

# Socio-cultural change influences the changes of Simalungun religion

*by Hisarma Saragih*

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Hisarma Saragih, Muhammad Ridwan & Abdurahman Adisaputera

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ARTICLE



# Socio-cultural change influences the changes of Simalungun religion

Hisarma Saragih<sup>a</sup>, Muhammad Ridwan<sup>b</sup> and Abdurahman Adisaputera<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Cultural and Historical Department, Universitas Simalungun (USI), Pematang Siantar, Indonesia; <sup>b</sup>English Department, Tarbiyah Faculty, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU), Medan, Indonesia; <sup>c</sup>Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

## 1 STRACT

This study analyzes the historical phenomena of zending in Batak tribe community. It focuses on the transition of Christianity among the Simalungun people, by using the primary and secondary sources tracked from various library locations, church archives, national archives in Jakarta, and private collections. The theme is categorized into cultural history, with source search (*heuristic*), source criticism, formulation of facts (*aufassung*), and presentation of new thoughts (*darstellung*), all narrated as historical stories. Other secondary sources came from a number of books, articles, and magazines, published in various eras. The cause of mass conversion among the Simalungun people is apparently related to the feudal structure of their society. The zending used both the community structure approach and customary approach. Consequently, the development of RMG zending activities in the Simalungun community, besides causing religious conversion from the Sipajuh Begu-begu tribe religion to Christianity, also gave rise to structural changes in the community.

## 2

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## Introduction

Europe has always been known to be the center of Christian religious activities in the world; however, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, movements arose that made the Protestant church to become aware of its obligation to spread and develop Christianity. Such movements included pietism.<sup>1</sup> Pietism was a movement that originated from Germany; it broke away from the Protestant church in the development of Christianity. Widespread support for this movement has led to the establishment of missionary institutions throughout the world, so that in the nineteenth century the activities of the gospel spread throughout the world. This missionary institution is called zending,<sup>2</sup> it included the zending Rheinische Mission Genootschap (hereinafter referred to as RMG) established in Germany in 23 September 1828 with its center in the city of Barmen,<sup>3</sup> and the Nederlands Zendeling-Genootschap (hereinafter referred to as NZG) established in 1797 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> Zending RMG based in Germany,

CONTACT Muhammad Ridwan  [bukharyahmedal1@gmail.com](mailto:bukharyahmedal1@gmail.com); [bukharyahmedal@gmail.com](mailto:bukharyahmedal@gmail.com); [ahmedalbukhary@yahoo.com](mailto:ahmedalbukhary@yahoo.com)  Jl. William Iskandar Ps. V, Medan Estate, Kec. Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara. Postcode: 20371.

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and NZG in the Netherlands both spread to Indonesia, and established their history in the Batak Land. NZG was known to have carved the history of the Batak Karo people since 1890,<sup>5</sup> and RMG also made history in the Tapanuli and Batak Simalungun.

The introduction of zending RMG to the Batak Simalungun people with the aim of spreading the Protestant religion resulted in the process of transition of religion, namely the transition from tribal religion to Protestant religion. Since 1903, the Batak Simalungun people began to get acquainted with the RMG zending namely August Theis, Godfred Karel Simon, H. Guillaume, and Meisel who at that time had the conviction to explore the villages of the Simalungun region.<sup>6</sup> The search results illustrated that among residents of the Lower Simalungun area, there were followers of Islam which included Sangnawaluh Damanik Bariba, the ruler of the Siantar kingdom.<sup>7</sup> The introduction of Batak Simalungun people to Protestantism was intensified when the zending settled in the Simalungun area. For instance, in 1903, August Theis lived in the Pematang Raja area, 1904 Godfred Karel Simon settled in the Bandar area, and in 1905 H. Guillaume settled in the Purba Saribu area.<sup>8</sup>

The main issue presented in this study is the relationship between socio-cultural conditions and zending activities and religious change of the Simalungun people from 1903 to 1942. The scope of the research area is onderafdeeling Simeloengoen. The choice of 1903 as the initial limitation of this study in the temporal scope is based on the consideration that since that year, zending RMG has placed August Theis zending in the area. The designation of 1942 as the final period of discussion was based on the consideration that in those years, the Simalungun people demanded independence to govern their own churches.

Pedersen, who has worked as a missionary of the American Luther Church for Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, produced work on the presence of Protestant Christianity in the Batak area. The resulting study was titled: 'Batak Blood and Protestant Soul'. Pedersen believes that Christians in the Batak area were unique people who had a strong awareness of their identity, both as Batak and as Christians. Protestant religion is closely related to the culture of the Batak people. He argues that the existence of the Batak church's plurality is a reflection of the different approaches used by the zending organizations to introduce Christianity and the various responses by the Batak ethnic groups to that approach. The willingness of the Batak people to accept new influences led them to acquire modern ideologies, prosperous coastal areas, and the Christian faith faster and in greater numbers than other ideologies, regions and churches. Thus, the church was able to accept them. Although this study only briefly touches on Simalungun and emphasizes on the observations made in the Toba Batak research, but it also provides preliminary information about the beginning of the entry of zending into Simalungun.

Yr. Muller Kruger, emiritus professor at Theologia Jakarta High School, wrote a study entitled: 'Church History in Indonesia'. His wide attention to the spread of Christianity in Indonesia is so great that he says that the process of Christianity in each region in Indonesia is a separate series by Western zending efforts. The church that emerged in various regions with its ethno-reactivity label had almost no connection between one zending area and another. He gave an example of the North Sumatra area of the Batak residence, the church has grown with the label of each tribe such as the Protestant Batak



Christian Huria (HKP) for the Toba Batak, the Simalungun Protestant Christian Church (GKPS) for the Simalungun Batak, the Karo Protestant Batak Church (GBK) for the Batak Toba, the Simalungun Protestant Christian Church (GKPS) for the Simalungun Batak, the Karo Protestant Batak Church (GBK) for the Batak Karo, the Angkola Protestant Christian Church (GKPA) for the Batola Angkola, Banua Niha Kreiso Protestant (BNKP) for the islanders of Nias, and the Mentawai Christian Protestant Church (PKPM) for the Mentawai islands.

