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# Music, Power and Gender in Opera Batak Performance

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to discuss power and gender issues which relate to musical performance within the Toba Bataks of North Sumatera, Indonesia. Based upon the idea that gender ideology, social power and performance are intertwined, this paper views musical performance as a potential vehicle for inter-gender communication, which has a power to protest, negotiate, and challenge authority. The discussion is going to focus on the analysis of a few songs specifically related to women and gender ideology in Toba Batak society and view Opera Batak as a vessel of women's voice where women express their feeling and talk about themselves. The data presented here is based on ethnographic research among the Opera Batak performance since 1987-2022. The music data that is analyzed is the music and song repertoires that derived from this theatrical genre which were composed especially during period of the 1920-1970's. The result demonstrates that Opera Batak, has become a vessel of women's voice and their feeling expression. Song lyrics analysis has proved that issues about gender inequality and women's struggle in the society has been expressed and negotiated through Opera Batak performance.

Keywords: Opera Batak; gender; music; power

## **Abstrak**

*Tulisan ini mencoba membahas isu-isu kekuasaan dan gender yang berhubungan dengan pertunjukan musik di Batak Toba di Sumatera Utara, Indonesia. Berdasarkan gagasan bahwa ideologi gender, kekuatan sosial, dan pertunjukan saling terkait, makalah ini memandang pertunjukan musik sebagai sarana potensial untuk komunikasi antar gender, yang memiliki kekuatan untuk memprotes, bernegosiasi, dan menantang otoritas. Pembahasannya akan fokus pada analisis beberapa lagu yang secara khusus berkaitan dengan perempuan dan ideologi gender dalam masyarakat Batak Toba dan memandang Opera Batak sebagai wadah suara perempuan di mana perempuan mengekspresikan perasaan dan berbicara tentang dirinya. Data yang disajikan di sini berdasarkan penelitian etnografi pada pementasan Opera Batak sejak tahun 1987-2022. Data musik yang dianalisis adalah repertoar musik dan lagu yang berasal dari genre teatral yang digubah khususnya pada periode 1920-1970an. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa Opera Batak telah menjadi wadah suara dan ekspresi perasaan perempuan. Analisis lirik lagu membuktikan bahwa isu kesenjangan gender dan perjuangan perempuan di masyarakat telah diungkapkan dan dinegosiasikan melalui pertunjukan Opera Batak.*

*Kata Kunci: Opera Batak; gender; musik; kekuasaan*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Historical Background of Opera Batak

Opera Batak is the first 'pure' entertainment theatrical form among Toba Batak people, an ethnic group from North Sumatera, Indonesia. Opera Batak was inspired by *stamboel* popular theater that came from Java and the *bangsawan* popular theaters of the Malay from Malaysia and North Sumatra. As Cohen argues Opera Batak is a kind of localized popular theatres that was at near-simultaneously appeared in other parts of Indonesia like *randai* (West Sumatra), *tonil* (Wet Java), *kethoprak* (Central Java), *kimidi rudat* (Lombok). (Cohen 2013:218) The *stamboel* theatres especially two theatre forms named Dardanela, the *stamboel* popular "Opera of Malacca" and "Bangsawan Indra Ratoe of Serdang" among the Malay ethnic group of Northern Sumatra theater, which was first influenced by *opera Bangsawan* from Malaysia.

The first initiative of establishing the opera Batak troupe derived from Tilhang Gultom, who was later known as the pioneer and the trendsetter of this theatrical form. It was the first established commercial and stage performing arts genre among the Toba Batak people that emerged in the urban area of Tapanuli, known also as *tano Batak* (the Batak land). The emergence of Opera Batak in 1928 was a reaction to outside entertainment forms, especially to theater forms "Opera of Malacca" and "Bangsawan Indra Ratoe of Serdang" among the Malay ethnic group of Northern Sumatera theater, which was first influenced by Opera Bangsawan from Malaysia. These Malay theaters, which performed stories based on Malay myths, legends, and stories inspired by everyday lives, were very popular in North Sumatra.

