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PRE-COMMODIFICATION OF SIGALEGALE: BETWEEN FOLKLORE AND THE PAPURPUR SAPATA RITUAL IN SIMANINDO DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the existence of Sigalegale in its pre-commodification phase and to analyze the dynamics of cultural transmission associated with it in Simanindo District, Samosir Regency. Employing a qualitative approach with an ethnographic model, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving Sigalegale performance managers and tourism destination managers. The findings reveal that prior to its transformation into a tourism performance, Sigalegale possessed two main entities within Batak Toba culture: as folklore and as the central figure in the papurpur sapata ritual. This ritual is associated with deaths occurring under the condition of mate punu and is rooted in the belief system of hasipelebeguan. However, field findings indicate that contemporary performance managers understand Sigalegale solely as folklore and are unaware of its former ritual function. This situation reflects a disruption and selectivity in cultural transmission, in which narrative elements are preserved while ritual knowledge becomes marginalized. Contributing factors to this condition include the non-inclusive and rare nature of the papurpur sapata ritual, as well as the introduction of religion to the Batak region, which led to the prolonged suspension of ancestral ritual practices. This study concludes that the transformation of Sigalegale from a pre-commodified cultural practice into a tourism performance represents not only a functional shift, but also a process of disrupted and selective cultural transmission shaped by social, religious, and historical factors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sigalegale is one of the cultural representations of the Batak Toba people that is widely recognized today through its performance in tourism contexts, particularly in the Lake Toba region. Within this framework, Sigalegale is commonly understood as a cultural artifact rooted in a folk narrative or myth associated with themes of loss and mourning. This understanding has been reproduced within the tourism sector as a form of entertainment and a cultural attraction intended for tourist consumption. Consequently, Sigalegale is more often positioned as a performance object, while its historical and cultural dimensions prior to commodification receive relatively little scholarly attention.

Existing studies on Sigalegale have predominantly focused on its performative form, tourism function, and aesthetic values in contemporary contexts. While such approaches are significant, they tend to overlook Sigalegale in its pre-commodification phase—that is, the period when Sigalegale had not yet been transformed into a tourist performance. This situation reveals a gap in the literature concerning how Sigalegale was originally situated, understood, and practiced within Batak Toba society before undergoing commodification processes.

In Batak Toba society, culture does not exist solely in the realm of narratives or ideas but is also manifested through practices, activities, and rituals that are embedded within specific belief systems. Therefore, understanding Sigalegale exclusively as a folk story risk reducing its complexity as a cultural phenomenon. This issue becomes particularly significant when certain cultural practices are no longer widely known or fully understood by subsequent generations, raising questions about the processes of cultural transmission within the community.

In addition to internal cultural dynamics, social change and external influences have broadly shaped the development of Batak Toba culture. The historical spread of religion in the Batak region is often discussed in the literature as a process that brought significant changes to ancestral belief practices that were once integral to community life. In such contexts, scholars have noted that certain cultural elements may become marginalized, restricted, or adapted, raising broader questions about cultural continuity and modes of transmission.

Based on this background, this study seeks to examine Sigalegale in its pre-commodification phase in Simanindo District by situating it within the cultural context of Batak Toba society prior to its transformation into a tourist performance. This research aims to explore the forms of meaning and practice associated with Sigalegale, as well as to understand the dynamics of cultural transmission that have shaped how Sigalegale has been inherited and understood up to the present.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, as the focus of the inquiry is directed toward understanding meanings, experiences, and subjective interpretations of informants who have directly encountered the phenomenon of Sigalegale prior to its transformation into a tourism commodity. A qualitative approach enables researchers to explore social and cultural realities in depth through the perspectives of cultural actors themselves, rather than through statistical measurement or numerical generalization (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). In this context, the number of informants is determined not by quantity, but by the quality of data and the depth of the informants' direct experiences with the phenomenon under investigation.