Hutauruk, a theologian from Batak, conducted a study in the form of a dissertation entitled: *Die Batak-Kirche Vor Ihrer Unabhangigkeit (1899–1942)*, wherein he revealed some of the characteristics typical of the history of the church in Indonesia, namely the church that grew and developed in the midst of ethnic tribes of Batak. He observed that churches with a tribal background were aware of the danger of exclusivism and territorialism which always threaten the lives of the churches. The wealth that is in the church such as an independent spirit, the need to be on the same level with others and the need to triumph so that they can be directed on how to live together in harmony, since this is the principal task the church has been assigned to handle in this world.

The studies stated above provided an overview of the zending process in Batak land with their foreign dimensions and approaches. These studies have paved the way for more specialized research in the Batak Simalungun community, with specificity in the form of dimensions and approaches. Therefore, the dimensions of this study are non-theological and its approach is historical, so that it will present a more complete scientific nuance to the historical dynamics of the Simalungun Batak people. The author observed the existence of religious transition in the Batak Simalungun by paying more attention to non-theological aspects so as to provide a more unique understanding of the Simalungun community.

## Review of literature

### *Initial zending activities in Simalungun*

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Batak Simalungun region began to enter a new historical episode. At almost the same time Dutch colonialism and zending entered the region to spread its mission. Zending RMG entered Batak Simalungun land, along with the annexation and pacification of the Dutch colonial government to this area, in the context of political economic interests of foreign investment in the form of plantation expansion which had expanded in the eastern Sumatra region since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Information on the Batak Simalungun area and population were obtained by Nendensen's zending from the writings and reports of Van Dijk controleur onderaf-deeling Toba located in Lagu Boti who had conducted research on the Lower Simalungun area including the Bandar, Siantar, Tanah Java, Purba, Panei areas. Van Dijk in his report stated that he and his entourage who departed on 26 May 1892 from Lagu Boti to the Simalungun area were well-received by the Simalungun kings, except when on the way from the Bolon Intersection to the Land of Java, precisely in the Aek Buluh huta were they attacked by Tuan Raimbang troops of the Dolok Panribuan rulers on 11 September

1892. From this report, the author observed that most of the population still adhered to tribal religion, besides the fact that Islam had also entered this area.

In order to consolidate the zending work program to Simalungun, while awaiting approval from Barmen, a review was conducted again. In this review, the zendeling sought the approval of native rulers (Batak Simalungun kings), as well as the Dutch colonial authorities to give permission to the zending to work in their territory. A group of 23 evangelists and zending departed from Sigumpar (Toba Batak area) to Tiga Langgiung (Haranggaol) in the Upper Simalungun area, towards Tiga Langgiung (Haranggaol) in the Upper Simalungun area. This review was carried out from 10 February to 10 March 1903, and was led by L.I. Nommensen who met with authorities in Raya, Purba, Panei, Silou, Siantar, and Bandar. However, it seemed that the kings of Simalungun did not refuse the arrival of the zending in their area, although none of them really agreed to it. When asked to embrace the new religion they said: 'We will think about it first'. King Siantar Sang Nawaluh Damanik seemed to behave the same way, in that he did not assent to or even reject the idea and presence of the zending in his Pamatang Siantar area. This attitude can be understood if it relates to the inclusion of Islamic influence on the population as a result of his peoples' contact with the Malays on the coast through trade contacts, especially since Raja Siantar had embraced Islam since 1901.

#### *Zending august theis's placement in Pamatang Raya*

August Theis was born on 16 February 1874 in Haiger Germany to a simple family. After completing his elementary school, he enrolled in a vocational school, and was called in 1895 by the director of the Zending RMG to the Zending Seminary School in Barmen. He studied and practiced for 7 years and was ordained as a Reverend on 6 August 1902 in Barmen together with his classmates. Then, Nommensen put him to work in Simalungun with a location in Pamatang Raya.

When August Theis arrived in Pamatang Raya, the method he used to approach the local community was to first approach the king of their Kingdom known as Tuan Hapoltakan. But the king was not willing to become a Christian because the new religion requires for him to abandon his pleasures such as: polygamy, slavery, worshiping of idols, and the use of opium. King Hapoltakan was married to 60 women, he had more than 100 slaves (jabolon), and he had a spiritual companion, namely a shaman (Datu Bolon) who was believed to possess magic powers or supernatural powers that aided the king to sustain his position. Thus, the king was more pleased with his tribal religion.<sup>9</sup>

However, the King did not hinder the opening of schools, and he even allowed his people to embrace the religion they liked.<sup>10</sup> Such conditions helped August Theis to apply the method of using social amenities to convert the people by opening schools, churches, and healthcare services (medical). The Batak Simalungun people were expected to be interested in entering the Zending school. Although the King refused to convert to Christianity, August Theis was aware of the fact that the cooperation of this ruler was needed in his work of zending. Thus, the zendeling continued to approach local authorities such as the Pangulu, or Partuanon. Based on August Theis's approach, Raja Raya's Tuan Hapoltakan visited Theis's house, and was present at the celebration of Christmas Eve on 24 December 1905. The king's participation greatly influenced the decision of the local residents to convert to



Christianity. They suspected that their king had converted to Christianity. Thus, there was a well known saying among the residents at that time: 'Ham pe converted to Christianity ma?' (Meaning: You will soon become a Christian right?). This saying illustrates the emergence of enthusiastic converts as a result of the participation of their king in a church festival as he was suspected to have converted to Christianity.

