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MARRIAGE COSTS AND CULTURAL POVERTY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BATAK SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Cultural poverty in Toba Batak society arises not from individual deficiencies, but from adherence to normatively mandated customary marriage practices, particularly the sinamot tradition. Although sinamot has been widely studied from the perspective of gender and customary law, no study has phenomenologically explored how this tradition functions as a mechanism for shaping cultural poverty from the perspective of the lived experiences of its participants. This research aims to identify the mechanisms of cultural poverty generated by sinamot practices in Toba Batak society. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected over one year through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies with seven informants selected through a purposive snowball sampling method, including married couples, parents, and traditional leaders. Analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 Pro following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The findings identify three primary mechanisms of cultural poverty: social pressure to maintain high sinamot values as a marker of family status, a tendency toward consumerism in wedding celebrations that exceeds the family's economic capacity, and adherence to customary values driven by fear of social sanctions. This mechanism creates a cycle of debt that limits family investment in education, health, and productive activities. Theoretically, through the framework of Baudrillard's consumerism and Bourdieu's symbolic capital, this study demonstrates that customary celebrations have transformed into arenas for symbolic consumption that reproduce economic inequality. The cultural poverty of the Toba Batak stems not from laziness or idleness, but from adherence to practices that are socially legitimate and demeaning. These findings expand the concept of cultural poverty by demonstrating that economic deprivation can be produced and reproduced through legitimate cultural norms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is not simply a lack of income or material assets. In many contexts, poverty is perpetuated through socially legitimate cultural norms and value systems, trapping individuals and families in a cycle of deprivation that is difficult to break. This phenomenon is known as cultural poverty, a condition in which adherence to legitimate cultural practices systematically results in economic pressures that exceed household capacity (Ahmad, 2022; Palikhah, 2017). Unlike absolute poverty, which is measured by minimum income, cultural poverty is rooted in a social logic that forces expenditure not for necessity but for identity and honor (Hasell et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, cultural diversity provides a rich context for understanding the cultural dimensions of poverty. The Toba Batak people, known for their dalihan na tolu kinship system, have marriage practices fraught with financial obligations. One central component is the sinamot, a sum of money or goods given by the groom's family to the bride's family as a symbol of respect and legitimacy of the marriage in the customary system (Purba & Lastri, 2021; Veronica & Azeharie, 2022). The value of the sinamot has no fixed standard and varies widely depending on the social status, education level of the bride, and negotiations between families.

Previous studies have documented the financial burden of customary marriage practices in Indonesia. Ramdhani and Risladiba (2022) found that the famasulo tradition in Nias traps families in a cycle of debt for years. Sopiah and Haryatiningsih (2023) demonstrated that cultural obligations are a driver of rural poverty that has been overlooked by conventional indicators. Globally, Gweshengwe and Hassan (2020) asserted that poverty research has focused too much on income and asset deprivation, while ignoring the cultural dimensions that produce hidden economic vulnerability.

However, significant gaps remain in the literature. Although studies on sinamot have been conducted from the perspectives of gender (Veronica & Azeharie, 2022), customary law (Purba & Lastri, 2021), and economic analysis (Siregar, 2019), no research has phenomenologically explored how sinamot operates as a mechanism for shaping cultural poverty from the perspective of the lived experiences of its participants. Previous approaches tend to rely on quantitative data or external perspectives, without capturing the subjective meanings, social pressures, and intergenerational dynamics that determine why families are willing to bear heavy financial burdens to fulfill customary obligations.

This study addresses this gap by using a phenomenological approach to explore the internal logic of sinamot adherence. The research questions are formulated as follows: First, how do communities interpret the implementation of sinamot and Toba Batak wedding celebrations? Second, how do sinamot practices contribute to the formation of family economic pressures? Third, how do Batak families manage financial constraints in fulfilling customary marriage obligations?

To answer these questions, the study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks. Baudrillard's (1998) theory of consumerism is used to explain how wedding celebrations become arenas of symbolic consumption, where expenditure serves as a marker of social status, rather than an expression of authentic cultural meaning. Meanwhile, Bourdieu (1986) concept of symbolic capital helps explain why investment in traditional ceremonies is understood as a strategy for gaining prestige and social recognition, even though it ultimately perpetuates a cycle of economic inequality. Both frameworks are directly relevant to the question of why Batak families continue to choose customary obedience despite being aware of the financial consequences.