The research model adopted in this study is ethnography. The ethnographic approach is considered highly relevant because it aims to understand culture as a system of meaning embedded in social practices. Ethnography does not merely observe behaviors or cultural artifacts; rather, it seeks to interpret the meanings behind actions, symbols, and cultural practices from an emic perspective, that is, from the viewpoint of the cultural participants themselves (Spradley, 1980; Geertz, 1973). Through this model, the study seeks to trace Sigalegale as a cultural practice in its pre-commodification phase.

Chronologically, the research began with the determination of the research focus and the formulation of research problems, namely examining Sigalegale in its pre-commodity phase in Simanindo District. This stage was followed by a literature review aimed at constructing a relevant conceptual and theoretical framework, particularly related to cultural performance, cultural transmission, and social change. The literature review served as an initial framework for designing data collection strategies and as a foundation for data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The next stage involved the selection of the research site and informants. Simanindo District was chosen as the research location due to its significant role as a center of Sigalegale performances within the Lake Toba tourism context. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement, experience, and knowledge related to destination management and Sigalegale performances (Spradley, 1979). The informants in this study consisted of Mr. Gading Jansen as the owner of the Huta Siallagan destination, Ms. Riris Hasibuan as the manager of the Huta Bolon destination, as well as Mr. Pendi Sidabutar, Mr. Winson Sigoro, and Mr. Anderson as managers of Sigalegale performances in Tomok.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to explore informants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations regarding Sigalegale and the cultural practices associated with it. Observation was carried out to understand the social context, performance settings, and interactions surrounding Sigalegale practices. Documentation served as supporting data in the form of photographs, archives, and relevant written sources related to the research

object. The use of multiple data collection techniques was intended to obtain rich and comprehensive data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The research procedure was implemented systematically and sequentially, resembling an algorithmic flow that began with problem identification, followed by field data collection, data organization, thematic analysis, and conclusion drawing. The collected data were transcribed, classified, and analyzed to identify patterns of meaning related to Sigalegale in its pre-commodity phase and the dynamics of cultural transmission surrounding it. This analytical process followed qualitative data analysis techniques emphasizing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

To ensure data trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation techniques, including source triangulation and method triangulation. Data obtained from different informants and data collection methods were compared to examine consistency and credibility of the research findings. The application of triangulation aimed to enhance the validity and reliability of the study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). The final stage of the research involved developing analytical interpretations by linking field findings with the applied theoretical framework, thereby achieving a comprehensive understanding of Sigalegale prior to its commodification as a tourism performance.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Sigalegale is part of the oral tradition of the Batak Toba community, as its existence has been transmitted from one generation to the next through oral narration, collective memory, and social practice, rather than through a written system. Within the context of this oral tradition, Sigalegale functions not merely as a form of narrative entertainment, but also as a medium for transmitting values, beliefs, and cosmological understandings of Batak Toba society. Along with the development of the tourism industry in the Lake Toba region, Sigalegale as an oral tradition has been empowered and reproduced as a tourist attraction, leading to a functional shift from a cultural practice to a commodified performance intended for tourist consumption.

However, prior to this process of commodification, Sigalegale occupied a more complex position and held deeper meanings within Batak Toba society. Based on historical and cultural inquiry, Sigalegale existed in at least two principal entities. First, Sigalegale was understood as a folk narrative that lived within the narrative and imaginative domain of the community. Second, Sigalegale functioned as a central figure in a ritual practice known as papurpur sapata, in which Sigalegale was not merely symbolic but formed an integral part of a ritual activity imbued with religious and social significance. Understanding these two entities is essential as a foundation for tracing how Sigalegale was perceived prior to its transformation into a tourism performance, and as an entry point for discussing the dynamics of cultural transmission that accompany this transformation.

Folklore as an Entity of Sigalegale in the Pre-Commodification Context

As noted by folklore scholars, folk narratives generally do not exist in a single, fixed version, but rather develop in multiple variations shaped by space, time, and the social context of the communities that sustain them. The same condition applies to Sigalegale as part of the Batak Toba folk tradition. Although various versions circulate within society, field findings indicate that the most dominant and widely recognized version—also acknowledged by the owners and managers of Sigalegale performances in Simanindo District—is the story of King Rahat's grief following the death of his son in warfare. This version has subsequently been reproduced and transmitted orally as the primary narrative of Sigalegale.