### *Zending and colonialism*

The collaboration that existed between zending and colonialism proved to be one of the manifestations of the sacred purpose of forming a divine kingdom. Relating to the relationship between zending and the Dutch colonial government in Indonesia, in general, the Dutch government paid considerable attention to Christian zending in Indonesia, not because they wanted to spread Christianity. Zending activities were tolerated only because of mere political considerations.<sup>11</sup>

Such views can be found, for example, in the figures of Dutch colonialists, J. T. Cremer and D. Fock. J. T. Cremer who was a plantation entrepreneur and minister of the colony from 1897 to 1901, suggested that the zending NZG work in Batak Karo Land should be properly supported in an effort to secure the area and prevent the entry of Islam, so that zending was made an ally of the Netherlands by way of Christianity. In this regard, Cremer in 1889 raised funds to help zending NZG open a number of schools that must spread Christianity and Western civilization.<sup>12</sup> D. Fock, minister of the colony from 1905 to 1908 also made a statement that since the NZG zending work was very valuable in advancing the decency and society of the colony, the colonial government needed to provide support for the zending work.<sup>13</sup>

### *Research method*

The researcher used a qualitative research approach to explain the socio-cultural change that influenced changes in the Simalungun Religion. Qualitative words simply emphasize processes and meanings that are not studied strictly or that have not been measured in terms of quantity, intensity, or frequency.<sup>14</sup> Qualitative research emphasizes the nature of socially constructed reality, the close relationship between the researcher and the subject under study, and the pressure of the situation that makes up the inquiry. The theme of this study can be categorized into cultural history,<sup>15</sup> cultural history's structural aspects will be more prominent because what is studied is primarily the product of institutionalizing various human behaviors that have crystallized and manifested as patterns, structures, institutions and so on, while aspects of dynamism that cannot be ignored include the institutionalization process, institutionalization, socialization and acculturation.<sup>16</sup>

Such pattern of thinking can be applied in this study by observing social structures, beliefs and customs as the basis for encapsulating the original Simalungun Batak social interaction on the one hand, and for meeting with the other parties, namely, zending with the dominant Western culture-dominated zendeling, who had the aim of spreading Christianity, and who experienced a dynamic process of conversion to Christianity as shown by the growth of churches and a number of residents who were willing to be baptized each year among the Simalungun Batak people during the period between 1903 and 1942.

Departing from the theme of the study of zending and religious change in Simalungun Land and relating to cultural history as a category, the approach used is the socio-cultural approach. This social approach is expected to explain the process of community interaction in its dynamic dealings with zending which is seen as an agent of reform.

Source search (heuristic), source criticism, formulation of facts (aufassung), and presentation of new thoughts (darstellung), were all narrated in the form of historical stories.<sup>17</sup> Primary and secondary sources were used in this study, and these were tracked from various library locations, church archives, national archives in Jakarta, and private collections. The authors got other secondary sources from a number of books, articles, and magazines, published in their various eras and obtained from various libraries in North Sumatra and Yogyakarta.

The basis of qualitative research is constructivism which assumes that reality is plural, interactive and an exchange of social experience interpreted by each individual. Qualitative researchers believe that truth is dynamic and can be found only through the study of peoples' interaction with their social situation. Qualitative research examines participants' perspectives with strategies that are interactive and flexible. It also aims at understanding social phenomena from the point of view of participants, and it is done by collecting words or sentences from individuals, books, and other sources. Therefore, this study uses interviews as a method of data collection so that researchers are able to access deeper information about the interpretation of the individuals that were examined.<sup>18</sup> There are six approaches to qualitative research: (1) narrative-biographical approach; (2) Grounded Theory approach; (3) case study approach; (4) approach to discourse analysis; (5) ethnographic approach; and (6) a phenomenological approach.<sup>19</sup>

Ethnographic meaning in the broad sense is a science that focuses on efforts to describe the ways of human life. Ethnographic study was originally pioneered by the famous Polish anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski through his monograph on society in the Trobriand Islands.<sup>20</sup> Ethnic groups as a territorial cultural entity that are neatly arranged and can be depicted on an ethnographic map. Each group has well-defined boundaries which separated the ethnic group from the others.<sup>21</sup> A common feature of ethnographic research is a detailed description, which results from interviews with key informants, participants' observation, and field notes during observation. Ethnographic data can be events, behaviors, or artifacts. The purpose of ethnographic research is to have a member's description that contains information about the insider's perspective.<sup>22</sup>

### *Place and time of research*

The location focused on by this research is the Simalungun area (see Figure 1). Simalungun at the moment is synonymous with the district of Simalungun which since the beginning of its capital until 2008 was the city of Pematangsiantar. After 2008, the capital moved to Pematang Raya, so that geographically speaking, the territory of Pematangsiantar city is in the Simalungun region. With it then was the possibility that the territory adjacent to the district of Simalungun or outside of it was also a concern to be observed as if it was in the city of Pematangsiantar, which is also the ethnic region of Simalungun. Also, the district of Simalungun had spread to the outer areas of Simalungun and Pematangsiantar districts such as: Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Papua and santero in Indonesia. Historically, Pematangsiantar city was a part





Figure 1. Map of Simalungun regency, North Sumatera, Indonesia. Source:Wikipedia ([https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:\(Peta\\_Wilayah\)\\_Kabupaten\\_Simalungun.svg](https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:(Peta_Wilayah)_Kabupaten_Simalungun.svg))

of the Simalungun region which was politically controlled by King Siantar of the damanik dynasty and since June 1907, the Dutch East Indies government had established a central government administration in that area known as Afdeeling Simalungun and Karolanden.

## Discussion

### *The first Simalungun and zending period (1903-1927)*

#### *Noble families*

The Simalungun kings were the first group of people to come in contact with August Theis, when he arrived the Upper Simalungun area of the Pematang Raya on 3 September 1903, to obtain permission to erect zending houses, schools and churches. His building was erected on a piece of land that King Hapoltakan gave him as he had promised Nommensen when he visited the area in March 1903. August Theis accompanied by evangelist Theopilus Pasaribu arrived at the Kingdom Hall for the wake of the late funeral service of Rondahaim Saragih Garingging, my father, from King Hapoltakan. By 1903, the Kingdom had become a part of the Dutch colonial rule, prompting the suspicion of King Hapoltakan over the presence of zending in his area. Though the Dutch had promised to help develop the land, but the king secretly ordered his people to investigate whether the zendeling (August Theis) came as the lord of the garden. August Theis tried to convince the king that he was not the master of the garden, but that he intended to introduce a school to bring progress (hamajuon) to the people of Simalungun.