Inspired by the stories performed by the Malay Operas, Tilhang Gultom, the pioneer of Opera Batak tried to find stories, legends, myths, and musical forms that existed at that time in Toba Batak society. He interpreted what the Toba Batak life was like and created an art form, in this case, theater form and also a musical genre based on the elements that he gathered. Most importantly, he along with his members, had 'interviewed' Toba Batak people, including women about their personal and social problems and elaborated them to become stories and songs that they performed in public (Carle, 1990).

The nature of Opera Batak performance is an oral tradition, where everything they perform is orally transmitted without a "fixed composition". Tilhang Gultom, as the leader, obviously has contributed most of the ideas. However, every time he created a new play or song, he always cooperated with his members, therefore the works were much more communal. Through the performance, the dialogs, song lyrics and melodies, have been developed and individual contributions will take part in the development of the performance itself. Actors often improvise the dialog, and singers often add their lyrics and melodic variations.

The motivation behind joining the Opera Batak group varied, most of the members wanted to enjoy living as "artists" where they could travel around and did not have to do regular jobs such as working at the farm like the common people in villages. Opera Batak's players are often labelled and stigmatized for their way of living –for staying on the road for too long and having to spend so much time with the troupe instead of the family.

The involvement of women in the stage performing arts and music especially important in the historical development of Opera Batak performance. According to several senior artists, at the early emergence of the Opera Batak, women were not included, all the women's roles were played by men. It is not clear when women became involved in the opera Batak, according to some of the players, at the beginning Opera Batak performance did not include women as players, and female roles were played by men. Other female players, like the male players, come from the audience who became interested in the opera. Oftentimes, as mentioned earlier, among the audience they were attracted to the male players and ended up marrying them. In the Opera Batak women usually performed as actors and singers, however, some of them can play musical instruments.

The involvement of women in opera Batak as professional artists produced ‘contradiction’ among the Toba Batak people at the time. Most parents discourage their daughters from getting involved in this stage performance activity, either as actors and/or singers. There were quite a few women who ran away from their families, for various reasons such as; to avoid an “arranged marriage” or a broken heart.

Female members were interested in joining because they were attracted to or fell in love with one of the artists. Many opera Batak artists married local women, whom they met during staying and performing in a particular place. It was common that village women would “fall in love” with the “male artists” after seeing their acting on stage. Those young women who fell in love with opera Batak artists finally joined the troupe and travelled with them, oftentimes without getting permission from their parents. This has created conflict for some Batak families.

Women who would become involved in the Opera Batak were mostly daughters and wives of male opera Batak players. Their involvement was primarily because of their fathers and/or brothers who were already involved as performers before. Therefore, it was more likely considered as a family group, and this continued until their next generations. With their lifestyle of being away from home most of the time and traveling to places, sometimes they have been excluded from Toba Batak communities in general. This was because, during its time, women were not supposed to be away from the family when they were not married.

### 1.2. Power and Gender Identity among the Toba Batak

Gender identity (women/man), has been analyzed in the study of anthropology as a socially constructed category, and the system of belief, which provides, uniquely for each society, an underlying conceptual framework for “correct” (i.e. ideal) behavior based on gender ideologies (Koskoff 1987: 5). To understand the conceptual framework based on gender identity that has determined Toba Batak social interaction, we have to account for the differences between men’s and women’s social and cultural experiences. In traditional Toba Batak society, since very young, especially after initiation, men and women stayed in separate places. As Tobing says, “as long as the boy is about twelve years old, he leaves the parental house in a ceremonial way. From now on he must sleep in a man house. It is during this time he is taught the *adat*.” (Tobing 1959: 155) *Adat* means a ‘customary law,’ or better, ceremonial life and community norms, and it is the paradigm of all Toba Batak social relationships.

So far, there is no explanation in early writing of women in traditional Toba Batak society who have grown up in different domains and whether they also have been taught the ‘*adat*’ (custom) or cultural knowledge like the boy. Yet, according to interviews with some informants, a girl will stay in the parental house and learn to do domestic activities following their mothers. There she is prepared to be a good wife and waiting for a man who wants to marry her.

