KURIOS
(Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen)
Vol. 12, No. 2, August 2026 (585-595)
e-ISSN 2614-3135
p-ISSN 2615-739X
https://www.sttpb.ac.id/e-journal/index.php/kurios

Rethinking dalihan na tolu: A feminist theological critique of gender inequality

Tiarma
Sekolah Tinggi Bibelvrouw HKBP

Correspondence:
tia.siahaan@ymail.com

Article History
Submitted: January 22, 2025
Reviewed: May 2, 2026
Accepted: August, 8 2026

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.30995/kur.v12i2.1333

Copyright:
© 2026, Authors
Licensed:

Abstract: Dalihan Na Tolu (DNT), the kinship system of the Batak Toba, operates as a religiously sacralized structure, yet in practice it places women in an inferior hierarchy that the church has never subjected to theological critique. This study aims to deconstruct the patriarchal construction embedded in DNT and to offer a contextual theological reconstruction grounded in the equality of Christian Batak women. It employs a qualitative method, using a feminist hermeneutical approach and critical literary analysis, complemented by autoethnographic reflection. The study argues that DNT can deliver genuine equality if it is reinterpreted in accordance with its own foundational metaphor: three hearthstones of equal height. Drawing on the frameworks of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, it shows that the rotation among the three positions in DNT applies only to men and that DNT's ritual proverbeffectivelynsacralizeng patriarchy precisely because they are regarded as harmless. The proposed theological reconstruction rests on the doctrine of the imago Dei, Galatians 3:28, and the *ekklēsia* boru community as a theological space of restoration. Batak churches need to take a clear theological position on adat practices that contradict baptismal identity.

Keywords: Batak Toba, *Dalihan Na Tolu*, discipleship of equals, feminist theology, hermeneutics of suspicion, *imago Dei*

Introduction

One afternoon at my younger sister's wedding, my family took our *manortor*[1] before the groom's family. My father stood at the front, followed by his brothers and their wives, then three of my male cousins (*ito*) with their wives, and finally my father's sisters. Because I was unmarried and had no brothers, my father asked me to stand behind my mother. Yet as I took my place, one of my father's sisters (*namboru*) pulled me by the hand and told me that, as a *boru*, my place was in their row. As the bride's elder sister and one of the hosts—the one who had partnered with my parents in every discussion, from the preparations to the celebration itself—I could not accept this. My eyes filled with tears as my father's brothers and my cousins, who had played no part in the preparations, were placed in front of me.

[1] *Tortor* is a dance handed down within Batak Toba culture that carries deep meaning; at weddings, for example, it serves not merely as entertainment but also as a means of conveying blessings and hopes to the bridal couple and to all who are present. Susilawati Panjaitan, "Kearifan Lokal Tarian Tortor : Sebuah Kajian Teologi Harapan Dalam Tarian Tortor Pada Pesta Pernikahan Batak Toba," *Damai: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Kristen Dan Filsafat* 1, no. 4 (2024): 84-94, https://doi.org/10.61132/damai.v1i4.426.

The question that arose at that moment is the point of departure for this study: Why did I, as a woman or *boru*, have no right to stand in the front row, even though I was a full subject of that celebration? And what made my *namboru* feel entitled, even called, to place me at the back? As a Batak woman, a Christian, and a *Bibelvrouw* (female evangelist), I perceive in *Dalihan Na Tolu* (DNT) an injustice toward women, including those who, like me, are unmarried. Most troubling is that the system has drawn no critique from the church; it persists at *adat* ceremonies attended by church ministers. This is what makes the issue not merely cultural but theological.