King Hapoltakan was not totally convinced, so he reduced the land area he had promised to give. The king apparently could not distinguish between the Lord of the Gardens (Dutch Onderneming) and the RMG master. The King and his people had

always called the Europeans silly, white-eyed, and viewed them negatively, regardless of whether they were Dutch, German or European. In short, they are considered enemies of the land, so they needed to be selective in allowing their presence in their midst.

Although it was very difficult to break through the critical stance of the Simalungun kings in an effort to bring Christianity to their people; however, the approach to this group was not ignored. The strategy was still applied at every appropriate moment, especially in formal and informal meetings such as church events, deaths, and royal meetings (*harapatan bolon*), which the kings often attended.<sup>23</sup> The zendeling realized how much influence this group of kings had on their subjects. This became obvious to August Theis as he realized this fact from the saying that was commonly heard among fellow residents in Pamatang Raya, '*Mintor sonaha ma parrohnami, anggo rajanta sandiri pe lape roh*' which means, 'how can we possibly come (convert to Christianity) if the king himself has not accepted Christianity?'.<sup>24</sup> There were several reasons why the kings were reluctant to convert to Christianity, namely: (1) Polygamy, (2) Slavery, (3) The influence of Islam.

Polygamy culture which was a main characteristic of the royal system was clearly contrary to the tenets of Christianity. The kings were unable to eliminate this culture, for them the existence of a concubine could be a prestige, a symbol of power, even a safeguard in power politics, because a woman could function as a mediator in the group of clans or clans.

Slave culture (*jabolon*) for a king was the backbone of his kingdom's food life, which contradicts the teachings of Christianity. The Kings knew that they will lose their slaves if they convert to Christianity. The strong culture of slavery that existed in this area made the zending to suggest to the colonial government to ban it, because it was not in accordance with the religion adopted by the Dutch. Thus, due to the proposal of the Westenberg Resident Assistant, slavery was abolished on 1 January 1910 in the Simalungun area.

The influence of Islam especially in the lower Simalungun area had been widespread as a result of contact with Malays living in the Asahan, Coal, and Deli areas. The Simalungun kings had made some Malay people royal officials, so their mindsets influenced the kings' interest in converting to Islam rather than to Christianity. For example, the Siantar king had converted to Islam before zending entered his area. Also, the Simalungun kings often imitated the pattern of life of the Malay sultans, such as wearing of oversized clothing to ceremonies or to court parties, as well as the inclusion of the religion of Islam into their private affairs, so they assumed that embracing Christianity would disrupt relations with the rich Malay sultans.

From a number of Simalungun kings of this early period, Mr. Riah Kadim Damanik, a Crown Prince of the Siantar Kingdom emerged. After the Dutch succeeded in capturing and interning his father, king of Sang Nawaluh Damanik to Bengkalis in 1906, the Dutch then sought this future Siantar king to become a Christian by sending him to a zending school under the guidance of zendeling Ed. Muller at Purba Saribu. After completing his education in 1912 under Ed. Muller, Mr. Riah Kadim was baptized under the name Waldemar, and he planned to continue his education at the Sipoholon Seminary. But he couldn't accomplish this plan because the Dutch colonial government appointed Mr. Riah Kadim Waldemar Damanik as Siantar king on 11 October 1916 to replace his father. He was the only one of the Simalungun Batak kings who got converted to Christianity.



But the presence of this figure as a Christian and a Siantar king did not have much influence on the ecclesiastical life in Pematang Siantar.

Mr. Dolog Saribu, Salain Saragih was also baptized in 1913 along with his people, who numbered 8. Likewise, Mr. Jaudin Saragih who was then serving as Pangulu Balei in Pamatang Raya was also baptized together with Jonatan Sinaga on 25 December 1911. This situation heralded the beginning of change in the conversion process among the Batak Simalungun nobles who also affected other residents later. This was marked by the conversion of religion by Pangulu Dolog Saribu, R. Daud Saragih on 2 November 1913 and Pangulu Urung Panei, Johan Purba on 17 December 1913.<sup>25</sup>

Purba Raja Tuan Rahalim Purba Pakpak entrusted the education of his son, Mr. Mogang Purba Pakpak who was just 10 years old at that time to zendeling. This King had promised Guillaume that he would immediately embrace Christianity. He expressed his intention directly to Guillaume zendeling during the eve of Christmas celebration on 24 December 1908. However, until Guillaume left Sumatra on leave in 1909, the wishes of Purba king Tuan Rahalim Purba Pakpak never materialized. Although he did not have the zeal to convert to Christianity, it must be admitted that the contribution of this Ancient King to the zending work in his kingdom was significant, especially in the eyes of the majority of the populace.

#### *Most community groups*

The sympathetic feelings of the populace towards zendeling began to grow over time as they started to see the advantages offered to them. August Theis, who had expertise in the field of medical treatment, used it as a means of preaching the gospel to the people. Various diseases suffered by local residents such as: pestilence (scabies), bun bolon (chickenpox disease), cholera, and bagoh bagas (boils),<sup>26</sup> which was a scourge among the populace were all successfully treated by August Theis who used drugs from Aphoteek. Theis explained to them that the medicine he was giving to them was from the Lord Jesus, so they must believe in Him and obey His commands.

The next area August Theis Zendeling went to was the village of Buluraya in 1904. The head of Buluraya village has heard the news from the neighboring village of how a zending school was opened for them, so he also asked for a forum to set up a school in his village.

Then, August Theis began the process of spreading Christianity further in the area of Tongah Kingdom, which was located 4 km from the Kingdom Hall. The zending school opened and started in that district on 5 October 1908.

The documentary in the archives of the Belgian Protestant Christian Church at the Election was written by August Theis, the first Baptist in that area on 25 December 1909. The number of people<sup>24</sup> who got baptized was 24, and they were all parishioners from the general public. This can be seen in the following Table (see Table 1).