The fact that boys are taught ‘the custom in the men’s house suggests that even need a study to be done, this gives us a clue of understanding that Toba Batak men have controlled the knowledge of *adat* (‘customary law,’ or better, ceremonial life and social norms), while women will grow up in the parental house to learn the domestic works. Therefore, the anthropologist’s idea that the tendency of dualism in a every culture where man/women as associated with culture/nature also occurred in Toba Batak society.

### 1.3. Women’s Status in the Society

In her article, “Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power: A Theoretical and Regional Overview”, Shelly Errington mentions that “Southeast Asian women have long been identified as an area where women enjoy high status, but this claimed high status is highlighted by contrasting male dominance characteristic of traditional Indian and Chinese societies. (1990:1) She mentions that commentators on Southeast Asia often notice that “the births of male and female children are equally valued. “(ibid:4) Furthermore, Errington argues that the reason why women in the Southeast Asia were not getting attention was “because feminist theorist about gender difference is highly marked. However, as she continues, “we may be missing issues germane to the topic when the treatment of women seems relatively benign.” (ibid:5).

The case of Toba Batak women seems to be the exception to that ‘high status’ category. Toba Batak is a patrilineal society, where the descent is traced in the male line. “The tribes into which are Batak divided, are called *marga*; that persons of the same *marga* are not allowed to intermarry, and the children follow the *marga* of their father.” (Wilken 1921: 27) Like women in most of patrilineal societies, Toba Batak woman’s status is always ambiguous. After marriage, a woman has to leave her parental house to follow her husband and stay in her husband’s family’s household. For Toba Bataks a woman is considered a ‘guest’ in her parent’s house; she is considered and will be ‘sold’ to the man who wants to marry her.\* After she gets married, she is still considered a ‘guest’, in this time her husband’s house as well as his family, and considered as her husband’s ‘property’.

In Toba Batak society, like women in most patrilineal societies, the status of Toba Batak women is always ambiguous. Culturally, after marriage, a woman has to leave her parental house to follow her husband and stay in her husband’s family’s household. For the Toba Batak, a woman is considered a “guest” in her parent’s house after marriage; she is considered someone who has been “sold” to a man who marries her. Wilken has made an interesting analysis or the terminology married “*mangoli*” which is rooted in the Batak word “*boli*” which means to buy. (1921:30) After she gets married, she is still considered a ‘guest’, in her husband’s house as well as his family, and considered as her husband’s ‘property’.

So far, there was not any explanation in early writing of how women in traditional Toba Batak society have grown up in a different domain and whether they also have been taught the ‘*adat*’ or cultural knowledge like the boy<sup>†</sup>. Yet, according to interviews with some informants, a girl will stay in the parental house and learn to do the domestic activities following their mothers. There she is prepared to be a good wife and waiting for a man who wants to marry her. The fact that boys are taught ‘the *adat*’ in the men’s house suggests that this gives us a clue of understanding that Toba Batak men have controlled the knowledge of *adat* (‘customary law,’ or better, ceremonial life and social norms), while women will grow up in the parental house to learn the domestic works.

Sandra Niessen states,

The position of the woman in the Toba kinship system is ambiguous. Because she is situated between hula-hula and boru, she is associated with both, and an absolute member of neither.” ... The position of the mother is also ambiguous. In spite of the dominant patrilineality of the Toba Batak system, descent from the female cannot be entirely negated as she bears the child. ... The continuity of the *marga* is strongly expressed through the transfer of goods. Given the fact that women leave their *marga* of origin to settle in their husband’s *marga* it corroborates *marga* logic that men are allowed to inherit (manean) and women are not, under any circumstances (Niessen: 1985:75-76).