In the Batak Toba community, DNT is the kinship system that determines each person's position. *Dalihan* means hearth, *na* means "that" or "which," and *tolu* means three: DNT is a hearth of three stones on which the Batak cook, and the balance of the pot resting on it has become a philosophy of harmonious life. Symbolically, DNT places each person in one of three positions—*dongan sabutuha* (members of the same clan), *hulahula* (the wife-giving family), and *boru* (the wife-receiving family)[2]—governed by three maxims: *somba marhulahula* (reverence toward the *hulahula*), *manat mardongan tubu* (circumspection toward fellow clan members), and *elek marboru* (gentleness toward the *boru*, or women).[3] Because the *boru* position is also assigned to the husband of a man's sister, the *amang boru*,[4] *boru* is in principle a relational rather than a gender marker. Yet the structure reaches far beyond major ceremonies into family and everyday life: Batak adults meeting for the first time will *martarombo* and *martutur*—trace their genealogies to fix their kinship relation[5]—and within the family a woman's brothers (*ito*) stand as her *hulahula*, while she remains *boru*.

The maxims already betray an asymmetry: women are positioned as the party that shows reverence, while men are charged with showing affection. DNT is thus not merely a system of relations but a system of hierarchy, and its own metaphor sharpens the problem. Three hearthstones must stand at equal distances and equal height so that the load they bear does not tilt. Are they truly of equal height in practice, or does the rhetoric of balance conceal and legitimate an unequal hierarchy?

The question is not new to Batak women, but it has rarely found room for discussion within *adat*, and the church's failure to see any inequality here lends the hierarchy a legitimacy that makes it all the harder to contest. Mangihut Siregar argues that in DNT women are inferior and men superior, women objects and men subjects, with a person's position determined by men and women reduced to complements.[6] Grecetinovitria Merliana Butar-butar, examining Batak Toba women from the standpoint of gender equality in culture and Christianity, concludes that the church must make room for women as decision-makers.[7] Magdalena Marpaung's ecolinguistic analysis of the three DNT maxims shows that

---

[2] Bustami Abubakar, ed., *Dalihan Na Tolu Pada Masyarakat Di Kota Medan* (Aceh: Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya Aceh, 2017), 15.

[3] Abubakar, 1-3.

[4] Adinda Arifiah and Iskandarsyah Siregar, "Knowledge and Perception of Dalihan Na Tolu Among Batak Settlers in Jakarta," *Journal of Gender, Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (2022): 1-10, https://doi.org/10.32996/jgcs.

[5] Mangihut Siregar, "Ketidaksetaraan Gender Dalam Dalihan Na Tolu," *Jurnal Studi Kultural* 11, no. 1 (2017): 13-15.

[6] Siregar.

[7] Grecetinovitria Merliana Butar-butar, "Eksistensi Perempuan Batak Toba Dalam Budaya Dan Agama," *Jurnal Pionir LPPM Universitas Asahan* 6, no. 2 (2020): 190-202.

syntactically the *boru* is obliged to show reverence with no room for argument, whereas men enjoy greater latitude in fulfilling their obligations.[8] Valuable as these studies are in mapping gender inequality, none systematically engages feminist theology to deconstruct the sacrality that sustains the system, nor does any offer a theological reconstruction that sides with women. This study addresses that gap.

I argue that DNT can deliver genuine equality if it is reinterpreted in accordance with its own foundational metaphor: three hearthstones of equal height. The argument draws on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who provides a feminist hermeneutical method, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who offers an African analogy for feminist critique of kinship systems sacralized by both culture and Christianity. It proceeds in three movements: exposing the patriarchal construction of DNT, examining it through feminist theology, and proposing a reconstruction for the Christian Batak community. Methodologically, the study is qualitative, combining feminist hermeneutics and critical literature analysis with autoethnographic reflection by a Batak woman who lives DNT from the inside. This autoethnographic element is warranted by Oduyoye's affirmation of women's experience as a legitimate theological source rather than a supplementary illustration[9] and by Clandinin and Connelly's insistence that experience is the starting point of social inquiry, for "experience is the stories people live."[10] The study thereby seeks to broaden contextual feminist theology in Indonesia and to provide theological resources for Batak churches.

