believes that the idea of world view which argued by Hallowell is a starting point to open the understanding to the western-modernist perspective and the others scholars (*Ibid*).

Then, Bird-David develop the idea through introduce Devaru (Supersperson) attendance conception in Hunter-gatherer group (Nayaka in South India), which are Devaru Objectifications, Devaru in the world, Devaru as performance characters. If we attempt to describe, perhaps we can see Devaru is like un-separate substances from Nayaka life practices...the Devaru objectivity sharing relationship between Nayaka and other beings (*Ibid*, 73). Once again to understand this concept therefore Nayakan knowledge becomes authoritative to others. It is new perspective because during the times gone we always use the west paradigm to see the reality in east (emphasize in indigenous ethnic in remote area).

Nurit, Bird-David sees the animism as relational Epistemology, which start from idea that person not only refers to the human merely but also to everything in universe. She believes that local people perceive them self as a microcosm homologous to society at large, which means that they as a humans constitute as a small part of the universe, They do not discern the nature from anthropocentrism perspective but they use cosmologist

stand point. They recognize the nature as a person that life and also can tied connection each other. So it means the relationship which created not only focusing between humans but also human and nature. Bird-David saw this phenomenon as admitting the existence of human. She argues through admit and tied relationship to the other therefore we admit existence of our self, and she called it as Di-vidual. It occurs because the local society recognizes the role and the involvement of their ancestor in their life (kinship). They believe the attendance of their ancestor could be in many things, such like aforementioned. So, they have to honor it. For Bird-David the relationship that created subsequently make ligament between “person to person” it can called as “we-ness”. This idea subsequently constructed as personhood in Nayaka society.

Nurit-Bird discerns the phenomena that occurred in Nayaka not only on how the Nayaka treat the nature but also how they tied relationship as objectification of relations. The Nayaka people assume that the existence of Devaru could be in everywhere (omnipresence). Certainly it makes Nayaka society have different idea of Devaru objectification. The one human could be recognize the one thing as Devaru but the others not. It really depends on the how they perceive it. Bird-David perceives all of this phenomenon as a relation epistemology, which the instrument consist of admit everything as a person and the second is everything have authoritarian to do everything as like they want.

### **C. Material and Method**

To understand the position of Tondi in each of things therefore the author will use ritual Manuk Gantung as depiction of how they treat and make relations to everything. The author took it from Nainggolan’s written about Batak People. This research only use literature study as the data for analyzed. For the methodology, this paper use qualitative research with purposes to have deep observation on the phenomena of Tondi from Manuk Gantung Ritual.

## **D. Result and Discussion**

### **1. Manuk Gantung**

*Manuk Gantung* is one ritual that recently almost difficult to find. There are many reasons that make this ritual slowly lost and forgotten. First, for some people admit the ritual that have relation to culture considered as a deviation performance, they think this ritual run using evil spirit (*sipele begu*). Therefore much people recently do not want to use many kind of tradition which is related to Batak. The second, some people deem everything which has relations with the Batak Ethnic only as a culture and some of them size up that tradition does not appropriate anymore to real condition.

*Manuk Gantung* (Hung Chicken) has meaning a chicken that slaughter and hung by a person. *Manuk Gantung* it self as like aforementioned, It is one ritual that conducted to forecast the destiny, lucky, or future of a person using chicken. Actually there are many rituals can conducted to forecast a destiny a person or groups. Such like using role of Rice paddy, chicken and so on. The author subsequently determines use this sample because this one has enough conception which can explain many things about relations among the tradition and religious activity and person in Batak culture.

According to Nainggolan which much wrote about it explain the phases which are, firstly they start through sit together and make circle and *Datu* (leader of the ceremony) then debriefing the *Suhut* (The person that request the ceremony held because want to see the future of his research) what is the purpose of this ceremony. After get answer about the intention of this ceremony, The *Datu* subsequently pray to *Mulajadi Nabolon* and his teacher spirit who was passed away and also the ancestors (*sombaon*) then called to help the process (Nainggolan, 2012).