The positioning of Sigalegale as a folk narrative rather than a historically verifiable event is clearly reflected in the perspectives of contemporary cultural actors. One destination manager emphasized the ambiguous status of the story and explicitly referred to Sigalegale as a myth:

"Kalau kalian bilang ini anak ni Raja, terus siapa pinoparnya? Itu berhak diklaim. Ya, ga jelas. Aku telpon anakku, tolong cari dulu ini cerita Sigalegale! Itu mitos pah. Ya, kalau udah mitos siapapun bisa buat." (Gading, manager of Huta Siallagan, interview, November 3, 2025)

This statement demonstrates how Sigalegale is understood as a narrative whose legitimacy is grounded in collective belief rather than historical evidence, reinforcing its classification within the domain of folklore.

Despite the recognition of Sigalegale as a myth, the core storyline concerning a king and his deceased child remains consistently reproduced through oral transmission. Another performance manager explained that Sigalegale originates from the story of a king's son who died during warfare at a young age, emphasizing that its "reality" lies not in lived experience but in inherited knowledge:

"Jadi, ini sebenarnya anak seorang Raja yang mati saat perang pada usia muda, remaja, itulah awalnya ada Sigalegale. Ya, kalo saya bilang nyata, artinyakan bukan pada usia saya pada saat itu. Jadi, kalo kita katakan nyata, itu yang bisa kita lihat. Tapi, itu, itulah sejarah turun temurunnya. Sampai saya di usia 6

tahun, saya sudah mengerti tentang Sigalegale itu yang saya dengar." (Anderson Sigiro, Tomok performance manager, interview, November 4, 2025)

This account illustrates how Sigalegale is internalized from an early age as inherited narrative knowledge, thereby strengthening its position as an orally transmitted folk story rather than a historically situated event.

Within this narrative framework, Sigalegale is understood as a statue created to resemble Manggale, the son of King Rahat who died in battle. The creation of the statue is closely associated with the king's deep longing and grief. One informant linked this narrative to pre-religious belief systems, particularly the role of spiritual intermediaries in addressing emotional and existential suffering:

"Rajanya, kerinduan kepada anaknya, lahirlah sibaso dengan ilmu, sebelum masuk agamalah ya, bergerak sendirilah, lepaslah kerinduannya. Nah, mungkin berdasarkan ide seperti itu, bagaimana seupaya bergerak mungkin." (Riris Hasibuan, interview, November 3, 2025)

This explanation indicates that, within the folk narrative, the movement of Sigalegale is imagined not merely as a mechanical phenomenon but as a manifestation of spiritual agency rooted in pre-religious beliefs.

Furthermore, in the evolving narrative, the Sigalegale statue is presented before King Rahat during a healing ritual, where it is believed to dance as if demonstrating the presence of the deceased child. This motif reinforces Sigalegale's position within folklore as a symbol of consolation, emotional recovery, and relational continuity between the living and the dead. The dominance of this narrative-based interpretation among contemporary performance managers indicates that Sigalegale continues to be transmitted primarily as a narrative entity.

Sigalegale as the Central Figure in the Papurpur Sapata Ritual

Historically, Sigalegale has not only existed as a form of folklore, but has also functioned as a central figure in a ritual practice known as papurpur sapata. This ritual was performed as an effort to eliminate or dispel a curse believed to be associated with a particular condition of death. In the context of Batak Toba society, the curse refers to the death of a married individual who did not have any offspring, a condition known as mate punu. Death under such circumstances is regarded as socially and cosmologically incomplete, and therefore requires ritual action to restore balance.

The papurpur sapata ritual was usually carried out several months after the death of a person who died in a mate punu condition. Through this ritual, Batak Toba communities in the past believed that the curse associated with such a death could be removed, either from the bereaved family or from the broader social environment. During the ritual, the closest relatives of the deceased would dance together with the Sigalegale statue. In the process, the relatives would cry, lament, and recount the virtues and good deeds of the deceased. This sequence of actions creates the impression that the spirit of the deceased is present within the Sigalegale statue, positioning the statue as a medium connecting the world of the living and the realm of the ancestors.