#### 1.4. Music and Gender among the Toba Batak

In the study of ethnomusicology, there have been increasingly varied discussions of how musical performance and behavior can contribute to “maintaining gender distinctions within a social system.” (Sarkissian 1990:345) In the introduction of a book titled “Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective” Koskoff also raises questions like “To what degree does a society’s gender ideology and resulting gender-related behaviours affect its musical thought and practice? How does music function in society to reflect or affect inter-gender relations? (1989:1) Robertson has provided several examples of different culture settings where men control ritual access to exclude women and form the core of male experience. Several questions that need to be addressed related to women’s role in the music performances are, “Are Musical materials equally accessible to all members of a culture? Are attributes in music closely link to sexual characteristics? Are the performance of women public, private, or both? How is access to power sources within music defined and achieved? Do women control their own performances? ... Do women seek to

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† In traditional Toba Batak society, from very young, especially after initiation, men and women stayed in separate places. As Tobing says “as long as the boy is about twelve years old, he leaves the parental house in a ceremonial way. From now on he must sleep in a ‘men’ house. It is during this time that he is taught the *adat*.” (Tobing 1959:155) *Adat* basically means a ‘customary law,’ or better, ceremonial life and community norms, and it is the paradigm of all Toba Batak social relationship.

change the balance of power in their communities? Do they accomplish or define changes through performance?" (1989:228).

Among the Toba Batak society the most important musical activity is what they call *gondang*. The term 'gondang' has at least four different meanings; ritual ceremonies, musical ensemble, musical piece and musical repertoire. There is no ceremony in every Toba Batak aspect of life without having *gondang* (musical ensemble) included in it.

In the traditional Toba-Batak society, musicians have a high status and this high status is only owned by the *gondang* musician in particular during the ceremonies. The *gondang* musicians are considered as human figures "aligned" with the Gods. *Gondang* musician, called *pargonsi*, has a special status in the ceremonies, they are even placed as equal to spiritual deities. They are also called as "Bataraguru", the spiritual deity who in the Toba Batak mythology has own the knowledge. *Bataraguru* is also associated with the traditional Toba-Batak belief that all knowledge including that of music comes from *sahala guru* (the spirit that guides and gives scientific knowledge). *Gondang* musician is a professional musician and exclusively male.

In traditional Toba Batak society, to become a *pargonsi* and a ritual musician was a specialist occupation where not everyone can be accepted as professional *pargonsi* before doing certain kinds of ritual to honor the guru (teacher) called *marsahala guru*. Before he did musical practices, he had to stay at his teacher's house for months and serve the teacher doing many things such as farming as well as accompanying the teacher to play *gondang* in particular ritual occasions. During such ritual occasions he learned how to play the musical instrument and musical pieces as well.

As a consequence of the high religious status given to the musician, in Toba-Batak society *gondang* musician is required to have the ability to master not only musical skills, but also to a variety of knowledge regarding rules connected to the *adat* (customary law) religious meaning of *gondang*'s related to the spiritual world of the community. Since the musicians are the main mediators in the relationship between the human world (naturally) with the world of the gods (supernatural), he should properly understand the context and the purpose of the ritual / ceremonial.

The term "*pargonsi*" for musicians is exclusively used for *gondang* musicians. The player of other traditional music genre called *uning-uningan* (solo instruments) is never called a *pargonsi*. The person is simply called according to the instrument he plays, such as *parsulim*, *parsordam*, and *partulila*. Among the Toba Batak practice, according to some of my informants, the musicians who play these instruments were not considered as professional. Most of these types of music are categorized as music for *parmahan* (herder boy), which functions as self-amusement. This type of music does not require special knowledge as in the case of *pargonsi* and they are considered less important than *gondang* ritual music.

