

Commodification of Ulos in the Perception and Respond of Batak Society (Structuralism Approach)

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Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of commodification of *ulos* to the perception and respond of Batak society. *Setting* of social research is the tourism area of Samosir, North Sumatera, Indonesia. This research applies qualitative method and phenomenology in specific. The applied approach is structuralism perspective in order to read the commodification text of Batak's *Ulos* through structural operation; *language parole* synchronic – diachronic, markers, and connotations. The result of research indicates that the society who understand the tradition and culture of Batak regret the occurrence of commodification of *ulos* that cause any changes. In contrary, commodification in the preserving *Ulos* and traditional culture can be accepted. In this sense, the commodification is a “common thread” between tradition and tourism sector.

Keywords: Batak's *ulos*, structuralism, commodification, perception and respond of society

1. Introduction

The social culture phenomenon in tourism area of Samosir, North Sumatera, Indonesia is in desecration of traditional culture and development of profanization in the form of commodification. As the tourism area, the dynamic of society changes is intensive that influence all of life aspects; mindset, value and attitude of society. The dynamic of this change also influence the existence of the cultural product of *ulos* in which *ulos* developed to be the tourism commodity. *Ulos* that independent from the commercial interest, and it is only the tradition and culture requirement of society, now to be a commodity product of tourism.

In certain condition, this effort has a positive advantage, i.e. in order to use the job and business opportunity by the increasing of the requirement of tourism, and as the building of art creativity and productivity of community. In addition, to increase the existence value of *ulos* as a local genius for the survival and developed based the requirement of community and its environment. The increasing of the existence value of *ulos* is part of the efforts for the increasing of individual and community excellence. This is a positive and valuable thins as described by Vincent Martin (2001, p.5): “...one of important thing that differ the human being living from the other ones is a fact that human being aware their existence and ask the existence”. Kierkegaard said that human being must realize their existence by binding themselves independently and practice the believe and fill the independency”(Hartoko, 1995, p.27).

The development of *ulos* as a new product variance will support the tourism of Samosir as cultural tourism category in addition to the cultural tourism. But in the other hand, Long (2001, pp.91-92) stated that it weakens the value of the old tradition culture that recognized by society (the term of Benjamin: decay of *aura*), because there is a distortion of type and working process that did not suitable to the actual tradition value. In the old time, making process of *ulos* accompanied by certain ritual. The maker of *ulos* that usually is woman, must satisfy any abstinences during the making process of *ulos*.

It the development of its commodification, there are some changes on the existence of *ulos*. The change of form is influenced by the surrounding area. The other change is the using of color material and processing. The uniqueness of Batak's *ulos* is on the using of the natural dye (color) but now it uses the chemical dye (Niessen, 2014, p.7). The making process of *ulos* in the old time by manual weaving using *gedongan* (weaving looms, now it uses the non-machine and machine weaving loom.

The consequence of commodification of traditional *ulos* of Batak has some influences either positive or negative impact. For the *ulos* craftsman, entrepreneur or the seller of *ulos* has a practical economic impact. But this economic impact has a negative consequence to the quality of product and traditional value in which *ulos* has lost its originality and traditional value (Levi-Straus, 2005, p.19). Batak's *Ulos* with the characteristic color of black, red and white that tend to be blurred (doff) is scarce and replaced by the color of bright red with the other color as variation, lace and beads. This change cannot be said as creative expose because there is addition of the element of shape and color without considering the tradition value.

The ordinary people accept this change as there is no loss in value and it is assumed as a consequence of age development. It is different to the people who understand the tradition culture who recognize *ulos* based on the quality of product and its tradition value, but it only a few. As well as collector that appraise and recognize *ulos* based on their knowledge and understand but its objective is commodification (fetishism)

2. Theoretical Review

2.1 Commodification of Batak's *Ulos*

Piliang (2003, p.16) defines commodification as a process to make anything in which it is not commodity in previous and now to be a commodity. Maunati (2004, p.245) depicts that cultural commodification is a process of packaging and selling of the cultural objects, such as performances and various lifestyle of community. ...the cultural commodification in line with the tourism service that sells the performance, architecture and rituals. Commodification of *ulos* is a part of cultural commodification generally.