Hearthstones of unequal height: The sacralized patriarchy of dalihan na tolu

DNT is not simply a set of rules about who sits where or who speaks first; it places Batak people in positions that feel "natural" and are therefore difficult to dispute. According to Rufer Firman Harianja and Ajat Sudrajat, it is rooted in the ancient Batak Toba belief in *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon*, the creator god who rules three realms—*banua ginjang* (the upper world), *banua tonga* (the middle world), and *banua toru* (the lower world)—and who was transformed into three persons: *Debata Batara Guru*, *Debata Soripada*, and *Debata Mangala Bulan*.[11] The social positions mirror this triad. The *hulahula* embody *Debata Batara Guru*, the source of supernatural power, life, and counsel, hence the proverb "*hulahula i do debata na tarida*" (brothers are the visible god); the *dongan sabutuha* embody *Debata Soripada*, a symbol of purity and of equality among clan members; and the *boru* embody *Debata Mangala Bulan*, the backbone of every ceremony, ready to give anything for their *hulahula*.[12] DNT is therefore no mere social convention. Its dimensions derive from a magico-religious cosmology that undergirds the entire web of Batak kinship, and that derivation is precisely what makes the structure sacred.

---

[8] Magdalena Marpaung, "Man and Woman Identity in Dalihan Na Tolu," *International Journal of Humanity Studies* 6, no. 2 (2023): 264-275, https://doi.org/10.24071/ijhs.v6i2.5519.

[9] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 5.

[10] D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), xxiii, xxvi.

[11] Rufer Firma Harianja and Ajat Sudrajat, "The Local Wisdom of Batak Toba through the Philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu in a Kinship Environment," *Budapest International Research and Critics in Linguistics and Education (BirLE) Journal* 4, no. 2 (2021): 759-765, https://doi.org/10.33258/birle.v4i2.1838.

[12] Harianja and Sudrajat.

This sacrality takes concrete form in a one-directional economy of blessing. Vergouwen notes that the *hulahula*, as *debata na tarida* for the descendants of their daughters, are those to whom the *boru* turn for blessing even in hardship.[13] Their principal role is to transfer *sahala*—spiritual power—to their *boru* through the *mangupa boru* ceremony, performed at the *boru*'s request or on the *hulahula*'s own initiative when they see their *boru* in danger. The *ulos* they give is not merely a cloth but a medium of *sahala*, and their gifts may also include livestock, a house, money, or land—though land never flows in the opposite direction.[14]

The *boru*, as recipients, owe the *hulahula* fear, reverence, and gratitude: beneficial and saving influences may flow to them from the *hulahula*'s *sahala*, but only if they avoid anything that might cause offense. The proverb "*hulahula so djadi badaan, habiaran ma tondina i*"—one must not quarrel with the brothers; their spirit is to be feared—enshrines this posture, and when angry words are exchanged, it is the *boru* who feel compelled to admit fault and offer a reconciliation meal. At major feasts the *boru* contribute generously toward the costs in the hope that blessing will flow back to them, and they do the work: the *boru* side serves the guests while its women cook in the back, so that the *boru* are even said to be synonymous with servants.[15]

The same hierarchy is danced. The *boru* dance to the *parmeme* melody ("the chewer"), which alludes to a mother chewing food for her infant, with finger gestures of helpless supplication, while the *hulahula* dance to the *sombasomba* melody with gestures that bestow blessing. In return, the *boru* give a *piso*—money, livestock, or rice—as gratitude and as support when the *hulahula* are in need. Two proverbs sum up the relationship: *tua ni na marua sitorop hulahula* (blessed is the one who has many *hulahula*) and *durung do boru, tomburan hulahula* (the *boru* are the fishing net, the *hulahula* the well). Relations among *dongan sabutuha*, by contrast, are marked by equality and solidarity, expressed in the ideal of being one in food, prosperity, honor, and shame (*sisada sipanganon*, *sisada sinamot*, *sisada hasangapon*, *sisada hailaon*). Even the *boru*'s recognized role as mediators in disputes—as *parhata siat*, the party whose words are accepted—derives from the very fear and reverence that keep them from taking sides.[16]

DNT thus presents itself as a harmony modeled on three hearthstones of equal height supporting the cooking pot, as Mangihut Siregar depicts below:[17]

For Siregar, the three positions may not be interchanged, yet this does not mean that the Batak have castes or classes, for the positions are temporary: every Batak family occupies all three in turn. No stone is more important than another; if one is uneven, the pot will fall. But if the positions are temporary and equal, why do women never fully occupy the *boru* position with authority equal to that of the other two? The answer lies in the patrilineal system that forms DNT's social body.