In traditional Toba Batak music practices, women do not play music instruments, they mostly perform vocal music genres such as *ende* (singing), *tumba* (singing and dancing) and *andung* (lament). *Ende* is a vocal music that performs mostly in private contexts. *Tumba* is social singing and dancing performed by young women. It is a type of singing accompanied with dancing (*embas*), particularly among young girls. The *tumba* is performed traditionally when someone among friends of a village girls' group will establish a marriage. The content of the song texts in general is an expression of joy from a marriage girl's friends. *Tumba* songs sung with alternate singing. Unlike typical *ende* songs, *andung* is a lament that is traditionally performed by family members or relatives when somebody dies especially female members. *Andung* is a lament practice during the pre-awake death ceremony. It is also performed when somebody is remembering a person who has passed away.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Ethnography and Participant Observation

The methodology used in this research is qualitative research and using ethnographical study. It uses four ethnography techniques; participant observation and interview with the former Opera Batak members. In the study ethnomusicology, Seegers also describes the importance of studying ethnography in doing music research, saying that, “ethnography of music, ... a descriptive approach to music going beyond the writing down of sounds to the writing down of how sounds are conceived made, and appreciated and influence other individuals, groups, and social and musical process. The ethnography of music is writing about the ways people make music.” (1992: 89) The primary sources for this research were interviews with Opera Batak performers and musicians and with audience members who had attended live performances. From the memories of Batak musicians who had been directly involved in performances, it was possible to reconstruct some of the musical repertoires of that time.

### 2.2. Musical Data

The music data analysed for this writing is based on music repertoires that were produced and performed during the important period of the historical development of Opera Batak from the 1920s until the 1970s. The data gathered are from the interviewing and recording of Opera Batak musicians and singers who still remember the songs. For this writing, all the songs that related to gender issues and women’s problems in society have been analysed.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Music and Gender in Opera Batak Performance

The process to become a musician in Opera Batak was different from that for the traditional *gondang* musician (*pargonsi*). In the Opera Batak everybody who has a talent can try to play the music ranging from the light instruments of *uning-uningan* up to instruments that belong to the *gondang* ensemble.

In Opera Batak anybody including children and women who wanted to learn to play musical instruments. Every member of the opera Batak troupe had the same opportunity to play the instruments, as long as the person was able to. The young musician will learn from the senior musicians who can teach them how to play instruments, or some talented musicians just learn by watching other musicians. Sarikawan learned *hasapi* when he was eleven and at the time, he was eighteen he had already been playing *gondang* with his father who led an opera Batak troupe.

There are few opera Batak women who are able to play musical instruments, while most musicians were males. However, during the intermission of the performance some women also could play musical instruments. For instance, Zulkaidah Harahap who was very well-known as a prominent opera Batak actress had been also acknowledged as a *sulim* (flute) player. In later generations there were a few women in opera Batak who can play *taganing* (drum chimes).

Within the circle of opera Batak life, a person who wants to become a musician will usually start as a stage crew member. While serving that task, a musician starts to learn a particular instrument orally. Sometimes they only asked to watch other senior musicians play and learned by heart. There is no formal way of teaching in the process of learning the instruments. Musicians practice during break times and borrow the instrument from his fellow musicians. A musician occasionally would have a chance to perform on the stage to replace the main musician who left the troupe for a particular reason. Another reason for a musician to be able to perform is if the *toke* (an opera Batak troupe leader) permits and asks the musician to play in the troupe. According to Marsius Sitohang, there is not any specific moment for musicians to learn musical instruments individually. However, all musicians, under direction of the group leader, will rehearse together to prepare several musical pieces for the opening concert performance and all of the musical pieces that will be performed in the means to accompany story-play.

The process of learning and mastering particular instruments in opera Batak troupes varies. Some musicians have an experience already in *gondang* tradition before they enter the opera Batak troupe. They started learning opera Batak pieces after joining the troupe. Some others learn the musical instruments and all opera Batak musical pieces and also *gondang* pieces while they are members of an opera Batak troupe.

Music is very important element of the Opera Batak theatrical performance. The music illustrates the scenes, and sometimes songs are played as part of the acting between the dialogues. However, most of the Opera Batak music was performed between chapters as extra turns. Around two hundred pieces of music have been composed since its emergence and all of these music repertoires are learned orally, without written notation and song texts. In fact, one of the most memorable aspects for the audiences of the Opera Batak until now is its music performances.

