

BETWEEN MIND AND SOUL – PUSTAHA MANUSCRIPTS IN BATAK SOCIETY.

Concerning the collections of Batak manuscripts – part I

In 2019, an issue was discussed in selected Polish institutions, relating to Batak bark books, commonly named *pustaha*.¹⁾ The project was part of a master's degree dissertation²⁾ and an introduction to a future nationwide overview of the manuscripts. As a result of the research, seven objects were located (Fig. 1–7), owned by four institutions: The Asia and Pacific Museum, National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, National Ethnographic Museum in Poznan and University Library in Poznan.

During the survey, specific ethnographical objects were recognized, which affected the degree of academic research on them, as well as the knowledge of appropriate protection methods. Difficulties arose from the need to consider the Batak manuscripts as transgressive objects, functioning in parallel in Western and Eastern societies. From colonial times, the *pustaha* books have

¹ Manuscripts have different names depending on kind of Batak dialect. The Karo – Batak call them *pustaka* or *pustaka – laklak* (what means “the book made of tree bark”). In Pakpak region they are name *lapihin* or *lopijan*. See Teygeler (1993: 593).

² The master's degree dissertation titled: *Konserwacja rękopisu na podłożu z tapy (kultura Batak; Sumatra), ze zbiorów Państwowego Muzeum Etnograficznego w Warszawie* (Conservation of the manuscript on a tapa base (Batak culture; Sumatra), from the collection of the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw) was completed out in 2021, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, under the supervision of Dr hab. Weronika Liszewska.

often been brought to Europe as souvenirs and kept in national or private collections. Starting from cult function of the manuscripts in Batak societies, through contact with western nations, to putting them in the hands of the conservator- the dissertation will be divided into three parts to explain unusual character of the books.

A MYSTERIOUS NATION – THE BATAK PEOPLE

Pustaha – Toba-Batak term for concertina books, made from the part of plant stem (secondary phloem from *Aquilaria Malaccensis*).³⁾ The manuscripts are often found in various collections, but usually they are not correctly defined as manuscripts coming from Sumatra. In 1999, it was estimated that there are about 2,000 historical exhibits of this type in worldwide collections (not including items constantly created for the needs of the tourist market).⁴⁾ The reason for improper identification of these types of the book is insufficient knowledge of the Batak culture which created them. Their genealogy is found within Continental Asia (around the Indian Peninsula) and Java. It is evidenced by common elements of religious worship, derived from Hinduism, as well as lexical remains. These were identified as proto-Malay.

The reputed migration of peoples probably took place from the Aceh province.⁵⁾ Batak lands are placed in the Northern Central part of Sumatra, in district named *Sumatera Utara*, near Toba Lake, partially in the Barisan mountains. Some researchers also say that first Batak Lands were found in the island of Samosir. The group isn't homogenous; it is divided into seven main tribes: Karo, Pakpak, Dairi, Toba, Simelungun, Angkola and Mandailing.⁶⁾

³ Using fibers from *Aquilaria Malaccensis* was identified based on the manner of crafting contemporary examples of *pustaha* books. Today, craftsmen from Sumatra make the books using traditional methods. There were no material tests, comparing samples from historic books with those taken from specific plant species. See Teygeler, Pork (1995: 55–58) and Zollo (2020: 65).

⁴ Zollo (2020: 65).

⁵ Roolvink (1978: 3).

⁶ In the one of the earliest publications about Sumatra, written by William Marsden, the Bataks are divided according to their territories: Angkola, Padambola, Mandiling, Toba, Selindong, and Singkel. The regions are inhabited by distinct groups of tribes; five

Each of these has their own variety of language and customs, but general traditions and beliefs are commonly held.⁷⁾

In literature, we can find information about the historical isolation of Batak people from other ethnic groups. They are well known for their aversion to foreigners and treated as a “strange”, somewhat unfamiliar nation. Up until today, there have only been a few written sources about Batak history, drawn up by European travelers and missionaries, who treated locals as primitives.⁸⁾ They also repeated rumours about the practice of cannibalism, however greatly exaggerated.⁹⁾