This study makes three contributions. First, it strengthens the concept of cultural poverty by demonstrating that poverty can be produced by socially legitimate norms, rather than by individual deficiencies. Second, it enriches empirical research on the Toba Batak community through in-depth qualitative insights not previously available. Third, it extends the applicability of Baudrillard's and Bourdieu's theories to non-Western and collectivist contexts, demonstrating how symbolic consumption and social capital operate within traditional cultural systems.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design rooted in the phenomenological tradition. A phenomenological approach was chosen because the primary objective of the study was to understand the meanings members of the Toba Batak community attach to the practice of sinamot and its economic consequences, as experienced within their own cultural world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Unlike survey or experimental designs that measure predetermined variables, a phenomenological approach allows researchers to remain open to the complexity, ambiguity, and contextual specificity of participants' experiences (Moleong, 2017).

The study was conducted in the Toba Batak community in North Sumatra, focusing on a community that actively maintains customary practices in wedding ceremonies. This location was chosen based on the consideration that sinamot here remains a socially obligatory institution with significant economic value, allowing the study to examine its implications for contemporary cultural poverty.

Informants were selected using a purposive snowball sampling technique, starting with initial contacts identified through the Batak community networks with which the researchers were previously familiar (Sugiyono, 2017). This technique was deemed appropriate because access to relevant informants, particularly traditional leaders and experienced married couples, is more effectively achieved through referral-based networks within a relatively limited community.

Seven informants participated in this study, representing three main categories: married couples who had negotiated sinamot within the past decade, parents of the bride and groom involved in sinamot negotiations, and traditional leaders, including a journalist with in-depth knowledge of Batak customary law. The informants ranged in age from 40 to 65, reflecting individuals with direct and mature experience with contemporary sinamot practices. Their varied educational backgrounds, occupations, and social status enriched the data by capturing diverse perspectives within the community.

The seven informants are consistent with phenomenological research standards, which prioritize depth of understanding of each case over broad statistical representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the phenomenological tradition, the appropriateness of the number of informants is judged by the sufficiency of the data generated to understand the essence of the phenomenon being studied, rather than by sample size.

Data collection was conducted over approximately one year in 2025. This duration provided sufficient time for in-depth engagement with informants and a comprehensive contextual understanding of the research setting. Three complementary methods were used to ensure data triangulation. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source. The interview guide covered four themes: cultural identity and the meaning of sinamot, social practices in negotiating sinamot, the influence of modernization and economic change, and intergenerational differences in views on sinamot. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was conducted in Indonesian or the Toba Batak dialect, depending on the informant's preference, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Second, participant observation was conducted during accessible ceremonial events and community gatherings, documented through structured field notes. Third, a documentation review was conducted by collecting relevant secondary materials such as customary law guidelines, local reports, and previous academic studies on sinamot.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by (Miles et al., 2020) consisting of three iterative stages. First, data reduction was conducted by coding interview transcripts and field notes using NVivo 12 Pro, starting with inductive open coding, then developing focused codes and thematic categories through constant comparison (Bandur & Prabowo, 2021). Second, data presentation involved the use of thematic maps, hierarchical charts, and word cloud visualizations to identify patterns and relationships among data. Third, conclusions were drawn and verified through iterative interpretation, repeated rereading, and analytical memos.

To ensure trustworthiness, four strategies were implemented: source triangulation by comparing perspectives across informant categories; method triangulation by integrating interview, observation, and documentation data; prolonged field engagement; and member checking by sharing key interpretations with selected informants to confirm the accuracy and relevance of the findings.

As a researcher from the Toba Batak ethnic background, the principal investigator positioned herself as an insider with an intuitive cultural understanding of sinamot practices. This position offered the advantage of easier trust in informants and the ability to read nuances of cultural meaning that informants could not always explicitly explain. However, the insider position also carries the risk of over-familiarity, the tendency to blindly accept cultural assumptions that should be questioned. To mitigate this, the researcher actively took reflective notes after each interview session, bracketed or temporarily suspended personal understandings and experiences during analysis, and engaged in member checking to verify that interpretations did not solely reflect the researcher's personal perspective.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of a phenomenological study of the sinamot tradition and its relationship to the formation of cultural poverty in Toba Batak society. The analysis is organized into five interrelated themes: the meaning and function of sinamot in the dalihan na tolu kinship system (4.1), the mechanisms of economic burdens, including the debt cycle (4.2), the role of consumerism in traditional wedding celebrations through the frameworks of Baudrillard and Bourdieu (4.3), cultural poverty as a product of value compliance and social coercion (4.4), and intergenerational shifts in perspectives on sinamot (4.5).