Commodification is related to the capitalism. Weber defines the capitalist as economic activities in a certain market and encourage to produce the profit by the market mechanism (Berger, 1990, p.21). Barker (2004, p.517) also said that commodification is a process that associated to the capitalism in which the object, quality and marker are to be commodities and commodity is sold in the market as its objective. In the context of Batak's *ulos*, in which the ancient function is not a commodity, now to be the commercial commodity in which contains the valuable as the binding of community solidarity, now has a market value and market oriented.

Based on some relevant researches, the consequence of commodification results double values, positive and negative. It has a positive value because it can develop the ancient cultural product beside the economic value. In contrary, its negative value appears because of the concern of the loss of the traditional values which have been existing in the society hereditarily (Pitana & Gayatri, 2005, p.124).

2.2 The value of Batak's *Ulos*

Ulos is identity characteristic of the Batak society until now, so there is a term : there is *ulos* there is Batak and contrary : there is not *ulos* there is not Batak (Pitana & Gayatri, 2005, p.124). Product of Batak's *ulos* is not only seen and assessed by physic visualization but also its meaning because it is a product of society culture that used in the cultural and religious ritual. *Ulos* is a related to the cosmology and theology of Batak. Cosmology of Batak divide the nature to be three levels (*banua natolu*), i.e. the upper world (*banua ginjang*), the center world (*banua tonga*), and the lower world (*banua toru*), and theology of Batak that believe to a god in the higher heaven *Debata Muljadi Nabolon*, that stay in the upper world (*banua ginjang*)(Sinaga, 2004, p.45).

As a cultural product made by weaving, *ulos* has a higher appreciation as the secret and spiritual object (Siregar, 1985, p.1). *Ulos* is consisted of any forms or pattern and has special function in each traditional ceremony such as wedding ceremony, birth ceremony or funeral. The consistence of form and pattern of this *ulos* had shift in this present day. This shift and change is caused by any factors includes the preference of consumer and market.

2.3 Structuralism Approach

This Dissertation studies Batak's *ulos* in the term of sociology. In the development of social and cultural science linguistic scientific to be the approach model in which the culture and social living is defined in language. The language, culture and social living is built by its structure as base. By the structuralism approach, cultural text and Batak's *ulos*, it can read and understand in which *ulos* is a marker and visual language code.

Daniel Chaffee and Charles Lemer in Bryan S. Turner (ed) (2012, pp. 188-193) said that structuralism is a formal term in all of empirical study that indicates the previous pattern of the reviewed field. Structuralism is also viewed as method, in which the content of the empirical study cannot observed directly because its characteristic of the object and event is not regulated, random or chaos. Generally, the structuralism is used in studied field in which the studied object and event requires a strong structural assumption so its definition can be understood.

The perspective of the main theory that replicated in this research is Saussurian structuralism in addition to semiotic structuralism of Roland Barthes and anthropology structuralism of Levi – Strauss. There are three basic principles as the main approach of de Saussure and then developed by other figure, Barthes and Levi – Strauss in their studies, i.e. distinction: language parole, signifiant signifie and synchronic – diachronic. Distinction of de Saussure is developed in the study of mrk and semiotic code by Barles and in study of kinship system, ceremony and mythos by Levi Strauss.

Based on the principle of binary opposition: language parole, synchronic – diachronic, markers and denotation – connotation, this research studied how its differential relation in the commodification of traditional *ulos* and its change to the commodification of *ulos*. It means in order to understand the impact of commodification of Batak's *ulos* must be preceded by description of principles and the old tradition value pattern. The commodification of Batak's *ulos* in Samosir is in process in the time dimension of diachronic, i.e. the change in the time range and processed in the dynamic of the change of social and society culture.

De Saussure has “predicted” that structuralism would developed to be approach in other humanity science because human being is *animal simbolicum*, and culture is arranged based on the symbols(Putrantu, 2005, pp. 130-131). In this research, the structuralism approach is formulated to be an integrated theory. The theoretical approach is that be replicated to be analysis's “knife” of the studied *ulos* issue.

3. Method of Research

This study applies the qualitative method in order to study the impact of commodification of Batak's *ulos*. Social setting of research is the tourism area of Samosir, North Sumatera, Indonesia. Therefore, the applied relevant qualitative method is phenomenology method in order to build the art sociology and culture in the understanding level, i.e. to review the culture and *ulos* in the discussion of existence, dynamic and its impact to the society (Faruk, 2012, p.201-203). The applied approach is structuralism perspective to read the commodification text of Batak's *ulos* through structural operation: *langue parole*, synchronic – diachronic, markers and marking, denotation – connotation. The data was collected by observation, interview and documentation. After the data collecting, the data was discussed through peer debriefing. The result data of the study will be analyzed by interactive model, data reduction, data presentation and conclusion/ verification.