After it, *Datu* then ask again the aim of this ritual but for this time *Datu* also preach mantra (*tonggo tonggo*) after *suhut* convey his need. After *Datu* was finished he gave food to the chicken. When he give food to the chicken he also convey to the chicken so the chicken does not forget to carry the answer of *Suhut* question. Then, using the formula liquid and mantra the *Datu* smear the chest, Head of chicken, which aim is

purify it. After that *Datu* pray again so they can get the answer through the every reaction (*gorak-gorahan*) from the chicken after slaughtered. After the chicken slaughtered by the assistant of *Datu* (*Panambol*), *Datu* subsequently take the chicken and hung it up. He did it by hold the neck. *Datu* will see every reaction of the chicken. The reaction which did by the chicken after slaughter will interpreted by *Datu* (*Ibid*, 90-92)

## **2. Personhood and Relations Epistemology**

Through the process which mentioned above in some phase, surely make our imagination head to mysticism practice because it is involving the spirit in the ritual. Moreover for modern people and scholar like EB Taylor it may calls as a Primitive culture. Nevertheless, as a human that have ability to discern everything, we have to question it again and the author perceive the way to understand the ritual that they conduct is from their world view in perceiving their tradition to the world. The world view has meaning that explanation which we get must be adapted with their religious understanding in perceive the ritual and their understanding toward their theological or cosmologist which they have. Therefore Nurit, Bird-David concepts about personhood and relation Epistemology are proper for this case. To understand that ideas, Bird-David use variable, which are a person as Dividual, Relations or Inter-subjectivity, Kinship, and the authority that belongs to them to do anything.

To understand Bird-David concepts and the relations to Batak, therefore we have to gain much data and references about indigenous idea of Batak. One conception which never separated from way of life of Batak is *Tondi*. This is the important part if we want to learn about their cosmology. *Tondi* is a substance which occupies a space such like human, animal and plants. Perhaps we could think it as a soul (*Roh*) similar with the understanding of world religions teaching, but in fact it is different. For *Batak* society they recognize *Tondi* more than a spirit (*roh*) which animating human kind, because it is also animating the objects. In *Batak* tradition believed that *Tondi* is substance that live in everything and sometimes have different of desires, that is why if a one person from

Batak ethnic have sick or accident therefore his *Tondi* would prayed by the others, in order to get his/her desires. We can say that everything in *Batak* cosmologist is depending on the presence of *Tondi* (Hadiwijono, 2003). That's all will construct the idea in every epistemology and *Batak* personhood.

**a) Admitting everything as a Person also admitting his existence or Di-vidual**

Starts from the presence of *Tondi*, then the Ritual of *Manuk Gantung* that wrote by Nainggolan can not released from the presence of the soul that animated everything. We can see it in some step. The presence of chicken in the ritual of *Manuk Gantung* does not delineate as burnt offering merely, moreover for Batak people it means that they admit the presence of *Tondi* in everywhere, even inside of chicken. They assume that *Tondi* derived from the substance which almighty (Debata Mulajadi Nabolon) and live in "Person" body (*Ibid*). So mutual recognition of presence the *Tondi* inside of "person" body which done by *Datu* and Batak society. They admit chicken not only as a chicken but also as a "Person". It has *Tondi* which live in it.

The presence of *Tondi* in chicken body which make it involved in the ritual. It can seen in how *Datu* gave food to chicken before he speak and ask it to not forget convey the message that requested from *suhut*. That is the answer why *Datu* wants to make communication to the chicken. If we see this ritual from anthropocentrism perspective therefore we will see it as stupidity but they did not think like it. They believe the relationship among all of *Tondi* in the universe can make good order. We can see that from the example which aforementioned. Without help from chicken's *Tondi*, they can not get depiction about future. It means the existence of human is not derive from him self or his idea but it comes from the relationship which created between human's *tondi* and chicken's *tondi*. Through admit the other existence so we also admit our existence.

**b) Relationship or Inter-subjectivity**

From such communication like it, surely we can see the relations which created by the human to chicken is really exert to honour the presence of chicken's *Tondi*. They do not



think that they are only the subject in the universe. Once again, everything is a subject but they have to stand on their position each other. In this case human's *Tondi* asking help to Chicken's *Tondi* to show how is the future depiction of *Suhut*.