Data were collected from seven informants representing three categories: married couples, parents of the bride and groom, and traditional leaders. The analysis used NVivo 12 Pro, following Miles and Huberman's interactive model, and integrated with Baudrillard's consumerism theory and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital.

The NVivo analysis results show that the sinamot theme appears with high frequency, indicating its centrality in discussions of cultural poverty. Five main categories were identified: Social Status, Meaning of Sinamot, Impact, Economic Burden, and Young Generation, which are visualized in the hierarchy chart in Figure 1.

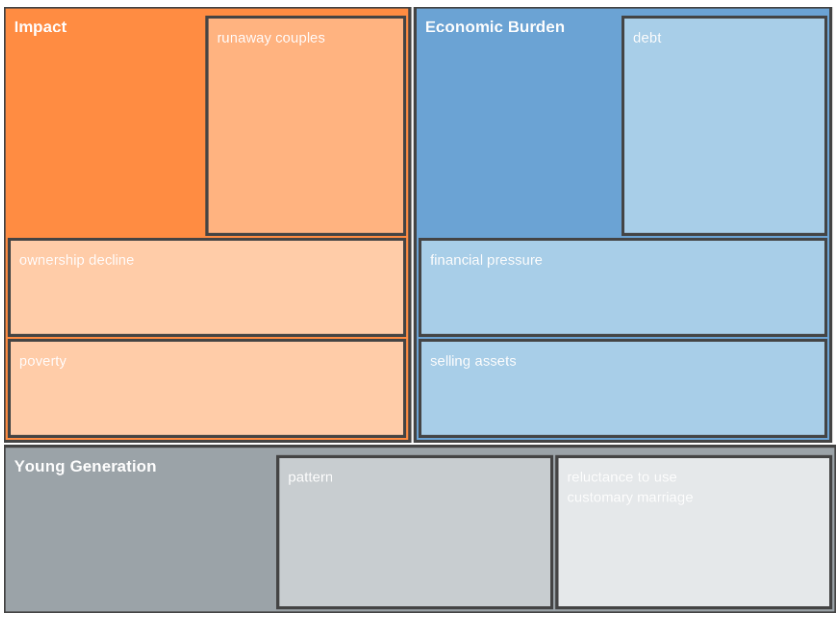

Figure 1. NVivo Hierarchy Chart of Research Themes

The Meaning of Sinamot in the Dalihan Na Tolu System: Between Symbol and Commodity

A word cloud visualization of the text processed from field interviews shows that dominant words such as sinamot and marriage were mentioned most frequently, followed by family, economy, and ability. These words reflect the diverse perceptions of the Batak people regarding the value of sinamot (Figure 2).