One of the most important people for Batak society was the *datu* (Fig. 8). He was a medicine-man, a priest, a magician, and a soothsayer in one person and sometimes even a chief (*raja*) of the village (*huta*).¹⁰⁾ As Roberta Zollo wrote:

“(...)The datu was the only person with the ability to understand the power of the relationship between the people on earth and the spirits and was also the one to ask about preparing magical potions, divination or the performance of healing rituals to re-establish a positive equilibrium. All this esoteric knowledge was used to enrich the pages of the *pustaha*, which were consulted in moments of need. (...)”¹¹⁾

Probably, he was also one of the few people who left the village and embarked on a journey around the island. He made the *pustaha* books, as his own, private notebook, containing the information needed to for his craft. He wrote it down by himself or dictated *hadatuhon* (everything that interests *datu*, all magical knowledge) for his pupils.¹²⁾ The profession was hereditary

in Angola and Toba, and three in Mandiling. The whole of Batak Land is divided into three kingdoms: Simamora, Suitar-male and Jambu-ayer. See Marsden (1811: 406).

⁷ Roolvink (1978: 3–4). Contemporary Bataks use national Indonesian language and successfully profit from tourism. See Pisani (2016: 20–21).

⁸ Reid (2006: 104).

⁹ Andaya (2002: 367).

¹⁰ Messrs., Burton, Ward (1824: 501). Batak villages was connected into bigger units named *horja*. A few *horja* made *bius*. Their chiefs were grouped in the council named *rapot bolon*. They were chosen among themselves overriding the chief – *raja bius* (other *raja oloan* or *raja na ualu*). See Andaya (2002: 367–409).

¹¹ Zolo (2020: 68).

¹² Zolo (2020: 67).

and dominated by males. The Batak believed, that this kind of job had a divine origin; that's why it was highly ritualized with its own rules, sacrifices and taboos.¹³⁾ Each *datu* passed on his knowledge to his successors and learned how to create manuscripts. Sometimes, we can find manuscripts created by more than one hand. This happens because of their continuation the notes by another *datu* or one of his successors.¹⁴⁾

LANGUAGE, SCRIPT AND LITERATURE

The oldest found Batak inscription was carved in a stone in the sanctuary Biaro Si Topayan, but for many years the people were treated as illiterates. This rumor came from the colonizers, who were fixated on Western civilization. Of course, they didn't know Roman alphabet, but in museums and other collections, we can find explanations of the literature, created in the local language.

In 2000, Uli Kozok collected information on the literacy of the Bataks, from which he theorized that the indigenous people commonly used the written word in their native dialects. *Pustaha* is the only one, crafted for sacral purposes. Ordinary people used parts of bamboo stem (Fig. 9) or pieces of bone (mostly the triangular shoulder and rib bones of buffaloes) (Fig.10) as a base for writing exercises or notes (love letters, lists, poetry). They also wrote some stories and legends,¹⁵⁾ but didn't keep journals or chronicles, which makes their history hard to reconstruct.¹⁶⁾ Sometimes, they wrote on some everyday items, such as containers for betel or tobacco (Fig.11). In a publication from 2020, written by Roberta Zollo, we can find a not so clear opinion, that writing skills were not shared by everyone. This issue is still under discussion.¹⁷⁾

¹³ Kozok (2000: 33–34).

¹⁴ Voorhoeve (1951: 284).

¹⁵ A good example of the manuscript contained a story about deities and the Sumatran hero Sisingamangaraja XII is the bamboo divination tool number 23 from the Museum am Rothenbaum. See Zollo (2020: 80–81).

¹⁶ Kozok (2000: 33–35).

¹⁷ Zollo (2020: 64).