Batak descent is reckoned through the *marga* (clan), and the *marga* passes through men. Sons are the heirs of the clan; daughters are structurally destined to leave their natal clan for

---

[13] J. C. Vergouwen, *The Social Organisation and Customary Law of the Toba-Batak of Northern Sumatra*, 1st ed. (n.p.: Springer Science & Business Media, 1964), 55.

[14] Vergouwen, 56-70.

[15] Rut Debora Butarbutar, Raharja Milala, and Dina Datu Paunganan, "Dalihan Na Tolu Sebagai Sistem Kekerabatan Batak Toba Dan Rekonstruksinya Berdasarkan Teologi Persahabatan Kekristenan," *Jurnal Ilmu Agama Dan Kebudayaan-DARMASMRTI* 20, no. 2 (2020): 21-28.

[16] Vergouwen, *The Social Organisation,* 65.

[17] Siregar, "Ketidaksetaraan Gender Dalam Dalihan Na Tolu."

their husband's,[18] which is why women have no right to inherit from their fathers.[19] Even the terms for a married woman define her by her function for others: *paniaran* (she who carries the seed of descendants), *parsonduk bolon* (she who serves the food), *pardijabu* (she who keeps the house), *pardibagas* (she who nurtures the family), and *pardihuta* (she who stays in the village).[20] DNT therefore positions women as perpetually dependent, never as the ones who determine their own position. And because the structure is sacralized, the gender ontology it produces becomes sacred as well, so that many women, my father's sisters among them, accept and guard it—not as passive victims but as active custodians of what they regard as holy. The question, then, is how theological critique can deconstruct this sacrality without discarding the noble values it contains.

Rotation for whom? Feminist suspicion and the sacred language of patriarchy

Because DNT is sacralized—through ancestral Batak Toba belief and through a church that grants it silent legitimation—a sociological or anthropological critique alone cannot reach its core. What is required is a framework that operates at the theological level and can problematize the sacrality of inequality from within the tradition of faith. Feminist theology provides such a framework, and the work of Fiorenza and Oduyoye, read together, exposes two distinct mechanisms by which DNT sacralizes patriarchy: the claim to divine authority and the everyday language that renders that claim self-evident.

Fiorenza's point of departure in *In Memory of Her* is that no text or tradition speaks from a neutral space. Every sacred text, every formulation of *adat*, and everything that has "always been this way" is a historical product that serves, consciously or not, the interests of dominant groups; academic theology itself, she notes, "tends to serve the interest of the dominant classes in society and church." Her "hermeneutics of suspicion" therefore places every canonical tradition under critical questioning about the patriarchal context that produced it—not out of religious distrust but out of vigilance, since canonization is a historical selection that filters out certain voices and legitimates a particular order.[21] Suspicion, moreover, does not end in critique. It opens the way to a historical reconstruction that recovers the memory of women erased from the dominant narrative and restores them as full subjects of the tradition of faith.[22]

Fiorenza's concept of *kyriarchy*—from the Greek *kyrios* (lord, master), developed in *But She Said*[23] and revisited in the introduction to the tenth-anniversary edition of *In Memory of Her*—widens the analysis beyond a narrow notion of patriarchy. Domination is not simply a matter of men over women but a multilayered web of power in which masters, by virtue of sex, race, age, marital status, economic standing, or education, rule over those below them.[24] This is precisely how DNT works. The subordination of Batak women intersects with *marga*, with one's status as wife-giver or wife-receiver, with the offspring one has borne, and with marital

[18] Vergouwen, *The Social Organisation*, 17.