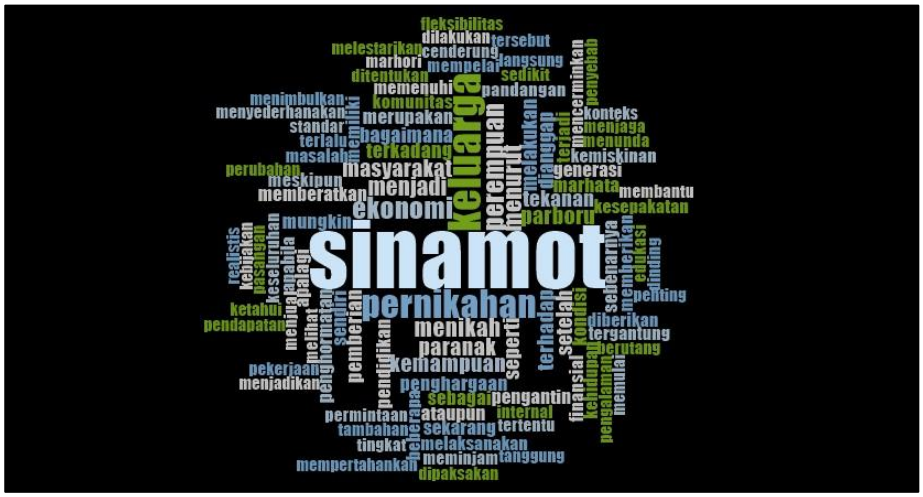

Figure 2. Word Cloud Visualization of Interview Data

A consistent finding from all informants was the understanding that sinamot is not simply a financial transfer, but rather a moral medium that legitimizes marriage within the dalihan na tolu kinship system. Sinamot is understood as a public declaration by the paranak (groom's family) of their respect and serious commitment to the parboru (bride's family). In Toba Batak customary law, marriage not only unites two individuals but also binds two kinship groups in a long-term social relationship. The majority of informants emphasized that sinamot should not be interpreted as a transaction, but rather as a moral obligation that validates the marriage within the customary system.

> "Sinamot is not about money, but about respect. If the value of sinamot is low, it means they are looking down on the parboru family." (D.P. Hutapea, personal communication, 2024)

This finding aligns with Veronica and Azeharie (2022), who documented that even young Toba Batak women in Jakarta still attach strong symbolic meaning to sinamot, demonstrating the persistence of this culture beyond geographical boundaries. However, herein lies an analytical tension that needs to be highlighted: if the true meaning of sinamot lies in its symbolic dimension, why does its nominal value become so socially determinative?

This research data reveals a fundamental paradox: the more sinamot is claimed to be "not about money," the more its monetary value becomes a concrete measure of respect. Sinamot has transformed from a marker of commitment to a marker of the family's financial capacity. The bride's educational level, which should reflect the family's investment, now operates as a pricing mechanism in sinamot negotiations, a transformation that occurs not through a conscious shift in values, but rather through an incremental process in which social conventions gradually replace the original meaning with comparative and competitive logic. Analytically, cultural poverty in the context of sinamot stems not solely from the tradition itself, but from the process of commodification of meaning that occurs within it. Traditions that are nominally symbolic actually operate materially, society maintains the symbolic language of tradition while covertly practicing it within the logic of the market. This is the subtle form of cultural alienation, yet difficult to break the cycle.

Sinamot as an Economic Burden and Social Pressure

Despite its strong cultural legitimacy, sinamot has shifted in function to become an indicator of social status and family prestige. The amount of sinamot is now often associated with the educational background, social standing, and economic capacity of the families involved. This transformation creates strong social pressure to meet high customary expectations, a pattern confirmed by Purba and Lastri (2021), who found that sinamot demands are significantly determined by the bride's educational level, regardless of the financial capacity of the paranak (parents).

The economic pressure of sinamot is not incidental, but rather structural. The data shows that families from all economic strata experience significant financial pressure. This is analytically important because it demonstrates that the burden of sinamot is not simply a matter of absolute poverty that can be solved by increasing income, but rather a relational and comparative issue rooted in social expectations. Three concrete economic consequences were identified: postponement of marriage due to financial inability, liquidation of productive assets such as land and education savings, and accumulation of debt that takes two to three years to repay, diverting household income away from basic needs and long-term investments. The inability to meet these expectations also leads to social stigma and a decline in the family's status within the community.

> "We had to sell inherited land to pay for sinamot and the feast. It took years before we could recover." (L. Sibarani, personal communication, 2024)

This situation is relevant to the macro context of poverty in Indonesia. Statistics Indonesia BPS (2026) recorded a national poverty rate of 8.25% as of September 2025, with North Sumatra within the national average. This figure indicates that economic vulnerability remains real in certain communities, and in Toba Batak society, cultural obligations such as sinamot have the potential to exacerbate financial stress beyond that captured by conventional poverty indicators.

These findings align with Purba and Lastri (2021), but there's a dimension their analysis misses: the sinamot mechanism creates incentive distortions that are structurally counterproductive. Family investment in girls' education, which should be a welfare-boosting strategy, instead becomes a financial burden for the families who marry off the girls. While socially lauded, girls' education is also secretly feared as a factor in sinamot inflation. If girls' education increases the demand for sinamot proportionally, some of the social costs of this educational investment are externalized to the paranak in the form of customary debt. Thus, sinamot in its contemporary form not only produces cultural poverty but also has the potential to distort educational decisions at the household level, a consequence that extends far beyond the cultural sphere.