Bataks dialects are classified into the Greater Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian group, which is part of Austronesian. Its language family tree is shown below:¹⁸⁾

Tree I:

- Austronesian
 - Malayo-Polynesian
 - Indo-Melanesian
 - Nuclear Malayo-Polynesian
 - Sulawesi-Polynesian
 - Celebo-Polynesian
 - Greater Central- Eastern Malayo-Polynesian

Tree II:

- Greater Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian
 - Northern Sumatra
 - Batak
 - B. Alas-Kluet
 - B. Dairi
 - B. Karo
 - B. Simalungun
 - B. Angkola
 - B. Mandailing
 - B. Toba

Batak handwriting comes from Old Sumatran, derived from the Indian Palava system.¹⁹⁾ Uli Kozok and Michael Everson²⁰⁾ described five main varieties of Batak script. In their opinion, the Batak people named the script *surat na sampulu sia* (nineteen letters) or *si-sia-sia*.²¹⁾ Texts were written continuously, in long horizontal lines. The Batak write and read from left to right. They do not use typical punctuation but special signs named *bindu*.²²⁾

¹⁸⁾ Milin 2015.

¹⁹⁾ Brinkgreve, Sulistianingsih (2009: 86).

²⁰⁾ Everson, Kozok (2008: 1).

²¹⁾ Other researchers say that Batak script differs according to one of seven dialects. It can contain from nineteen to twenty horizontal basic signs *ina ni surat* (mother of script) and eight diacritic signs- *anak ni surat* (children of script). See Kumar, Mc Glynn, Hardjoprakoso (1996: 232).

²²⁾ *Bindu* signs are written in many ornamental forms depending on the writer's

Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk, one of the first Indonesian linguists, analyzed the *pustaha* language and named it sub-Toba. Petrus Voorhoeve wrote about the *poda*-language. It was a universal dialect with an admixture of words and expressions characteristic of the *datu* profession, regardless of the region of occurrence.

BETWEEN MIND AND SOUL- *PUSTAHA* MANUSCRIPTS IN BATAK SOCIETY

Pustaha is a kind of sacral and utility item. Both the material layer and content had powerful properties for the Batak people. Historically, the manuscripts were a kind of notebook, crafted and used only by *datu*. It is assumed that both historical and currently created manuscripts are made on an *Aquaria Malaccensis* base. The long stripe of inner bark was worked out and bent to a concertina format. Usually, the books had two glued wooden covers.²³ The top one was usually carved by *datu*. The bottom one had two holes, through which a string (made by various fibers) was threaded. This was necessary to carry and store (probably open) the manuscript, hung on the house wall. Every *pustaha* is unique and fully understandable only to its creator. It contains the notes needed for his profession: medical recipes, prayers, magical graphs, spells and a lot of more.

Writing placed in medicine man notebooks can be divided into three categories: the art of preserving life (methods of making magic stuff and the way of connecting with human souls, gods, ancestors, spirits), the art of destroying life (black magic) and divinations. One of the topics of the writing was *pagar*. This was the set of special activities and ingredients (parts of plants, fruits or animal) needed to make a magical potion. Then it was swallowed, hung on a wall in somebody's house or put into an amulet.²⁴

The most representative type of texts were various kind of divinations. These were a set of magical devices and formulas, used to invoke the chosen

craftsmanship. They are used to disambiguate similar expressions or to separate successive pieces of text. See Everson, Kozok (2008: 4).

²³ There are also many manuscripts without covers. Sometimes, they can be wrapped in leatherlike objects PME 1462/E from National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw and the manuscript no. MSS Batak 3 from the British Library.

²⁴ Zollo (2020: 68).

divine spirit, whose presence or help was desired at ritual time. People turned to *datu*, for example, for advice before embarking on a trip, for information about the harvest in the current year or to know the best way to do something. From the memories of missionaries, we can read about preparing for a ritual aimed at finding the right day to move the herd to a new shelter. The shaman would send for his notebook to read the directions from a special table called *porhalaan*.²⁵ If the omen was not successful, they would have to wait for the right day, staying outside the shelter, exposed to the attack of wild animals.²⁶

Notes in the books were supplemented with drawings, symbols and tables such as the *batak* calendar – *porhalaan* and zodiac table – *pormesa*, referring to the text content. Illustrations were one of the most enigmatic issues of *pustaka*. Some symbols, like a star, could be related to solar signs. The explanation for this kind of picture can be found in books belonging to the Asia and Pacific Museum (object number MAP2553; see Fig.1), the Ethnographic Museum in Poznan (object number MNP Ep 1390; Fig.12) and the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw (PME MKiSL 4702/e; see Fig.4).