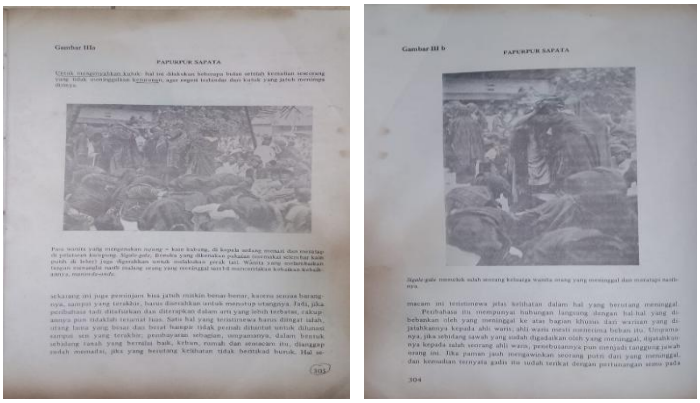

Figure 1. Historical Notes on the Sigalegale Statue as the Central Figure in the Papurpur Sapata Ritual

This type of death (mate punu) is perceived as a form of curse because it is grounded in the ancestral belief system of the Batak Toba people, which acknowledges the existence of spirits of the deceased (hasipelebeguan). Within Batak Toba cosmology, the spirits of the dead are classified into three hierarchical levels, namely begu, sumangot, and sisombaon. Begu represents the lowest level of spirit, whereas

sisombaon occupies the highest position and is regarded as an exalted spirit with symbolic authority and significance for its descendants.

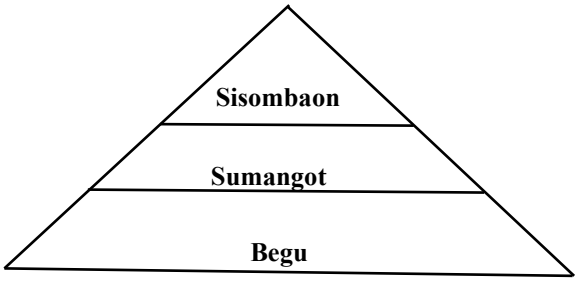

Figure 2. Levels of Ancestral Spirits in Batak Toba Belief System

Within this belief framework, the presence of descendants plays a crucial role in determining the elevation of a spirit's status. Spirits at the levels of begu or sumangot are believed to be capable of ascending to higher levels through the continuation of lineage and the performance of ritual practices by their descendants, such as visiting graves and offering ritual offerings. These practices are understood as expressions of respect and as mechanisms for maintaining relational ties between the living and the dead.

Conversely, individuals who die while married but without children lack both social and ritual agents capable of facilitating the elevation of their spiritual status. As a result, their spirits are believed to remain at the lowest level. This condition underlies the interpretation of mate punu as a curse within Batak Toba society, as such a death is perceived not only as an individual misfortune but also as a disruption to the cosmological and social balance of the community.

Fundamentally, the papurpur sapata ritual is closely related to the folklore that circulates within Batak Toba society. However, the version of folklore that directly correlates with this ritual is not the one commonly promoted by the managers of Sigalegale performances in Simanindo District namely, the story of King Rahat but rather the version concerning Nai Manggale. In this version, Nai Manggale is portrayed as a married woman who was unable to have children. Toward the end of her life, she requested that her husband create a statue resembling the child she had long imagined, with the hope that her spirit would find peace after death.

This version of the Nai Manggale folklore demonstrates a strong correlation with the papurpur sapata ritual, as the emergence of Sigalegale in this ritual context is directly associated with the death of an individual who was married but did not have offspring (mate punu). Thus, in this version, Sigalegale is understood not merely as a narrative representation, but as a symbolic medium functioning within ritual practice to respond to a form of death that is considered cosmologically problematic within Batak Toba society.