Some of the inhabitants of the Lower Simalungun area were already converted to Islam when zendeling Gotfred Karel Simon<sup>27</sup> opened a zending post in the Bandar area in 1904. Simon zendeling tried to increase the number of supporting staff in zending works. The workers recruited were from the Christian Toba Bataks who had migrated to that area, especially in the Bandar Maratur area. They first received a three-month quick education with the material titled: 'Understanding Christianity and mastery of the

Table 1. Baptismal members 25 December 1909.

No	Mr/Mrs	N A M E		Family Name	Village
		Baptism	Before Baptism		
1	Mr	Musa	Morhadjim	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
2	Mrs	Marianna	Ramonim	Saragih	Pamatang Raya
3	Mrs	Sanna	Tanin	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
4	Mr	Marinus	Bongir	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
5	Mrs	Hulda	Ronim	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
6	Mrs	Nonna	Tomma	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
7	Mrs	Anna	Rama	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
8	Mr	Petrus	Tilam	Damanik	9 matang Raya
9	Mr	Salomo	Murdjaim	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
10	Mrs	Abina	Omma	Saragih	Raya Tongah
11	Mrs	Hormainim	Hormainim	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
12	Mrs	Martha Sinaga	Manta	Sinaga	9 ya Tongah
13	Mrs	Lamina	Boras	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
14	Mr	Andreas	Mariah	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
15	Mr	Simeon	Udjat	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
16	Mrs	Ragina Saragih	Ronim	Saragih	Raya Tongah
17	Mrs	Artina Sinaga	Lama	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
18	Mrs	Teresia	Tati	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
19	Mr	Pilemon	Bulan	Sinaga	9 ya Tongah
20	Mr	Abel	Agam	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
21	Mrs	Sara	Tara	Sinaga	Raya Tongah
22	Mr	Daut	Tori	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
23	Mr	Johannes	Tari	Damanik	Pamatang Raya
24	Mr	Josep	Igil	Sinaga	Naga Tongah

Source: GKPS Archives, Tauf = Register (Baptism Register) Year 1909.

**Simalungun** Batak language' so that they were expected to have good communication skills with the local population.

The colonial economic and political developments in the area caused changes that affected the process of religious conversion among the local population. In 1907, the colonial government moved the center of economic and political activity from Bandar to Pematang Siantar. This movement had implications for the development in Pematang Siantar. Such conditions were seen as an opportunity to work more effectively and to intensify the work of zending for Batak Simalungun residents, besides gathering Batak Toba Christian migrants in this area. The zending post was also moved to Pematang Siantar in 1907. The rapid development in the lower Simalungun area, especially in Pematang Siantar, seemed to have less influence on Batak Simalungun's agrarian culture to adjust to changes. As a result, the Simalungun Batak people were increasingly left out in their own area. Such conditions made it difficult for zending to work among them, especially with the emergence of hatred towards Toba Batak migrants who were accused of being 'plunders' of their land, while efforts to spread the Gospel were also carried out in the Batak Toba language.

In the Batakese tradition, the development of art and culture cannot be separated from religious life (Zulkifli & Ridwan, 2019). The Batak Simalungun's population in this area was faced with two religious influences, namely, the Malays on the one hand who offered them Islam and on the other hand, the Batak Toba plus their zending who offered them Christianity. The minority among the Simalungun people seemed to prefer the offer of the Malays. The reason they preferred the offer of the Malays was because besides being prestigious, Islam was considered to have more economic or livelihood opportunities. So that many of the Batak Simalungun people who mated with the Malays



deemed it fit to alienate the clan, while they still held on to the use of the language and customs of the Simalunguns.

#### *Cultural aspects and religious transition*

The slow increase in the number of converts (baptized) and the number of Jem'at (churches) was due to the slow transformation of understanding of the new religion. Such a process can be viewed from several sides, namely: from the geographical aspects, aspects of language and aspects of the socio-cultural and political systems prevailing in the Simalungun area at that time.

The following table shows the development process of the Simalungun people who had converted to Christianity, through their willingness to be baptized. After 25 years of zending work, a number of 31 churches were established in various corners of this region with a population of 1326 people (see Table 2).

Although there was an increase in the number of the Batak Simalungun people who were being baptized every year, but this increase in the number of churches that were built did not seem to get any recognition from the local community. For a zending, the geographical aspect was one of the problems that must be faced when visiting residents from one village to another. A village that is only inhabited by around 30 to 40 households with relatively far distances and heavy terrain of shrubs that are only connected by footpaths slows communication with local residents.

The Toba Batak language aspect as a means of communication used by the zending and evangelists for the Simalungun Batak community influenced the conversion process. Zending RMG made the assumption of thinking that the origin of the Simalungun and Toba genealogies was the same, so it tends to underestimate the differences in terms of language. Such an assumption appeared in L. Bregenstroth's zending statement which says: 'It is now firmly stated, that the Simalungun people are hardly true Bataks. In the meantime, the king's home village is in Ambarita-Samosir, which was called Lumbannabolak, and which is inhabited by the people of Raya from Simanindo, and vice versa. Simalungun people understand Toba Batak language quite well, but today every language is deliberately made into a library language.'

**Table 2.** Number of conversions among Batak Simalungun people from 1903 to 1927.

Year	Number of baptized	Amount of Friday
1903–1904	-	5
1905–1906	-	11
1907–1908	-	13
1909–1910	37 people	18
1911–1912	60 people	21
1913–1914	114 people	23
1915–1916	273 people	26
1917–1918	509 people	26
1919–1920	768 people	27
1921–1922	876 people	27
1923–1924	983 people	27
1925–1926	1202 people	29
1927	1362 people	31

Source: Processed from the GKPS Archives, Tauf = Register (Baptis Register) Year 1906–1927. Also from Susukkara GKPS 1999, (Pematang Siantar: GKPS Collaboration, 1999),

Zendeling Bregenstroth rested on the premise that the Simalungun's language region will be increasingly narrow due to the influx of immigrants from Toba, so it can be predicted that the language will not be able to last as long as a social language. Moreover, he stated that Simalungun Batak language was only slightly different from the Toba Batak language.

