

Batak

The 6 million or so Bataks (Indonesia Census, 2000) belong to one of about seven ethnic groups (Alas-Kluet, Angkola, Dairi, Karo, Mandailing, Simalungun and Toba) inhabiting the interior of Sumatera Utara Province south of Aceh. Their languages are within their own branch of Sumatran languages, part of the Austronesian family, and most of them live in the highlands, especially around Lake Toba, to the west of Medan. Mainly Christians (though a small percentage are Muslim), the Batak are organized along patriarchal group lines known as *marga*. This group owns land and does not permit marriage within it. The *marga* has proved to be a flexible social unit. Batak who resettle in urban areas, such as Medan and Jakarta, draw on *marga* affiliations for financial support and political alliances, reinforcing their ethnic identity.

Historical context

Indigenous minorities who have long inhabited the highlands of north-central Sumatra, the Bataks have lived in relative geographic isolation throughout much of history, though there are historical references to them going back to the thirteenth century. Their fighting traditions, and their reputation as cannibals, probably also helped to reinforce their relative isolation.

This began to change in earnest at the start of the nineteenth century when the Bataks and the neighbouring Minangkabau minority – already Islamized – were involved in a series of conflicts. Some Bataks, such as the Mandailing, Angkola and Karo, began to convert, often then calling themselves Malay. The Dutch themselves were relatively late arrivals here, with the first Dutch missionaries only being sent from 1850, and the Bataks themselves only being completely subdued after what is sometimes referred to as the Batak war of 1872–94. Still, some Bataks, particularly those further north such as the Toba, became Christianized during the Dutch colonial period, and were particularly amenable to – and benefited from – early missionary schools. It is thought that these schools and the relatively high level of education of Bataks such as the Toba, explain why many of them were able to fill positions such as teachers and government officials after the Dutch colonial period.

Current issues

The Bataks were less affected by the central government's *transmigrasi* programme than were their northerly neighbours the Acehnese. Partially because of this, and the absence of the same valuable oil and gas resources, the Bataks have not been losing their traditional land or resources to the same degree as the Acehnese or Papuans. They have also been more successful – in part because of their relatively high levels of education and the small percentage of Javanese settled in their province – in occupying many of the jobs in the higher employment categories such as teaching, civil service positions and professionals.

Nevertheless, government policies continue to exclude the use of Batak languages in many areas of public life, such as in local administration, and schooling in their languages remains limited.

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