4. Discussion

The society as the subject of this research is positioned as appreciator who will review the development and the change of culture and Batak's *ulos* clearly and neutrally based on the understanding of physiology, history, tradition and daily living by considering the dynamic of social and cultural development of Batak until now. All of data and fact of this research will discussed based on the structuralism perspective.



Figure 1. The left figure (a), the function of traditional *ulos*, and the right figure (b,c,d and e) represents the function of *ulos* as of commodification of *ulos* as *fashion* and household equipment

4.1 *Langue and Parole* of Shape, Function and the Meaning of *Ulos*

Based on *langue*, Batak's *ulos* in the past is a sheet of cloth in the size of one times two meter (may be more or less) with certain pattern according to its function and objective. When used as clothes, it must be in the sheet without stitched or when use as baby sling (*ulos parompa*). The color of *ulos* is consist of three color: black, white and red. Its parole is known as *si toluborna*, as visualization of Batak cosmology, i.e. three worlds (*banuanatolu*). The upper worlds are symbolized by white, the center world by red and the lower world by black color. Although there is bluish or dark blue such as *ulos sibolang*, this is a consequence of the dying limitation that made of natural substance. But conceptually the bluish color is assumed as black or dark, its parole is *mangitomi* (to make black). As well as the red color, that tend to maroon or dark red and not bright red. The pattern of *ulos* in the past time is form of the pattern of color composition in geometrical area. This pattern is divides *ulos* vertically or horizontally.

In the commodification of *ulos* in this time, *ulos* is not only in form of the sheet of cloth, but also it has been developed in various form of wearing product; fashion and household equipment. Its parole is product diversification. As fashion, *ulos* to be jacket, blazer, shirt, skirt, bag, etc. As household equipment product, *ulos* is used as tablecloth, seat cushions, curtain and wall hanging, etc. the various function of diversification product of *ulos* has parole as imaging.

Ulos is made in coloring by using green, yellow, purple colors, etc. In addition to the color application independently, it also uses various beads, red thread, lace, writeable, etc. There is also the embroidery that ordered for the requirement of the ceremonial event for the luxurious image. This change is caused by the transparency of society. By this change, the society assume there is a new thing and modern. Therefore, in traditional ceremony specially for the party, it uses the *ulos* that had changed in the shape or form. The female wears the *ulos sedum* with the variation of color and beads while the male wear *ulos ragi hotang* with variation of gold and silver thread.

Langue function of traditional *ulos* is blessing channeling, spirit power (*saqhala tondi*) and provide the warmth either inner or outer. In the cosmology of Batak, there are three source of warmth, i.e. sun, fire and *ulos* (Febriane, 2014, p.11).

This spiritual function is a biological or cultural hierarchy. Based on the biological hierarchy such as the submission of *ulos* from the parents to their child or grandchild, and based on cultural hierarchy is submission of *ulos* from *hula-hula* to *boru*. The cultural hierarchy is a realization of the traditional system of Batak *dalihan natolu*. Therefore, the submission of *ulos* in the past time, it was clear who the giver and receiver were, as well as its custom or traditional context. For the terms of submission of *ulos*, in the traditional ceremony of Batak in the past time, such as in the wedding ceremony, the number of *ulos* is 11 sheets. Culturally, the function of this *ulos* was a binding of solidarity of Batak people that lives in a group or clan.

Each type and pattern of traditional *ulos* has special functions. *Language* function of *ulos ragi hidup* is a cloth of the parents who have grandchild, its parole is *hagabeon*, i.e. long age and more descendant. *Language* function of *ulos ragi sibolang* is the cover of corpse, its parole is *ulos saput* or the last respect. The *language* function of *ulos ragi runjat* and *sadum* is cloth of the rich man, its parole is *hamoraon* (rich). *Language* function of *ulos ragi hotang* is submitted to the bride/bridegroom, its parole is *ulos hela*. *Language* function of *ulos rqi mangiring* is *ulos* for grandchild, its parole is fertility for the birth of more grandchildren. And the *language* function of *ulos bintang maratur* is to be wore in the inauguration of the new house, its parole is *hamoraon*.