Consumerism in Traditional Wedding Celebrations

Beyond the value of sinamot itself, this study identified traditional wedding celebrations as a significant source of economic burden in their own right. Data show that the scale of the celebration, including the number of guests, the food offerings, the lavish decorations, and the duration of the event, has evolved into a platform for displaying social status, with families being required to host large events to maintain their dignity and recognition within the community. It was found that hosting lavish celebrations is perceived as a symbol of the family's economic success and social honor. Families tend to hold celebrations beyond their financial capacity, driven by the fear of being perceived as inadequate or failing to comply with customary obligations (D.P. Hutapea, personal communication, 2024). Even families able to negotiate more modest sinamot still face strong pressure to host large-scale celebrations.

From the perspective of Baudrillard's (1998) theory of consumerism, this phenomenon is understood as a form of symbolic consumption. In the context of Toba Batak traditional celebrations, large expenditures on food, entertainment, decorations, and the number of guests is found to function not to meet practical needs but rather to simulate social status, reflecting the family's prosperity and success. The extravagance of the feasts is not an authentic expression of joy, but rather a simulation of prosperity and honor intended for consumption by a social audience. Baudrillard calls this a simulacrum, a representation that no longer refers to the reality it represents. The splendid celebrations are thus interpreted as social signs reflecting the family's position in society, not simply expressing happiness.

However, applying Baudrillard's framework directly to the Toba Batak context requires critical nuance. Baudrillard developed his theory in the context of individualistic Western society, while in collectivist Batak society, the logic of symbolic consumption is not entirely individual. It is mediated by the structural system of kinship obligations (dalihan na tolu), so the choice to celebrate lavishly is not simply an expression of individual status desires but a response to collective pressures with real social sanctions. This adds a layer of complexity that Baudrillard's theory does not capture in its original form.

This study found that traditional celebrations often become a source of long-term financial stress, particularly for families from lower-middle-class families. Families have been found willing to go into debt to host large celebrations, driven by fears of perceived inadequacy or disrespect for traditional guests (L. Sibarani, personal communication, 2024). This phenomenon suggests that social prestige and shame serve as powerful psychological factors in determining the scale of celebrations, with celebrations often perceived by society as a sign of incompetence or failure to seriously adhere to traditional customs.

This pattern is further reinforced by Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital, where expenditures on traditional celebrations are understood as social investments aimed at converting economic capital into symbolic capital in the form of prestige, honor, and community recognition. However, a crucial analytical tension arises: in Bourdieu's logic, investments in symbolic capital should generate social benefits that can be converted back into economic capital later. In the case of Toba Batak wedding celebrations, this conversion cycle appears to be broken because large expenditures generate only temporary social prestige and no measurable economic benefits. Thus, this practice is more accurately understood as a capital drain than a capital investment in Bourdieu's true sense. As Baudrillard argues, this process ultimately draws individuals into a cycle of consumption and simulation, rendering custom no longer a vehicle for authentic cultural meaning, but rather a tool for generating social image and economic inequality.

This finding has relevance beyond the Batak context and aligns with Ramdhani & Risladiba (2022), who found that the famasulo tradition in Nias similarly influences families in a cycle of debt through the logic of social solidarity, and Rodliyah et al. (2017), who documented analogous dynamics in the practice of belis in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). These structural similarities suggest that the logic of symbolic consumption in marriage rituals is not a uniquely Batak phenomenon, but rather a recurring pattern in Indonesian societies based on strong kinship. This opens up broader theoretical questions about whether economic modernization inherently results in ritual cost inflation, or whether certain institutional conditions exist that allow communities to maintain traditions without financial burden.

Cultural Poverty as a Product of Values and Custom Compliance

The most crucial finding of this study is that cultural poverty in the context of Toba Batak traditional marriage is produced not by ignorance or laziness, but by a conscious awareness coupled with structural powerlessness. Cultural poverty is found to be inseparable from a value system that emphasizes adherence to custom as both a moral obligation and a social identity. Adherence to custom is identified not only as a form of respect for ancestors but also as a means of maintaining hasangapon, or family honor, in the community. Nearly all informants acknowledged that they understood the economic burden of sinamot and traditional celebrations, yet chose to fulfill them nonetheless, driven by fear of social sanctions, shame, and concerns about losing family honor. This is not irrationality, but rather rationality operating within a value system distinct from conventional economic calculations.