Table 1. The Correlation between the Nai Manggale Version and the Papurpur Sapata Ritual

The Point of Correlation	
The Nai Manggale Version	Ritual Papurpur Sapata
The Emergence of the Sigalegale Statue after the Death of Nai Manggale	The Sigallegale statue appears after someone's death
Nai Manggale died while married, but had no descendants or children	The ritual is performed for someone who dies while they are married, but has no children

However, this ritual dimension is never mentioned by contemporary Sigalegale performance managers when explaining the background of the tradition to the public. The managers perceive and present Sigalegale solely as a form of folklore. The author's attempt to confirm the existence of the papurpur sapata ritual with the performance managers further indicates that they are unaware o f this ritual practice. This situation suggests that the process of cultural transmission related to Sigalegale has not occurred in a continuous and comprehensive manner, but instead has experienced a rupture from one generation to the next. This rupture demonstrates how ritual elements that are sacred and context-specific tend to be marginalized, while narrative aspects that are considered more relevant and acceptable for public consumption continue to be transmitted.

Cultural Transmission Disruption and Selectivity in Sigalegale Performances

The fact that performers and managers of Sigalegale performances in Simanindo District are unaware of the relationship between the Sigalegale statue and the papurpur sapata ritual indicates a problem in the process of cultural transmission. In cultural contexts, transmission is not limited to the inheritance of

symbolic forms such as stories or narratives, but also includes the transmission of practices, ritual knowledge, and the cosmological meanings that accompany them. When cultural elements are transmitted only partially, what occurs is not a complete process of cultural transmission, but rather a disrupted or selective transmission.

The absence of knowledge about the papurpur sapata ritual among performance managers suggests that Sigalegale has been predominantly transmitted and understood as a narrative entity—namely, as folklore—rather than as part of a ritual system. This condition demonstrates that the process of cultural inheritance tends to select elements that are perceived as relevant, accessible, and adaptable to contemporary social contexts, while elements that are sacred, complex, or require specific ritual prerequisites are gradually abandoned. In this case, the ritual dimension associated with mate punu death and beliefs in hasipelebeguan no longer forms part of the collective knowledge of the performers.

This situation cannot be separated from broader social and historical changes within Batak Toba society, including the introduction of religion and the accompanying transformation of value systems. Ritual practices rooted in ancestral beliefs have tended to experience marginalization or prohibition, resulting in their exclusion from open intergenerational transmission. Consequently, later generations inherit Sigalegale in a reduced form, detached from its original ritual and cosmological context.

Thus, the lack of awareness among performers regarding the papurpur sapata ritual does not merely indicate a loss of cultural memory, but also reflects a mechanism of selective cultural transmission. Sigalegale continues to survive as a cultural symbol because it is considered relevant and acceptable within the context of tourism performances, while its ritual dimensions have been severed from the chain of transmission. This condition underscores that cultural transmission is dynamic and contextual, shaped by power relations, shifts in values, and the social and economic demands of particular historical moments.

Cultural Transmission Disruption and Selectivity in Sigalegale Performances: Underlying Factors

The disruption and selectivity of cultural transmission in Sigalegale performances cannot be separated from the historical conditions under which the ritual dimension of Sigalegale was practiced. One of the underlying factors lies in the non-inclusive nature of the papurpur sapata ritual itself. This ritual was not accessible to all members of Batak Toba society, as its implementation required substantial economic resources. Historical accounts indicate that the cost of performing the papurpur sapata ritual ranged from approximately 80 to 100 gulden, an amount that could only be afforded by individuals or families of higher social and economic status. Consequently, participation in the ritual was structurally limited, excluding lower social strata from direct experience and embodied knowledge of the practice.

In addition to its economic exclusivity, the papurpur sapata ritual was performed only under very specific circumstances, namely in cases of death involving individuals who were married but had no offspring (mate punu). This highly restrictive condition further contributed to the rarity of the ritual. As a result, papurpur sapata was not a regularly recurring practice within the community, but rather an exceptional event that occurred infrequently. The limited frequency of the ritual reduced opportunities for intergenerational transmission, making the ritual knowledge vulnerable to disappearance when social conditions changed.