Commodification of function of *ulos* is a development that did not consistent to the traditional rule. The biological and cultural hierarchy always be neglected and be developed to be power hierarchy (as respect, recognition). For example, the submission of *ulos* to the government officer. Although the society is actor and motor of this change, but the parents who understand the custom tradition regrets this condition. As well as the educated society who understand the culture of Batak, hope although the function of *ulos* had developed the society and young generation must have a critical and wise attitude and did not loss the cultural basic, i.e. to understand the principle function of traditional *ulos*. Therefore, the change of function of *ulos* can be directed and developed in the fair and natural condition based on the age development and in its preservation.

Related to the *langue* of the meaning of *ulos*, traditional *ulos* has secret, philosophy, and functional meaning. The submission of *ulos* is a part of prayer statement and a hope to the Lord, therefore, *ulos* did not written by the prayer words. In addition, *ulos* has functional meaning that used in the traditional ceremony and daily activities based on the type, form and its function. In this sense, the parole of *ulos* is *homitan* (deposit), *panoropi* (custom equipment), as *parompa* (baby sling) etc. Visually, the meaning of *ulos* is exposed by its type or form, color and its pattern. For example, *ragi hotang* means a strong spiritual binding as a rattan, the pattern of *ragi mangiring* means a more birth, *suri-suri ganjang* means the tidiness and regularity, etc.

In the development of its commodification, the meaning of *ulos* shifted to propane meaning. Its parole is cultural identity, collection and imaging. The change of meaning of *ulos* is in line with the change of its value from the utility value to market value and marking value because the society did not understand the philosophy meaning of *ulos*, related to the form, color and its function so there is an aesthetic value that covered by business meaning of *ulos* commodification. Certainly, it has a positive and negative value. In one hand, it provides profit for the craftsman and businessman of *ulos* and in the other one, the commodification which is too far will lose its philosophy, history and secret meaning.

4.2 Synchronic and Diachronic of Form, Function and Meaning of Ulos

Based on the synchronic time perspective, the form of *ulos* in the past time was a tradition form that developed in the society of Batak, until the meaning shifted which is caused by various influences. The synchronic forms of *ulos* survived until a moment before the powerful influence of modernization and development of Prapat area and the area around the Toba Lake as the tourism destination in the colonialism. The acceleration of the change of *ulos* was getting stronger since the development of Samosir as the tourism destination since 70s. In addition, there was influence from the surrounding area. The shift and change of form of *ulos* by using the elements of beads were influenced by *ulos angkola* (South Tapanuli) and gold thread from the Malay tradition. The dominant influence of red that weakened two other colors, i.e. black and white, is the influence of *ulos* of Karo (*uis gara*).

The shift and change of form of cultural product of Batak has occurred since the coming of Christian missionary from Europe, especially Nommensen to Batak land in the mid-19th century. In that time, any cultural product of Batak was prohibited for wearing because it assumed it did not suitable to the Christian faith. Specially for *ulos*, that did not same to the prohibited product, it survived and adjusted its consistence as cloth, so it is not opposed to the Christian religion take by missionary.

Based on diachronic time perspective, Batak's *ulos* in Samosir show the shift and change in evolutionary. This shift and change was occurred until now that related to the sheet of *ulos* (Color, pattern and variation) and the product of its diversification. Based on historical comparison, development of color of *ulos* with various color by the addition of green, yellow, and other ones, and the addition of wririnf element and lace

had occurred since 70s. The society in that time assumed that there is a new thing of the existence of *ulos*, anything that assumed as modern that preferred it. The development of *ulos* by the application of elements of beads and gold thread, add the embroidery up to the diversification of product as the cloths and the household equipment was occurred in 80s. the acceleration if this change was occurred since 2000s. Associatively, this development is related to the external influence of the surrounding area, i.e. the culture of Angkola in South Tapanuli, and Karo culture and malay culture.

Based on the synchronic time dimension, the function of *ulos* is a traditional function in line with the existence of the traditional form. The function of traditional *ulos* is survived in the society of Batak until now. There is a term: “There is *ulos*, there is Batak”, if *ulos* is not functioned, the principle of Batak of the society is lost. Therefore, the Batak people still wearing *ulos* that related to the three important events: birth, marriage and death.