Palikhah (2017) and Ahmad (2022) define cultural poverty as a condition in which cultural values and norms systematically reproduce economic deprivation, and the findings of this study both confirm and refine this definition. Cultural poverty was found to be produced and reproduced through social practices considered normal and culturally legitimate, consistent with the structural interpretations put forward by Ahmad (2022) and Sopiah and Haryatiningsih (2023). Crucially, being systematic in the Toba Batak context does not mean that social actors are passive victims of a system they are unaware of. Rather, they are conscious agents, choosing to adhere to customs as a strategy to maintain social position, cultural identity, and kinship networks, which also have economic value in the form of solidarity, access to communal resources, and social protection. This research confirmed that the implementation of Batak customs is perceived as a social obligation that cannot be ignored because it serves as a benchmark for family dignity in the eyes of the community (Pardosi, personal communication, 2024).

It was further found that although the Batak community is aware of the significant economic burden of organizing traditional marriages, most families still choose to comply. Families were found to persist in fully performing traditional ceremonies because they were considered incapable, or performing incomplete celebrations was perceived as shameful (D. P. Hutapea, personal communication, 2024). Similarly, many families were found to be willing to incur debt to properly perform traditional ceremonies, as smaller celebrations were often considered disrespectful to the hula-hula or guests (L. Sibarani, personal communication, 2024). These findings suggest that adherence to traditional ceremonies stems not from economic capacity, but from a fear of social sanctions and a sense of collective shame deeply embedded in Batak culture. Debt arising from traditional marriages was found to be part of the social cycle, accepted as inevitable, while adherence to traditional ceremonies was identified as functioning as a social control mechanism that ensures the continuity of collective values within Batak society while reinforcing a social structure based on dalihan na tolu.

Herein lies the profound paradox of this phenomenon: the system that produces cultural poverty also provides a social safety net for those who suffer from its consequences. Patterns of mutual assistance were found to strengthen solidarity and social bonds, yet economically create a cycle of inherited financial burden that is difficult to break. Communities that demand significant expenditures on marriage are the same communities that will support their members when facing economic hardship, illness, or disaster, so customary debt and customary solidarity are two sides of the same coin. Customary debts are often found to take two to three years to repay because household income is allocated primarily to installments (D. P. Hutapea, personal communication, 2024).

Consequently, families' ability to meet other basic needs such as education, health care, and productive investments is significantly limited. It has been confirmed that some families struggle to send their children to school or maintain their homes because income is used to pay celebratory debts (L. Sibarani, personal communication, 2024). This means that policy recommendations that solely encourage the elimination or drastic reduction of sinamot without considering its protective function have the potential to produce solutions that are worse than the problems they are intended to address.

This finding also challenges Lewis's (1974) theoretical legacy on the culture of poverty, which tends to interpret cultural poverty as the internalization of fatalistic values by poor groups. In the Toba Batak context, there is no fatalism; what exists is a highly rational social calculation within a distinct value system. Compliance with sinamot is not due to the community having resigned itself to poverty, but rather because, in their social system, the costs of non-compliance, such as loss of hasangapon, social exclusion, and severance of kinship networks, are considered greater than the costs of financial debt. The Toba Batak's cultural poverty is thus more accurately understood as rational compliance under structural constraints rather than the internalization of poverty values in Lewis's sense.

Shifting Intergenerational Perspectives: Negotiation, Not Rejection

The research data identified a significant generational rift in attitudes toward sinamot, but this rift needs to be interpreted carefully to avoid being simplified into a narrative of modernization versus tradition. What is occurring is not a rejection of tradition by the younger generation, but rather a renegotiation of the terms under which tradition is practiced, driven by changing economic conditions and increased exposure to alternative value systems through education and urbanization.

The older generation, represented by informants aged 50 and over, consistently framed sinamot as a non-negotiable moral obligation. For this group, the value of sinamot is inseparable from its function in dalihan na tolu, as a mechanism for public expression of the paranak family's respect and responsibility to the parboru. Reducing sinamot is interpreted not as a practical adjustment but as a moral derogation from marriage itself. This framing reflects a traditional interpretation where the weight of sinamot lies in its symbolic dimension. However, in practice, this symbolic weight has been operationalized through ever-increasing amounts of money, creating the economic burden documented in this study (D.P. Hutapea, personal communication, 2024).