Before human's *tondi* asking his request, firstly he has to make connection with it. It is like if we want to asking help to somebody so firstly we have to tied relationship with him through sharing something. So do with this case, in addition spelling Mantra, *Datu* also give food to the chicken, and reminded the chicken not to forget.

After slaughter they subsequently see the change of the chicken's movement, it needs because this is the core of the *Manuk Gantung* events. *Datu* should discern and read the reaction of chicken after slaughter. Every reaction from the chicken has meaning to every question from the event organizers (*Suhut*). From this particular part actually we can observe that the relations among *Tondi* to *Tondi* (Human and Chicken) is tied with good. Moreover they can not escape them self from that pattern or circle. The desire which try to deny the *Tondi* will be making disturbance in the pattern of universe especially for him self.

**c) They have authority to do everything.**

The Authority of the *Tondi* also becomes an important part. Even by the desire or the need of the person still can not control the *Tondi*. Such like *Manuk Gantung* Performance when the chicken already slaughtered, all of reaction can not predicted. *Datu* only can discern the every reaction from the chicken but can not determine the chicken's movement. The presence of *Tondi* in *Manuk Gantung* Ritual really have important role. They do not worship to chicken or kind like it. They just make relationship with it because they recognize it life. As the microcosm, every "Person" must honour the other "Person". They recognize it as the person because they feel they are small part of macrocosmic.

The presence of the soul which called as *Tondi* show to us that all of ritual ceremonies in *Batak* ethnic indeed have relation to the culture and vice versa. This is can not separate

one from another because it starts from way of life and way of idea that constructed for generations. The interrelation among culture and faith become part which unites from the life of *Batak's* society.

### **3. Local Wisdom and Environment**

The understanding of relationship among all of Tondi which objectified by human and chicken constitute depiction of how supposedly human response to the others. They recognize another as a "Devaru". They construct the idea in their mind that everything is life. Through their worldview, we can perceive everything in the universe is life. For Batak Toba people existence is co-existence (*Ibid*, 96). Therefore, if they do something to another, they have to tie relationship firstly. They make it as like as person. They have to give something to make connection. If there is no connection surely it means the human is not a live too. It could be happened because the Devaru also has authority to do everything to human.

If you have idea that you are created in the image of gods mostly you will brag your self because you feel as a perfect creature. It will bring your idea to see the other (nature) as creature which has no ethics. In the end you will perceive the nature belongs to you and you will exploit it (Beteson, 1972). Start from that idea i argue the Tondi existence concept as suitable idea to reminder the society about nature. If we recognize everything in the nature has Tondi certainly we will keep away the bad habit of human which prefer to exploited than keep it well. Keep the nature well means keep our self life. Nature does not tool or vehicle to fulfil human desire.

Nature also has spirit which objectified through give life to us. The spirit can recognized as Tondi in Batak concept. It means we have to keep away the perspective which positioned the nature as the object because they also life. It has will and also become determiner for what man did.

We can not escape from the cosmologic circle. We have to tie relationship with the nature and make the inter-subjectivity occurred. It is important because usually modern man can not predict when the disasters will be happened. Human only like to exploit everything, for instance soil, mineral resources, water and so forth. Surely whatever they did, it will be bring punishment from the nature. It did because the nature has the authority to decide what he will do. Building relationship constitute first way to design plan for maintaining the balance of nature. It is important because through building relationship therefore the human will keep their behaviour from greedy.

The risk of the human greedy which mirrored from de-forestation, pollution and unfriendly of environment will make bring human into damage. We can said they created hell by them self.

## **E. Conclusion**

In perceiving the nature, mostly human use the anthropocentrism perspective. Actually, there is no false but the pragmatism perspective carried them to the idea of owner of this universe. Surely, their idea raise new problems because their desires to exploit everything make the environment condition become bad. They tend to use it as like they want without care about the sustainability. Whereas it is important to note that the nature has the authority to raises the disaster if we do not keep it well. Through the relations epistemology concept and Personhood which belongs to Bird-David, we can learn another ways to perceive the nature. We recognize not only as the object but also as the other subject. We have obligation to make relationship with it than exploit it. If we want to use it surely we have to use it with wise. Nature is our friends, he also has *Tondi*, he also subject and he also life.

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