The synchronic time dimension, the meaning of *ulos* is a secret meaning in religion ritual and cultural of Batak, a realization of theological faith and cosmology of Batak, and manifestation of the cultural philosophy *dalihan natolu*. The meaning of *ulos* still survived until now, although there is development of the new meanings. In contrary, diachronically, in addition to the society who understand the *ulos* as secret product, there is also the profane development. Profanization of *ulos* is related to the involvement of people out of Batak, who consume and popularize *ulos*. The giving of *ulos* out of the custom tradition and biological and cultural hierarchy do by the people out of Batak culture as the respect and recognition, so *ulos* to be a popular product. There are society who use *ulos* as souvenir, for display or collection, indicates that there is profanization of *ulos* in the tourism consumption that support the economic value of *ulos*

4.3 Marker and Sign of Form, Function and Meaning of *Ulos*

All of elements and structure found in the commodification of Batak's *ulos* in Samosir can be indicated as marker that will be analyzed based on the marker and marking aspect. One of the marker is the form of *ulos* as the cloth (fashion) and various household equipment. This marker creates the interpretation of marker that there is the allowance of principles and the openness of the society to the change. The development of various form of *ulos* will be interpreted as the indication of compromised society with the development condition. The society accept the change with pragmatic reason, accessible because there are number of producer and seller and there are more society as consumer. In addition to the psychological reason as image and pride.

The other marker is application of color that over the traditional color, and the addition of various elements and variation. The interpretation of marker is society did not understand the philosophy of the color of *ulos* that only consist of three color (*si toluborna*). There is a few of people who understand it, but did not compliance the terms and the value of the tradition. This condition is interpreted that the society is accommodate the change either supported by the internal or external dynamic of the influence of the relevant product from the surrounding area.

The function of *ulos* as sign of friendship is a marker in its commodification. The function is not more than as gift or parcel in order to build a mutual relationship between the giver and receiver indicates that the society misuse the function of *ulos* in which the real function of *ulos* is a prayer and blessing. The dominant marker is as the commodity product. As a commodity product, *ulos* is also consumed by people who has no background of Batak, but also the new comers and tourist who visit the Samosir destination. This indicates that the secret function of *ulos* has gone and the tourism business exploits the traditional value of *ulos*.

In line with that, the development of the meaning of *ulos* as identity of Batak culture is a marker. Interpretation of its marking describes that *ulos* is assumed as the keeping of cultural identity, to remember that the people of Batak has traditional product with the secret value. This indicates that the tourism in Samosir in addition to its natural view, it also hase cultural properties that must be promoted.

4.4 Denotation and Connotation of the Form, Function and Meaning of *Ulos*

Based on denotation, or the meaning in the first level, it can read from any meaning aspect such as that related to the using of color and the addition of variation of *ulos* independently. Based on connotation or the meaning in the second level, it provides interpretations such as: 1) The society is assumed cannot preserve or maintain the consistence of the application of traditional color that built from the philosophy understanding and cosmology of Batak in the past time, 2) the society is influenced by the external appearance of textile from the surrounding area, 3) Society did not understand the philosophy of form, pattern and traditional color of Batak's *ulos*. 4) the Society has a pessimistic to the change.

Commodification of *ulos* as the cloth (fashion) and the functional of household equipment is a denotation. In its connotation, it has interpretations: 1) as a pride of society to *ulos* as cultural asset, 2) the society creative exploration for the diversification of the functional form, 3) it understand that society did not understand the principle of traditional *ulos*.

Denotation of commodification of *ulos* as tourism commodity product, has connotation interpretation: 1)

The meaning of secret value of *ulos* that changed to be economical and consumption value, 2) Tourism commercialism that exploit the cultural product of *ulos*, 3). The utility value of *ulos* is developed to be the market value and market value in the change of society to be modern society in capitalism economic, 4) instead of *ulos* as the binding of society solidarity in cultural principle of *dalihan natolu* had changed to be the memory binding of the tourism who consume it as souvenir.

5. Closing

The society who understand the custom and traditional culture of Batak regrets the commodification of *ulos* that cause any changes. In contrary, the commodification in the preservation of *ulos* and traditional culture can be accepted. The quality of traditional *ulos* is a manifestation of the simplicity of color and variation that support of the making process in neat and painstaking. In contrary, the commodification of *ulos* is in various color and variation. It is not only as the sheet of cloth, but also is sewed as fashion product and household equipment. Its parole is imaging. In this sense the commodification is a “common thread” between the tradition and tourism.

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