[19] Vergouwen, 58, 63.

[20] Butar-butar, "Eksistensi Perempuan Batak Toba Dalam Budaya Dan Agama."

[21] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 6, 56, 60.

[22] Fiorenza, 26–35.

[23] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said (Feminist Practices Biblical Interpretation)* (USA: Beacon Press, 1992).

[24] Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xviii–xix.

status. A married woman whose husband stands as *hulahula* to a clan may be more honored than an unmarried woman, yet she remains structurally beneath her husband and her brothers. Kyriarchy thus explains why some women become active guardians of *adat*, as my *namboru* did at my sister's wedding: the layered system grants them a stake in the very order that subordinates them.

Applied to DNT, suspicion raises questions long treated as taboo at *adat* ceremonies. The first concerns the origin myth: If *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon* was transformed into three persons, why are the three not equal? The proverb *hulahula i do debata na tarida* is not a poetic metaphor but a theological claim that incorporates men into divinity and places women in a relation of worship toward their brothers, unconsciously sacralizing male power with divine authority. The second concerns the promised rotation: Rotating for whom? A Batak man can be *hulahula*, *dongan sabutuha*, and *boru* in different contexts, but a woman will never be *hulahula* to her brothers or her father. The rotation that the narrative of equal hearthstones promises applies only to men; wives take part only as companions to their husbands, and unmarried women are excluded even from that.

Oduyoye's *Daughters of Anowa* supplies a contextual analogy closer to Batak life. She shows how African cultures, particularly the Akan and Yoruba traditions, sacralize patriarchy through origin myths, proverbs, lullabies, marriage rituals, and everyday speech—forms often dismissed as "just culture" that in fact function as "the source of the popular ideology that governs the people's lives."[25] The proverb *durung do boru, tomburan hulahula* works in exactly this way: it fixes a hierarchy of source and channel in which men are the wellspring and women merely the receptacle. The terms for married women—*paniaran*, *parsonduk bolon*, *pardijabu*, *pardibagas*, *pardihuta*—likewise name women only by their function for others; not one names a woman as herself. This is what Oduyoye calls the problem of naming, which women must confront by "refusing to let seemingly trivial issues—such as our naming by Madam, Mrs., or Ms.—overshadow questions of real autonomy, the naming and defining of who we are."[26]

The *manortor* I experienced can be read in the same light. When the *boru* dance to the *parmeme* with gestures of supplication while the *hulahula* dance to the *sombasomba* with gestures of blessing, what is displayed is not mere choreography but a bodily liturgy that sacralizes superior and inferior positions—a wordless pedagogy that teaches every onlooker, including young Batak girls, that the proper posture of a woman's body is to plead, to chew for others, and to serve. Oduyoye detects the same logic in the myth of how the stories that once belonged to God (*Nyankosɛm*) became *anansɛm*, the stories of the male figure Ananse, after he "bought" them from *Onyankopon*: theocentric tales became androcentric, and the women who had supplied their wisdom were written out. Her response is to reread the myth in order to recover the life-giving *Nyankosɛm* beneath the distortion.[27]

Oduyoye also clarifies why women guard the very *adat* that oppresses them. African women, she observes, have "smiled at the insensitivity of husbands and brothers, and sons, and bosses"[28]—a traditional coping device adopted not by free choice but because the system

[25] Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 14–17, 55–78.
[26] Oduyoye, 108.
[27] Oduyoye, 39.
[28] Oduyoye, 3.

leaves no room for protest, which is why her critique targets the system rather than the women. Her normative criterion follows: Does a religion or culture affirm life and bring it to fullness, or does it diminish women's lives? A sacred tradition is not automatically good; sacralization often conceals harmful practice. Yet African feminist theology does not reject culture wholesale, for culture also holds resources for liberation. Read together, Fiorenza and Oduyoye thus yield two mutually reinforcing findings: the rotation DNT promises never reaches women, because the system rests on a theological claim that divinizes men; and DNT's proverbs, dances, and forms of address are the most effective means by which patriarchy reproduces itself. Answering Oduyoye's question—Does DNT bring fullness of life to Batak women?—therefore demands more than critique. It demands reconstruction.