Opera Batak music originally was formed by using various traditional music genres, from instrumental vocal, ritualistic to secular into a new musical form. The music ensemble called *uning-uningan* was basically a combination of musical instruments from ritual *gondang* ensemble and various solo instruments. Vocal genres; *ende* (singing) and *andung* (lament) were also adopted.

As entertainment music genre, Opera Batak song themes are mostly about love relationship. However, many Toba Batak social experiences and problems were articulated through the Opera Batak song texts. There are several important issues that have been raised through the song lyrics which includes Batak ethnic and culture identity, the spirit of nationalism; and gender inequality.

### 3.2. Critiques on Toba Batak Gender Tradition

The involvement of women has also given inspiration to *Tilhang* and Opera Batak members to create stories and songs related to women's problems in society. Following discussion will analyze few song lyrics in the Opera Batak music that specifically relates to women and gender ideology. Songs about women, their problems, feelings and their critique of the society have been one of the crucial issues which emerge in this stage performance.

The first examples that I provide here has a theme about women who suffer because they are barren. Like most other cultures, the value of women tied to reproduction which is really important to Toba Bataks. Barren women will lose their status or their status becomes ambiguous until she has a child. Traditionally, this was the sufficient reason for a man to send his wife back to his wife's parents, or he could get another wife. The song-lyrics below titled "*Andung-Andung Ni Na So Marianakhon*" ("The Lament of The Barren Women"), pictures such a phenomenon discussed above,

*Hansit nai di ahu dainang na sai lalap mardua-dua*  
*Binereng angka dongan na magodang nunga sude be i martua*  
*Ai tung uli ma i manogu-nogu jala une muse marompa-ompa*  
*Bohama ahu no inong mangirim managam di rohangku*  
*Manang tung adong do humatop ro, Sai apusi ilu sian matangki*  
 My feeling is really hurt to realize that only two of us  
 I see all my friends are all happy  
 It is so nice when carrying their children  
 Oh mother, what is wrong with me who has been hoping  
 Is that still a chance come/happen  
 That can wipe off my tears

In Toba Batak mythology, barrenness is considered a failure or a kind of disease that has caused barren women to remain in marginal status. An example of myth that relates to this is the story of '*Boru Sibasopaet*'. The excerpt of a myth is in the following description,

There was a certain man by the name of Tuan Sorimangaraja, son of Tuan Sorba Dibanua. He had two wives, the first was called Boru Sipasopaet not yet has a child. One day a ruler wished to give a feast.



He invited everybody to be present, with the exception of the barren women. On hearing this Boru Sipasopaet began to cry and she complained to her husband, Tuan Sorimangaraja. For she would have liked so much to assist at the celebration. There upon Tuan Sorimangaraja sent for a *datu* (shaman), expert in fortune telling by means of cock-oracle, in order to ask the prince of the oracle-cock “Si Adji nangkapiring”, what should be done to put an end to Boru Sibasopaet barrenness. (See Tobing 1956:78)

The myth shows that, as it is showed up in the opera Batak song lyrics, that barrenness is a women’s problem or a misfortune that can affect her status in the society. As the myth portrays that Toba Bataks has to arrange a specific ceremony to invoke supernatural power to give blessing to a barren woman, or she cannot attend the feast; this has given the message of the ambiguity of women’s status.

The following song represents gender inequality in the Toba Bataks and shows how Tilhang criticizes his tradition where women put in subordinate to men<sup>‡</sup>. This song is often sung after the story of “Si Boru Tumbaga” is played. The story derives from a legendary woman named “*Si Boru Tumbaga*”, which has been adopted to become a story in the opera Batak play.

The story of “Si Boru Tumbaga” is about two daughters, Siboru Tumbaga and her sister Siboru Buntulan, who did not have any brothers in her family. Because of that, no man wanted to marry them. Their mother had already died and their father was old, therefore there was not any hope of having a brother for them unless the father re-married. However, when they wanted to encourage their father to re-marry with the help of witches, they found out that the fortune told the father would die sooner. After the father died their uncle (father’s brother) took over all the properties and abandoned them. This is because in Toba Batak custom properties only go to the sons, or otherwise the properties will go to the father’s brothers if there is no son in the family. After the father dies, the son (or the father’s brothers) is supposed to take care of the daughters. It is also stated by Vergouwen that if a man died “without having had sons (*na punu*), his good accrue to his closest collateral, the eldest living male descendant of his eldest brother” (1964: 271).