Younger Batak people, particularly those with higher education and living in urban areas, demonstrate a more pragmatic orientation. They tend to maintain sinamot as a culturally meaningful practice but question the inflationary logic of requiring high amounts as a demonstration of financial capacity. Younger generations now tend to be more realistic, viewing sinamot as a tradition that does not need to be rigidly enforced in terms of its value as long as its meaning and practice are carried out within one's means (T. Hutapea, personal communication, 2024). This finding aligns with Veronica and Azeharie (2022), who documented that young Toba Batak women in Jakarta also negotiate cultural expectations and economic realities in their attitudes toward sinamot.

This pragmatic shift does not occur in a value-free space but is burdened by real social costs. Data shows that some young Batak people choose to delay marriage, marry outside the customary system, or even not marry at all, not because they reject tradition but because they cannot afford it without incurring burdensome long-term debt (Pardosi, personal communication, 2024). This raises an important analytical question: is this generational shift strong enough to structurally change norms or is it merely a temporary individual adaptation that will revert to patterns of high compliance as individuals' economic status improves.

Synthesis: A Model of Cultural Poverty Based on Normative Compliance

The five themes above collectively construct an analytical model of how cultural poverty is produced and reproduced in Toba Batak society, as visualized in the concept map in Figure 3. Sinamot, as a legitimate cultural institution (4.1), undergoes a process of commodification of meaning that transforms it from a marker of commitment to a marker of financial capacity. This commodification, combined with the logic of symbolic consumption in traditional celebrations (4.3), produces structural economic pressures (4.2) that encourage debt accumulation in the form of asset sales, financial stress, and debt bondage. This debt is not rejected because adherence to the legitimate value system is understood as a rational social cost for maintaining communal identity, networks, and protection (4.4). The role of traditional and religious leaders contributes to strengthening this adherence through education and norm enforcement. Meanwhile, intergenerational shifts (4.5) indicate that the system is in a process of internal negotiation that has not yet reached a new equilibrium, where the younger generation faces tensions between inherited sinamot patterns and contemporary economic realities. Institutional signs are beginning to appear through a number of customary councils in urban Batak communities that have begun to simplify ceremonial requirements such as limiting the number of ulos exchanged and reducing ornamental ceremonial stages. This simplification does not directly reduce the size of the sinamot but reduces the total burden of ceremonial costs and makes room for the application of more flexible norms within the marhata sinamot forum.