Restoring the hearthstones to equal height

The critique offered here is not a rejection of DNT but an effort to hold it faithful to the metaphor it proclaims. Both Fiorenza and Oduyoye deny that any tradition, textual or customary, speaks from a neutral space, and both treat women's experience as a legitimate theological source. Their convergence grounds a reconstruction that starts from the gap between DNT's metaphor and its practice: the *hulahula* occupy a more honored position than the *boru*, in stark contrast to the careful mutuality expected among *dongan sabutuha*. The reconstruction rereads DNT's cosmological foundation through the *imago Dei*, rereads the *hulahula–boru* relationship through Galatians 3:28, and reclaims Batak women's experience as a theological source.

DNT's cosmology forms a direct bridge between theology and social structure: because the brothers are the visible god, the *boru* must revere their *hulahula*. For Christian Batak women, this claim collides with Genesis 1:27, in which humankind, male and female, is created in the image of God. Oduyoye speaks of "human beings in the image of God, truly human among humans,"[29] and from this it follows that any structure diminishing the fullness of women's lives contradicts the image of God in them. If women bear the image of God, no tradition may treat them as a lesser image or separate them from the position that is rightfully theirs as members of the nuclear family.

The *imago Dei* therefore demands three theological deconstructions. First, the manifestation of divinity in three male persons is a historical-cultural construction that reflects the limited imagination of its formulators, not a limitation in God. Scripture declares that God is Spirit (John 4:24), irreducible to gender, and this Spirit breathed through women such as Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, and Junia in the early Christian community[30]—and breathes no less through Batak *boru*. Second, if the visible God is present in the Batak community, God is visible not exclusively in the bodies of the *hulahula* but in every person created in the divine image, including the women long positioned as supplicants before a pseudo-divinity institutionalized in the *hulahula*. Third, the ritual channeling of *sahala* from *hulahula* to *boru* must be reexamined: a woman who bears the image of God need not receive divinity from her brothers, for it was placed in her at creation. None of this abolishes respect for the *hulahula*. Respect is retained, but as respect between fellow bearers of God's image rather than as worship offered to God's representative.

[29] Oduyoye, 15-16.

[30] Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xliii–xliv, 170–184.

Galatians 3:28 carries this argument from creation to baptism. Fiorenza reads the verse—"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (NRSV)—as "the pre-Pauline baptismal formula" through which the early Christian missionary movement declared void the distinctions that formed the backbone of the *kyriarchal* order. The formula did not originate with Paul; it expressed the self-understanding of the communities he quoted, and as a ritual declaration it shaped their symbolic universe and transformed their social relations. This is the discipleship of equals: a community that, Fiorenza insists, is not a bygone golden age but one "already" and "not yet" realized in the struggle for emancipation.[31] Oduyoye adds that Paul himself later "contradicts his original message of freedom in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28) and reverts to a language of subordination of woman, which conformed with that of his contemporaries."[32] Christian women, then, must not leave biblical interpretation to men alone; what is authoritative for faith is not the Paul who yielded to his culture's conventions but the vision of Galatians 3:28 that he inherited from the earliest community.

For DNT, this vision has concrete consequences. Baptismal identity must be recognized as more fundamental than *adat* identity. A Christian Batak woman enters the community of faith not as a *boru* inferior to the *hulahula* but as a disciple equal to male disciples, and a tradition that returns her to an inferior position after baptism structurally negates what baptism has accomplished. The discipleship of equals also furnishes a critical norm for every *adat* rite: any rite that casts women as pleading recipients and men as dispensers of blessing must be tested against Galatians 3:28. In practice, this requires that women have a voice in *adat* deliberations in their own name rather than through their husbands—a change that would also open participation to unmarried women. Since *hulahula* and *boru* operate within the family regardless of marital status, these designations mark not only marital relations but also gender, and gender currently governs access to public speech.