Another significant factor contributing to the disruption of cultural transmission is the arrival of Christianity in the Batak region, introduced by German missionaries. The spread of the new religious system brought fundamental changes to Batak Toba belief structures, particularly those associated with ancestral spirits (hasipelebeguan). Ritual practices linked to spirit beliefs—such as the performance of gondang, tortor, and rituals related to papurpur sapata were regarded as incompatible with Christian teachings and were consequently prohibited. Historical records indicate that for approximately fifty-five years (1897–1952), practices associated with hasipelebeguan were entirely suspended.

This prolonged prohibition created a significant rupture in the transmission of ritual knowledge. During this period, younger generations grew up without exposure to ancestral rituals, resulting in a discontinuity of experiential learning. Although certain cultural practices were gradually reintroduced and adapted after this period, the transmission that followed was no longer comprehensive. Instead, it occurred selectively, emphasizing elements that could be reconciled with new religious values while marginalizing those that remained closely associated with pre-Christian belief systems.

Within this context, Sigalegale continued to survive primarily as a narrative tradition rather than as a ritual practice. The folkloric dimension—detached from its ritual origins—proved more adaptable to changing religious, social, and later economic conditions, particularly within the framework of tourism. Consequently, contemporary Sigalegale performances reflect a form of cultural continuity that is simultaneously marked by loss and transformation. What is transmitted is not the entirety of Sigalegale's cultural meaning, but a selective reconstruction shaped by economic constraints, religious intervention, and historical disruption.

This condition illustrates that cultural transmission is neither neutral nor automatic. Rather, it is mediated by structural factors that determine which elements of culture are preserved, transformed, or abandoned. In the case of Sigalegale, the rarity and exclusivity of the papurpur sapata ritual, combined with prolonged religious intervention, have played a decisive role in producing a selective mode of transmission—one that allows Sigalegale to persist as a cultural symbol while severing its connection to ritual knowledge and cosmological foundations.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion presented above, it can be concluded that prior to its commodification as a tourism performance, Sigalegale possessed two principal entities within Batak Toba culture. First, Sigalegale existed as a form of folklore transmitted orally and embedded in the collective memory of the community. Second, Sigalegale also functioned as the central figure in a ritual practice known as papurpur sapata, a ritual associated with deaths occurring under the condition of mate punu and rooted in the belief system of hasipelebeguan. These two entities indicate that, in its pre-commodification phase, Sigalegale existed not only within the realm of narrative but also within the realm of ritual activity, carrying significant cosmological and social meanings.

However, in the context of contemporary Sigalegale performances in Simanindo District, the owners and managers of the performances understand Sigalegale solely as folklore. They are unaware that Sigalegale once functioned as a central figure in the papurpur sapata ritual. This lack of awareness demonstrates that knowledge regarding the ritual dimension of Sigalegale is no longer transmitted comprehensively from one generation to the next. This condition indicates a disruption in the process of cultural transmission. While Sigalegale continues to be inherited and reproduced, the transmission occurs selectively, emphasizing the narrative dimension perceived as more relevant and socially acceptable in contemporary contexts, while the ritual dimension—sacred and context-specific in nature has become marginalized. As a result, Sigalegale persists as a cultural symbol but undergoes a reduction in meaning due to the loss of its ritual function.

In addition to internal factors related to selective transmission, the introduction of religion to the Batak region has also been a major contributing factor to this condition. The spread of religion brought about fundamental changes in Batak Toba belief systems, particularly those associated with hasipelebeguan. The prolonged suspension and restriction of ancestral ritual practices, including papurpur sapata, resulted in generations growing up without direct exposure to these rituals. Consequently, ritual knowledge related to Sigalegale was severed from the chain of cultural transmission, while its narrative form continued to survive and was later commodified within the tourism context. This conclusion underscores that the transformation of Sigalegale from a pre-commodified cultural practice into a tourism performance is not merely a functional shift, but also reflects the dynamics of disrupted and selective cultural transmission shaped by social, religious, and historical factors.

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