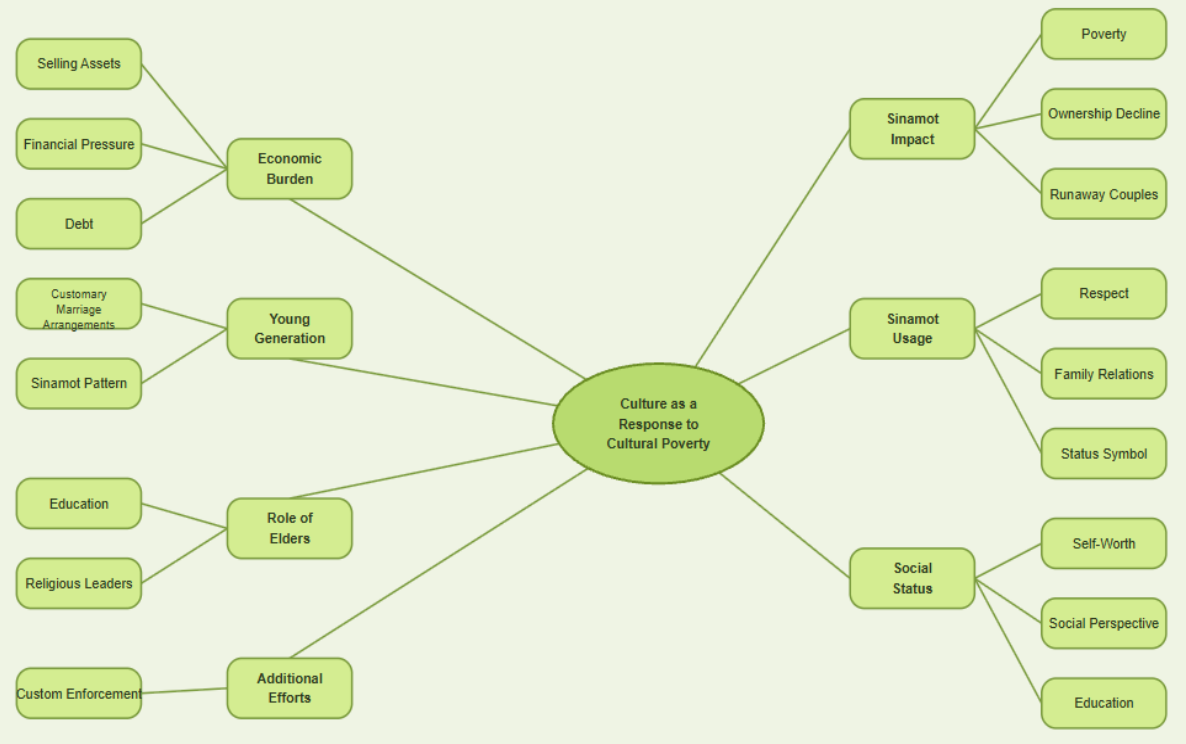

Figure 3. Conceptual Map of Cultural Poverty Factors in Batak Marriage

What is analytically interesting is that this simplification initiative originates from within the customary institution itself, rather than from external pressures from the state or the market. This suggests that dalihan na tolu, as a social system, contains internal corrective mechanisms that can be activated when economic pressures become too great for the community to bear. This model has three theoretical implications. First, cultural poverty cannot be understood solely as a matter of erroneous values or economic irrationality, but rather as the product of a coherent yet internally contradictory value system. Second, the agents in this system are conscious actors with rational calculations, not passive victims; therefore, policy design needs to consider their perspectives and incentives. Third, sustainable change is more likely to come from strengthening the community's internal adaptation mechanisms than from external interventions that fail to consider the social logic underpinning the practice.

The main limitation of this study lies in its limited geographic coverage of the Toba Batak community in North Sumatra, so the findings require verification before they can be generalized to the entire Batak diaspora in major Indonesian cities. Longitudinal studies are needed to verify whether the pragmatic shifts of the younger generation transform into sustainable normative changes or whether they revert to patterns of high compliance as individuals' economic status improves.

4. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that cultural poverty in Toba Batak society is produced through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: social pressure to maintain high sinamot values as a marker of family honor within the dalihan na tolu system, a tendency toward consumerism in wedding celebrations that consistently exceeds the family's economic capacity, and adherence to customary values driven not by financial ability but by fear of social sanctions and loss of hasangapon. These mechanisms operate together to reproduce a cycle of debt that limits family investment in education, health, and productive activities.

Theoretically, these findings expand the concept of cultural poverty by demonstrating that economic deprivation can emerge and persist not because of individual character deficiencies but because of adherence to socially legitimate norms. Through Baudrillard's framework, Toba Batak traditional celebrations are understood as arenas of symbolic consumption where expenditures serve as markers of social status that reproduce inequality. Through Bourdieu's framework, investment in customary ceremonies is understood as the accumulation of symbolic capital that ultimately traps families in an economically counterproductive consumption logic. The original contribution of this study lies in the simultaneous application of these two frameworks in a non-Western and collectivist context, with phenomenological data capturing subjective experiences from within the cultural system itself.

The findings also identify significant generational rifts: younger Batak, particularly those with higher education and living in urban areas, demonstrate a more pragmatic orientation toward sinamot. They tend to maintain traditions as an expression of sincere commitment, rather than as a demonstration of competitive financial capacity. At the institutional level, a number of customary councils in urban Batak communities have begun simplifying ceremonial requirements. This adaptive dynamic demonstrates that Batak culture is not static and contains internal mechanisms for negotiation and self-correction.

In terms of practical implications, three prioritized recommendations are proposed. First and most urgently, customary leaders need to facilitate structured dialogue within the marhata sinamot forum to establish a range of sinamot that are symbolically meaningful but do not cause long-term financial hardship. This step is internal and does not require external intervention, so it can be implemented without threatening cultural autonomy. Second, educational initiatives that emphasize the original symbolic meaning of sinamot as respect and kinship solidarity, rather than as a competition for status, need to be developed in partnership with communities to reach both older

and younger generations. Third, local governments could consider formally recognizing successful practices of simplifying traditional ceremonies practiced by specific communities, as a reference for other communities without imposing standardization from above.

Future research is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies to track whether the pragmatic shifts of the younger generation transform into sustainable normative changes, or are merely temporary adjustments. Comparative studies with other Indonesian ethnic groups practicing similar traditions would also provide a broader understanding of patterns of cultural poverty and its cross-cultural solutions.

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