The examples below are two songs that were composed as part of the “*Si Boru Tumbaga*” story in the opera Batak. They are related to the women’s subordination in the Toba Batak society. One song is titled “*Pangeol Eol Mi Solu*” (“The Way you Move Oh Canoe”) with song lyrics that portray metaphorically a woman who does not have a brother.

*Pangeol eolmi solu, Ue solu na di tonga tao*  
*Molo matipul halemi solu, Mago manongnong nama ho*  
*Pangeol eolmi boru, Ue boru na so mariboto*  
*Molo mate amanta i boru, Maup tudia nama ho*

The way you are moving oh canoe, canoe in the lake  
 If your paddle is broken of canoe, you will be drifting nowhere  
 The way you are moving oh lady, Lady who has no brother  
 If your father passed away, you are going to be lost

The second song is “*Andung-andung Ni Siboru Tumbaga*” (“The Lament of Sibour Tumbaga”) as shown below:

My heart was affected, to see a friend, a woman, who was crying  
 The father collects the belongings [wealth], That would be given [as silean-lean] by his brothers  
 Then, all the sons divided the properties

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<sup>‡</sup> In the Toba Batak society, the importance of having a son is not only because the patrilineal system, but it relates to their social structure system called ‘Dalihan Natolu’ that regulates each relationship among the Toba Batak group of people. To marry a woman who does not have a brother means that the man who married that woman will not have his ‘*hula-hula*’ (one of Dalihan Natolu parties). *Hula-hula* is considered a ‘representative of God’ or in Toba Batak terms it is called ‘*Debata Na Tarida*’, which means a visible God. If people do not have their *hula-hula* it means to them that they will miss the blessing from their god which is believed to come through *hula-hula*. When their father died their father’s brother took over all the properties and abandoned them.

But the daughter did not get anything (2x)  
 When dividing their father's properties  
 Why daughters (women) are never encompassed, In taking part in the properties?  
 There is no difference between son and daughter, In defending all, with the same energy  
 I evoke to God, who takes care sons and daughters equally  
 Even more painful, there is nothing left for the daughter  
 The daughter is only able to see and works hard  
 Oh it is really painful and sad  
 [Speaking:]  
 Oh, Beautiful Batak land, why son and daughter are respected differently  
 The weakness of the ancestor's adat (custom) should be revised  
 If we want to revise it, it will become the greatness of our ancient (ethnic group)  
 What we would like to suggest, For you, all young people (generation)  
 Repair your adat (custom, customary law) to make it better  
 We could not do anything instead of being sad  
 Keep in mind this respectful work

In Toba Batak traditions according to the adat law women did not have a legal right to inherit (*uaris*) properties from their parents. However, there are still ways in which a woman inherits or receives some properties from her parents. Niessen (1984: 77-80) and Vergowen (1964) have listed ten categories of transferred property from the parents to their daughter, which are exceptional in that they are not classed as inheritance. Here are some of the categories:

1. *Dondon Tua*. Homage may be paid to an elderly person (*natua-tua*) on his deathbed and be reciprocated with blessing (*pasu-pasu*). Sometimes, depending on the wealth of the *natua-tua*, these blessings come in the form of land for the grand children: *dondon tua*. Vergowen stresses its transfer in the male line, from the grandfather to the eldest son to the eldest son... From Batak sources) it appears that it may also be given to the eldest grandchild of the eldest daughter as an "ulos-gift", the other daughter receiving textile ulos. (p. 78)
2. *Hauma Bangunan*. The "gift of affection" (Vergowen 1964: 204) is a piece of land which a young girl may receive from her father before she is married. It is a permanent gift (*sileanlean*) and may not be reclaimed. Of all the pieces of land a women may receive; her rights tend the furthest over this one. ... It may also make her attractive to suitors, especially if she is not physically attractive. (Vergowen 1964: 61)
3. *Niupahon*. There are few kinds of *niupahon*, one is called *upa mangunung* is rice land given by a father to his daughter, to induce her to marry a man to whom she does not feel attracted.
4. *Ulosulos* is a piece of land that may be given by a father to his daughter if she requests it for some reason.
5. *Pauseang* is property that may be given by parents to their daughter and her husband when they marry. ... (Vergowen 1964: 246)
6. *Punsu Tali* (the end of the rope, "left-overs, not considered as "true" inheritance.) Upon the death of an aged person (*natuatua*), property is divided up. If, after it is divided fairly amongst the male descendants, there is a small portion left over, this may be given to the boru as a *parmanomanoan*, that which they receive in remembrance of the deceased, also called *punsu tali*.
7. *Daon Sihol* (the means of alleviating distress) is a piece of land of other types of moveable property that a *boru* may request it formally from her father on his deathbed while paying him homage (*ulaon manulang*) or after her father's death, from her brothers for whom she provides a ritual meal.
8. *Parambuan* is the category of goods passed down from mother to daughter including textiles and weaving equipment. ... (Niessen 1985: 79-80)

From these categories, we can see that there are possibilities for the Toba Batak woman to receive or inherit properties from the parents however the chance depends mostly on her father's or the brother's willingness to share. Therefore, the power and authority are still in the male's hand.

According to some Toba Batak performers, the *Siboru Tumbaga* is inspired by a true story. This song also clearly questions the gender inequality among the Toba Batak as one of the important issues in society; as the textual phrase says in the song, "Why son and daughter are respected differently..." *Tilhang* and his group in this case challenged the *adat* tradition that need to be restored. It reflects a different view toward Batak *adat* if we compare it to the earlier song, such as "*Tio Do Tao Toba*," where opera Batak complements the *adat* structure that should be continued, here opera Batak performers suggested a change or fixed of Toba Batak *adat* tradition. On the one hand, opera Batak has expressed that the Toba Batak should continue their *adat* tradition, on the other hand there is also an expression through the performance that critiques Toba Batak tradition. Until now the "*Si Boru Tumbaga*" story is one of the most memorable stories for Toba Batak who has direct experience seeing the performance.

#### 4. Discussion

After analyzing the Opera Batak song lyrics that related to gender issues above, we can conclude that through Opera Batak performance the players (musicians, artists, singers), especially women artists can express their personal feelings and complaints about the way society, particularly men have treated them. Music can be used to not only express people's feelings but it also can criticize and challenge authority. As Robertson says that, "Musical performance affords us a point of entry to understanding how people achieve what they want within their own environment, how they act out their assumptions about each other, and how they challenge authority." (Robertson 1987: 223).

About women issues and gender inequality in Toba Batak culture, several issues have been raised in the Opera Batak song lyrics. One of the interesting issues is women's right to inheritance right as it is shown in the song lyrics of '*Siboru Tumbaga*'. This is a really important issue that until recently is still a relevant issue in the Toba Batak society. Another important issue raised in the Opera Batak song lyrics is the responsibility of having offspring. As a patrilineal society and *marga* system, for the Toba Batak, having offspring, especially a son is crucial. and the ambiguity of women's status in the family.

Opera Batak now is a dying art form; however, it is still performed in different forms from its original context. Nowadays, Opera Batak is especially used for the Toba Batak to assert their ethnic and cultural identity as a result of interethnic relationships. Yet its music and songs are still performed and musicians have modified it with the popular music style. When we ask men and women who have seen this Opera Batak about what is the most famous song and story that they can still remember, they oftentimes answer that '*Siboru Tumbaga*' is the most impressive to them, the story and songs about a critique of gender inequality, this is the story and song that mostly Batak present in the new context of Opera Batak performance. This limited research, even needs more study to be done, Opera Batak, I suggest has become a vessel of women's voice and the expression of their feelings that has given the power to women to critique or challenge authority.

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