"One in Christ" does not erase identity; it rejects the hierarchy built upon it. The Batak remain Batak and the *boru* remain *boru*, but *boru* should be understood as a marker of kinship—of one's position in the network of marriage alliances and as a daughter in the family—not of inferior position and function. Thus understood, the metaphor of the three hearthstones can at last become what it promises: stones of the same height, none more entitled to honor and none consigned to labor at every *adat* ceremony, for all are *imago Dei* and share alike in baptism in the name of the Triune God.

Reconstruction also requires memory. Fiorenza's historical reconstruction seeks to recover women erased from the dominant narrative, and she points to Mark 14:9: Jesus promised that the woman who anointed him would be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed, yet her name vanished while that of Judas did not. "The name of the betrayer is remembered," she writes, "but the name of the faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a woman."[33] Theological recovery thus means recovering the memory of women as disciples, apostles, and leaders: Mary Magdalene, first witness and proclaimer of the resurrection; Phoebe, *diakonos* at Cenchreae; and Junia, prominent among the apostles (Rom. 16:7).[34]

---

[31] Fiorenza, 208–209.

[32] Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 190–191.

[33] This quotation is taken from the introduction to Fiorenza's book. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xliii–xlv.

[34] Fiorenza, 332–334.

Read through such a hermeneutics of recovery, Batak memory itself holds resources for equality. In Batak Toba cosmology, *Si Boru Deang Parujar* is the female ancestral figure who fashioned the earth from a handful of soil and made it habitable[35]—the owner of the land and the mother of all creation. To remember her is not to inflame conflict but to reshape communal identity: the *boru* now sent to the kitchen and the back row are, in cosmological memory, the mother of the very ground the community walks on. Such recovery depends on the church making room for women's voices. Oduyoye's most critical contribution is her insistence that women's experience is not illustration or secondary data but a primary *locus* of theology, since "personal experiences are a valid source for understanding gender issues in the organization of human society"[36]—the methodological ground of this study's autoethnography.

From this conviction the *ekklēsia boru* takes shape: a fellowship of Christian Batak women that offers a safe space to read the Bible with suspicion toward Batak cultural tradition, to retell *adat* from the experience of the *boru*, and to formulate new practices—claiming women's right to speak in shaping *adat*, for instance, or refusing a division of labor that confines women to the kitchen at *adat* feasts. Like Fiorenza's *ekklēsia gynaikōn* (the *ekklēsia* of women), it is not a community that separates itself from church or *adat* but a hermeneutical space within them that serves as a counterweight to patriarchal culture.[37] There, women like my *namboru*, long the system's active guardians, can be invited to reread *adat* not as a betrayal of Batak culture but as fidelity to the metaphor of equal hearthstones. As Fiorenza uncovered a community of equal disciples beneath the patriarchal layers of the New Testament, the *ekklēsia boru* is called to uncover and revive an egalitarian Batak community beneath the layers of patriarchy in a DNT long regarded as sacred.

Conclusion

This study has shown that *Dalihan Na Tolu* harbors a tension between its metaphor—three hearthstones of equal height—and a practice that places the *boru* in an inferior position, religiously sacralized and legitimated by the church's silence. Read through Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion and Oduyoye's cultural hermeneutics, the promised rotation of positions proves to apply only to men, while DNT's proverbs, dances, and forms of address emerge as the most effective means by which patriarchy reproduces itself. A theological reconstruction grounded in the *imago Dei*, Galatians 3:28, and the *ekklēsia boru* shows that equality within DNT is possible without rejecting Batak cultural identity, for it is precisely such equality that keeps faith with DNT's own metaphor. Batak churches are therefore called to stop granting silent legitimation to *adat* structures that contradict baptismal identity and to become a theological space in which DNT is reinterpreted as an expression of twofold fidelity—to Batak culture and to the gospel of Christ. Future research could examine empirically how Batak women respond to the *ekklēsia boru* as a hermeneutical space within *adat* communities and the church.