L. Bregenstroth's view can be classified as an understanding that ignored the cultural elements of the Simalungun Batak people. Bregenstroth seemed to underestimate and ignore the differences that existed in the two Batak languages in the course of his work among the Simalungun Bataks. It may be emphasized that until 1928, Christianity among the Simalungun Bataks was not based on their own culture but rather, it tended towards the culture of the neighboring Batak Toba tribe. The tendency to underestimate the differences in language on the one hand caused the Batak Simalungun people to be deprived of their own culture, and on the other hand it triggered the demand for zendelings so that they became the ones who had the authority to lead and to determine the implementation of the gospel in Simalungun.

Simon tried to translate a number of zending school textbooks and gospel stories into the Simalungun language, even the teachers that accompanied him were required to use the Simalungun Batak language in schools and in church services. But this effort did not continue because Simon soon returned to Germany.

During this period, the Simalungun Batak people showed apathy towards the zending work which was introduced by the zendelings, with zending teachers of the Toba Batak people and with a language that the Simalungun Batak people did not understand. This required for the Simalungun Batak people to first learn the Toba Batak language before they can read textbooks at the zending schools, or before they can understand the sermons delivered to them by the zendelings, which made them to show apathy for joining the church.

Zendeling August Theis began to realize that the Simalungun Batak people should be involved in the work of zending, because they had a better understanding of their culture, and the Simalungun language was used as an educational tool in churches and schools. Proposals concerning it were made and accepted, but the use of the language was not yet accepted. In 1911, an opportunity was given to two young men from the Simalungun Batak community to enter the Zending-Kweekschool's school. They were expected to become teaching staff later and to help the zendeling in their own area. The two Batak Simalungun youth who were given the opportunity to study outside their area was, Saragih who was sent to Zending-Kweekschool Narumonda in Tapanuli, and Saragih who was sent to the seminary school in Depok, West Java. In 1915, these two youths from the Simalungun area successfully completed their studies and were employed as zending school teachers in the Raya area, since they understood their own customs perfectly well.

Thus, zending activities increased during the period of 1903–1942 among the Simalungun people. By paying attention to zending activities especially to the process of religious conversion, and with a great consideration to the language of communication, tradition and transformation, it was impossible to engage all these in the development process and not make progress.

New institutions built by zendings grew and developed in the Simalungun area such as churches, schools, polyclinics, and transportation facilities which opened both the internal and external parts of the once isolated Simalungun area to the outside world. The



construction of inter-regional and intra-regional Simalungun highways to the outside world accelerated the entry of Western values such as assessments of education, as well as evaluations of money. The speed with which urbanization started and increased in the Simalungun, area led to the belief that the Simalungun's actual goal or orientation for accepting Western education in the first place, was for economic reasons.

The tribal religion that was the model of the pre-zending Simalungun people did not have any special house of worship. Religious ceremonies were a part of daily social life that was usually held in family homes or in open areas around the village. For this reason, the RMG zending emphasized the establishment of a number of church buildings as places of worship for Christians. The shape and style of the church buildings adopted were a Western model that was alien to the inhabitants of that area.

The zending expanded their work by opening zending schools to reach the wider communities who wanted to acquire reading, writing and arithmetic skills. Therefore, most people got to know that they too can take part in utilizing the zending schools' education to improve their social status. They saw the strengths of the zending as knowledge and Christianity, and understood that school zending and converting to Christianity could help them gain knowledge such as the one possessed by the zending. If they are able to attend zending schools and they succeed in acquiring the required education, then they are made zending school teachers, and they will acquire the status of zending teachers in the community. They could also apply for jobs with the Dutch colonial government, which in turn would raise their status regardless of the structure of the traditional Simalungun royal society, from where they did not get such opportunities.

In addition to applying the Western model of education to the Simalungun Batak community, the RMG zending also introduced a new healthcare service, the Western medicine model. Before the coming of the zending to the Simalungun Batak community, the person in charge of curing illness was known as datu. The datu's knowledge was usually passed on to his children or their offspring. The datu, who was usually from the same clan as the king, was used as a spiritual advisor, especially in deciding the solution to certain problems in the kingdom. However, there were two diseases<sup>26</sup> that could not be cured by the Batak Simalungun's datu, namely, cholera and leprosy. **Towards the end of the nineteenth century**, almost **the entire area of Simalungun** was hit by a cholera epidemic. The RMG zending who arrived in this area provided healthcare services by giving medicines from the West which turned out to be effective for treating cholera, leprosy and other various diseases disturbing the Simalungun residents. The ability of the zending to use drugs became a bridge to open contact with the Simalungun Batak people who were usually very suspicious of them and cautious with them.

### *The second Simalungun and zending period (1928-1942)*

#### *Building identity*

One of the most important developments of this period (1928–1942) in Simalungun was the growth of the Simalungun Batak ethnic identity. The work of the zending that was introduced to the populace was the main factor that gave rise to the growing awareness of Batak Simalungun ethnicity.<sup>28</sup> Ethnicity as one of the factors that sustain a sense of **primordialism is often interpreted as a social group in a social or cultural system that has**

a certain meaning or position because of heredity, customs, religion, language, and so on.<sup>29</sup> The language problem experienced by the zendingings was a mistake caused by the assumption that the culture of the Simalungun Batak was very similar to the Toba Batak's. However, the zendingings started to suspect that the Simalungun Batak people could not understand the Toba Batak's language of communication and they also suspected that the reaction to their teachings of Christianity would follow the same path that applied to the Toba Bataks in Tapanuli. Thus, the difficulties experienced by the zendingings as a result of the erroneous assumption became an obstacle in the conversion process.

On Sunday 2 September 1928, a celebration was held at Pematang Raya to commemorate 25 years of zending work in the Batak Simalungun area. Although the zendingings were not as successful in this area as they were in Tapanuli, thousands of people attended the celebration including important officials of the Dutch colonial government and the Simalungun Batak kings. Many talks were held by the zendingings during the celebration, especially regarding the mistakes made in this area, and proposals emerged to accelerate the process of religious conversion among ethnic Simalungun people.