Moreover, there are many representations of aggressive spirits called *devata*. In the *pustaka* from Asia and Pacific Museum we can find creatures like a big serpent (the legendary *Naga Padoha*) and lizards in a diagram (object number MAP2553; Fig.13). The most recognizable picture representing a human being is the wizard (probably the *datu* himself) with characteristic headgear.²⁷ An example of this kind of illustration is in the book from the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw (object number PME 1462/E; Fig.14).

Not only was the content layer of manuscripts important for the *Batak* people. They believed that materials used for crafting manuscripts had powerful magical properties. This applied both to the writings made on bones, bamboo and *Aquilaria* fibers. The choice was based on the type of text. Historically, *datu* crafted his notebooks only from *Aquilaria* fibers, forming them in concertina fashion. The same applies to the ingredients used to make the inks. They contained various ingredients of mineral, plant and animal

²⁵ Messrs., Burton, Ward (1824: 500–501).

²⁶ *Porhalaan* / *perhala-an*- a table representing conjunction of the Scorpion constellation with the moon. It is a rectangle divided into 12 or 13 horizontal lines representing the months of the year. They are crossed by 30 perpendicular lines, creating 360 small squares, representing the number of days in a year. See Voorhoeve (1951: 288).

²⁷ Voorhoeve (1951: 296).

origin. To prepare black ink, the Batak people made a special type of soot named *baja*, which was also used to ritually blacken their teeth. This was a tarry substance obtained from burning, resinous wood from the Manggistan tree. The soot was deposited on a knife, sword or potsherd and after that scrapped off. Albumin, floral gums, oils, resins, saps and juices were also used as additives. Dammar resin and blood albumin improved the adhesion of the ink to the base fibers, but chicken blood also had strong magical and religious significance. In the “Report of the Journey of Batak Country, in the interior of Sumatra, in the year of 1824”, it was noted that *datu* read the instructions on how to carry the rite out from his *pustaha*. Then, he looked for an answer to the question about cause and remedy for somebody’s sorrows in a fowl’s gut.²⁸⁾

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²⁸ Messrs, Burton, Ward (1824: 502).

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1. Pustaha from Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Object number: MAP 2553. Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.



2. Pustaha from Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Object number: BUAM Rkp.1670. Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.

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3. Pustaha from Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Object number: MAP 2554. Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.



4. Pustaha from National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. Object number: MNP Ep 1390. Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.



5. Pustaha from Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Object number: MAP 11798.
Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.



6. Pustaha from National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. Object number PME 1462/E. Photo: Tymon Rizov-Ciechański.



7. Pustaha manuscript from University Library in Poznań. Object number: MAP2553. Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.



8. Datu with pustaha, medicine horn and magic staff; photographer unknown; 1929; Photography owner: Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Photo taken from: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/GAVBQ-bzRQMA8A>.



9. Part of bamboo stem with Simalungun Batak scribe, from Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Object number: 3138-1. Photo taken from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bamboo_with_Batak_script.jpg.



10. Carved bone with Batak inscription and porhalan. Photo: Michelle Pemberton. Owner: The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. Photo taken from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bamboo_with_Batak_script.jpg.

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11. Bamboo tobacco case with Batak inscription. Before 1929. Owner: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Photo taken from: https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_Bamboe_tabaks_en_wichelkoker_met_Bataks_schrift_TMnr_512-4.jpg.



12. Symbols from pustaha belongs to Ethnographic Museum in Poznan. Object number MNP Ep 1390. Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.



13. Pustaha manuscript from Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Object number: MAP 2553.
Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.



14. Picture from pustaha, belongs to National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. Object number: PME 1462/E. Photo: Z. Rozwadowska.