---

[35] Roy Charly H. P. Sipahutar, Rinto Tampubolon, and Andar Gunawan Pasaribu, "Ekofeminisme Batak Toba: Pembacaan Lintas Tekstual Kejadian 1 Dan Kosmologi Si Boru Deang Parujar," *Kurios* 9, no. 3 (2023): 715-729.

[36] Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 9, 188–190.

[37] Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 343–351.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced this article.

Credit authorship contribution

The author affirms having contributed to the development and completion of the manuscript, including the initial conceptualisation, formulation of the main ideas, critical analysis, expansion of the discussion, and revision and refinement of the manuscript for final submission.

AI disclosure

The author acknowledges the use of artificial intelligence tools to support preliminary idea development and identify relevant references. All AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed and carefully evaluated, and the author retains full responsibility for the accuracy, academic integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Sekolah Tinggi Bibelvrouw HKBP Research Ethics Committee (No: 04/EC/UPPM-STB HKBP/VIII/2026).

Funding information

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

Bibilography

Abubakar, Bustami, ed. *Dalihan Na Tolu pada Masyarakat di Kota Medan. Aceh: Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya Aceh*, 2017.

Arifiah, Adinda, and Iskandarsyah Siregar. "Knowledge and Perception of Dalihan Na Tolu Among Batak Settlers in Jakarta." *Journal of Gender, Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (2022): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.32996/jgcs.

Butarbutar, Rut Debora, Raharja Milala, and Dina Datu Paunganan. "Dalihan Na Tolu sebagai Sistem Kekerabatan Batak Toba dan Rekonstruksinya Berdasarkan Teologi Persahabatan Kekristenan." *Jurnal Ilmu Agama dan Kebudayaan-DARMASMRTI* 20, no. 2 (2020): 21–28.

Butar-butar, Grecetinovitria Merliana. "Eksistensi Perempuan Batak Toba dalam Budaya dan Agama." *Jurnal Pionir LPPM Universitas Asahan* 6, no. 2 (2020): 190–202.

Clandinin, D. Jean, and F. Michael Connelly. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation.* USA: Beacon Press, 1992.

———. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994.

Harianja, Rufer Firma, and Ajat Sudrajat. "The Local Wisdom of Batak Toba through the Philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu in a Kinship Environment." *Budapest International Research and Critics in Linguistics and Education (BirLE) Journal* 4, no. 2 (2021): 759–765. https://doi.org/10.33258/birle.v4i2.1838.

Marpaung, Magdalena. "Man and Woman Identity in Dalihan Na Tolu." *International Journal of Humanity Studies* 6, no. 2 (2023): 264–275. https://doi.org/10.24071/ijhs.v6i2.5519.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. 2nd ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Panjaitan, Susilawati. "Kearifan Lokal Tarian Tortor: Sebuah Kajian Teologi Harapan dalam Tarian Tortor pada Pesta Pernikahan Batak Toba." *Damai: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Kristen dan Filsafat* 1, no. 4 (2024): 84–94. https://doi.org/10.61132/damai.v1i4.426.

Sipahutar, Roy Charly H. P., Rinto Tampubolon, and Andar Gunawan Pasaribu. "Ekofeminisme Batak Toba: Pembacaan Lintas Tekstual Kejadian 1 dan Kosmologi Si Boru Deang Parujar." *Kurios* 9, no. 3 (2023): 715–729.

Siregar, Mangihut. "Ketidaksetaraan Gender dalam Dalihan Na Tolu." *Jurnal Studi Kultural* 11, no. 1 (2017): 13–15.

Vergouwen, J. C. *The Social Organisation and Customary Law of the Toba-Batak of Northern Sumatra*. 1st ed. N.p.: Springer Science & Business Media, 1964