Such talks also took place among the Simalungun Bataks who had embraced Christianity. They began to realize that the best way to spur the expansion of this new religion was to accept responsibility for spreading the teachings of Christianity to their friends and relatives by using their own language. The Simalungun Batak Christians felt very capable of carrying out this task, because they knew and understood the social system and customs themselves more than the European zending and zending teachers from Tapanuli, and this helped them to attract more new members. They showed how the work of zending can be done in a more realistic way by communicating with their own language, and how it can deliver a more flexible atmosphere in conversations with people who were still adherents of their tribal religion, seeing that they were no longer reluctant to ask questions and they were ready to get answers in their own language, which in turn made them to become interested in Christianity.

The discussion that was had concerning Batak Simalungun resulted in an agreement to form a Christian organization in Pematang Raya, which was named the Na Ra Marpodah Committee (Committee for Evangelizing the Evangelism). Although the Na Ra Marpodah Committee was a Christian organization, it felt responsible for spreading the use of the Simalungun language through the books that it published. The book *Ruhut Manurathon hata Simalungun* (the rules in writing the Simalungun language) was published by this committee and used in schools, thus giving encouragement to the spread of this regional language. This publication was committed to expanding the Simalungun language so as not to lose its supporters.

The formation of the Na Ra Marpodah Committee<sup>30</sup> was followed by the formation of other Christian organizations in Simalungun. Christian youth who actively participated in church services and studied at the zending schools formed a group called *Kongsi Sauhur* (united organization). In addition to actively spreading Christianity, members of the *Sauhur* Congregation provided voluntary assistance to community members during marriage ceremonies, funeral rites, and so on. They also formed choirs and sometimes provided entertainment through hymn songs. This youth organization was supervised and guided by the zendingings in the hope that they would take over from them in leading the church in the future.



The older generation members did not want to be left behind in religious activities. In 1931 in Pematang Raya, they formed an organization called Kongsu Laita (let's go), with the main aim of spreading Christianity among friends and relatives.

A further step taken by Christian pioneers in the Simalungun community was to start a course for church elders (sintua) in Pematang Raya. The course was held once a month for 5 hours. The material discussed was related to understanding the Bible, church history and Palestinian history. But their main goal was to find the best way to attract tribal believers into the church.

Special organizations were also formed to handle the issues of finance that arose in connection with the work of evangelism in Simalungun. One of these organizations was founded in 1934 under the name, Cash of the Witness Ni Christ. Members of the Simalungun Christian congregation made special contributions to this organization which was used as living expenses for every evangelist who worked in remote parts of the Simalungun area.

The number of religious conversions among the Simalungun Batak people during the period of 1928 to the beginning of 1942 can be seen from the number of members in Table 3.

#### *Building independence*

The use of the Toba Batak language as the official language in the RMG zending activities in Simalungun, and the dominance of a large number of Batak Toba people in the church hierarchy, received a negative reaction from the Simalungun people. In 1940, the HKBP church was an organization in its own right with the first Ephorus K. Sirait. The Simalungun Batak people felt that the time had come for them to demand greater autonomy from the HKBP on the basis of differences in language, custom, and the demand of separate services. Repeated requests were made to the HKBP head office in Pearaja Tarutung, requesting that the Simalungun area be recognized as a separate area. But this request was always rejected.

**Table 3.** Number of conversions among Simalungun people from 1928 to 1942.

Year	Number of church members	Number of churches
1928	1498 people	34
1929	1725 people	39
1930	2038 people	39
1931	2564 people	40
1932	2951 people	47
1933	3218 people	50
1934	3605 people	53
1935	4796 people	55
1936	5083 people	57
1937	5269 people	58
1938	5694 people	60
1939	6068 people	60
1940	6443 people	61
1941	7894 people	63

Source: Processed from Tauf = Register of Simalungun Protestant Christian Church 1928–1941, (Archives of the Pematang Raya GKPS, Simalungun), Also from Susukkara GKPS 1998, (Pematang Siantar: GKPS Collaboration, 1998), p. 425–440. Also R. K. Purba, 'GKPS Statistics' in the Barita pakilan Ambulan, No. 53, Special edition, 1978, p. 74–78.

The Batak Simalungun people felt that if they could manage the affairs of the church in their own area, without depending on the decisions made at Pearaja Tarutung, the work of zending would achieve more rapid progress. Ephorus agreed that the Simalungun area should be separated and that its formation should be in an ecclesiastical spirit and the church leaders should be given broad autonomy.

Increased awareness of ethnic identity that was later developed among the Simalungun Bataks became a force to be reckoned with. The relationship of the Simalungun leaders with HKBP officials in 1940 showed that they were confident in their ethnic abilities so they wanted to assert their rights, but this attitude led to some clashes with the Toba Bataks. Consequently, ethnic or regional loyalties became more prominent than Christianity.

Viewed from the perspective of pure religion, the conflict between Simalungun and Toba Batak church officials over the issue of who should be responsible for the spread of Christianity in Simalungun was a petty problem.

During this period, the desire for independence in the Batak Simalungun people's mode of worship reached where the Simalungun language began to be used in the churches and schools until the stage when the Simalungun church leaders were confident enough to demand broad autonomy from the HKBP leadership. On 26 September 1940, the HKBP formally granted autonomy to the Batak Simalungun Christians to become a separate district.

## Conclusion

The reason for <sup>1</sup> mass conversion among the Simalungun people was apparently related to the feudal structure of their society. When viewed from the perspective of capitalism, it becomes justifiable to say that Simalungun was the Yogyakarta of Sumatra during the revolution of independence. This also relates to the influence of colonial and traditional political conditions of that time, coupled with the use of the Toba Batak language as an introduction in the school and church environment, as well as the involvement of the Toba Batak people as assistants to the zending and the character of the Simalungun community who were prudent in making their own decisions.

The zending RMG chose the Pamatang Raya area as the initial base for the spread of Christianity among the Simalungun Batak people based on several considerations including geographical, cultural, political, and religious strategies. It turned out that from this area the conversion process started for the Simalungun area and then slowly spread to other areas.

The approach taken by the zending to the Simalungun community was the community structure approach and customary approach. The approach through structure started from the upper layer, namely among the local kings. The negative reaction from this group then diverted the attention of the zending to immediately approach the majority of the community, namely from the paruma group (farmers), and the jabolons (slaves). This layer of the society was able to see the strengths of the zending such as their skills, knowledge, and religious prowess. This community group was also able to grasp the benefits that could be obtained from the zending, so that they were willing to convert to the Christian religion through baptism conducted in churches that were initially provided by the zending party. The slow increase in the number of converts



changed the pressure of the zendeling approach towards indigenous cultural approaches, such as replacing the Toba Batak language that was previously used with the Simalungun Batak language in church, school, and daily communication services. In addition, the Simalungun Batak people were involved in church service activities, schools, and other services by accompanying the zendelings.

The development of RMG zending activities in the Simalungun community, besides causing religious conversion, that is, from the Sipajuh tribe religion to Christianity, also gave rise to structural changes in the community.

The change in the structure of the society from homogeneous to heterogeneous with its ethnic and cultural plurality in the Batak Simalungun area, led to the emergence of newisms that involved ethnicity, religion, and others. The ethnic inclinations of the Simalungun Batak people were demonstrated by their desire to form their own churches and fellowships, to use their own language in their churches and schools, and to demand that they be prioritized as teachers and employees in their own regions. Therefore, they immediately formed partnerships among the Mandailing Batak people and had a separate residence with the Islamic Santri style. Meanwhile, they were fully aware of the fact that some Javanese who were contracted to work as coolies and who came from the grassroots group formed their own community with wayang culture and the Islamic style of the Abangan religion, while the Toba Batak people also formed their own community and settlement with a cultural style that was thick with the Christian customs and religion.

## Notes

1. Pietism is a movement that emphasizes piety and appreciation of faith. This movement arose in the Lutheran churches in Germany around 1675. The word 'pietis' comes from 'pietas', which is piety, and was given the name in ridicule of people who emphasized that the Christian faith must become visible in godly life. The 'pietists' felt dissatisfied with the church service effort which was considered to be stagnant at the time. See, de Jonge and Artonang, *Apa dan Bagaimana Gereja: Pengantar Sejarah Eklesiologi*.
2. The term zending is used for Protestant evangelistic bodies, while for the Roman Catholic evangelistic bodies, the term mission is used. See De Kuiper, *Missiologia*. See also Enbrink, *Theological Development*, 149.
3. Artonang, *Sejarah Pendidikan Kristen di Tanah Batak*.
4. Khof and Enklaar, *Sejarah Gereja*.
5. den End, *Ragi Carita 2: Sejarah Gereja di Indonesia 1860-an-sekarang*.
6. Nommensen, *Ompu i Dr. Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen*.
7. Pedersen, *Batak Blood and Protestant Soul*.
8. Papp, *Benih Yang Tumbuh XII*.
9. Bagih, *Barita ni Tuan Rondahaim Na Ginoran Ni Halak Tuan Raja Na Mabadjan*.
10. Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (National Archives of Indonesia), SoK MvO J. C. C. 16 ar.
11. Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (National Archives of Indonesia), SoK MvO J. C. C. Haar, ibi 12
12. Breman, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial Tuan kebun dan Kuli di Sumatera Timur pada awal abad ke-20 (Translated: Koeslah Soebagyo Toer)*.
13. Randwijck, *Oegstgeest: Kebijakan Lembaga-Lembaga Pekabaran Injil Yang Bekerjasama 1897-1942*.
14. Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook Qualitative Research*.
15. Abdullah and Suryomihardjo, *Ilmu Sejarah dan Historiografi: Arah dan Perspektif*.
16. Kartodirdjo, *Pendekatan Ilmu Sosial Dalam Metodologi Sejarah*.

17. Hockett, *The Critical Method*.
18. Martono, *Metode Penelitian Sosial*.
19. Kahija, *Penelitian Fenomenologis Jalan Memahami Pengalaman Hidup*.
20. See note 14 above.
21. Pelly, *Urbanisasi dan Adaptasi*.
22. See note 31 above.
23. Munthe, *Riwayat Hidup Pandita August Theis (Missionar Voller Hoffnung)*.
24. Ibid.
25. Archive of GKPS, Tauf = Register (Daftar Baptis) Tahun 1913, *op. cit.* See also *60 Tahun Injil* 7 *op. cit.*, p. 30.
26. Tideman, *Simeloengoen: Het Lan der Timoer-Bataks in Zijn Vroegere Isolatie en Zijn Ontwikkeling tot een deel van het Cultuurgebied van de Oostkust van Sumatera, Leiden: Stoomdrukkerij Louis H. Bacherer*.
27. Simon initially served in 1897 in Pangaloan, South Tapanuli. In 1900, he served in afdeeling North Toba Tapanuli, and then from 22 May 1904, he worked in Simalungun. The Bandar and Siantar areas were designated as his working areas, so Bandar was used as the initial zending post. (See ANRI, Slu Besluit no. 8, 10 September 1897. Also ANRI, Slu Besluit no.1, 26 September 1900. Also ANRI, Slu Bisluit no. 10, 22 May 1904).
28. Tichelman, "Mededeelingen Beschrijv. 17 van Heiden-Batakschbegrafenisceremonieel in Simeloengoen (Sumatra'S Oostkust)' dalam *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde*," 321-7.
29. Angkat et al, "Construction of Religious Identity," 487-94.
30. Langenberg, *National Revolution in North Sumatra*.

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## Notes on contributors

**Hisarma Saragih** is a senior lecturer in Universitas Simalungun. He teaches cultural of some ethnics in Indonesia. One of his research is about the development of Christian Religion in Simalungun.

**Muhammad Ridwan** is a lecturer in Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU). He teaches cross-culture understanding for ten years. He has published an article in Asian Ethnicity entitled, "Revitalization of the traditional values lost due to the commodification of art/crafts: a case study of Bataknese traditional Ulos."

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