

Preserving the Ancestral Heritage as a Diaconal Role of the Church Against Land Exploitation in Toba Land



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the church's role in preserving ancestral heritage and cultural identity in the Toba Lake region, amid increasing resource exploitation and economic pressures. Many Batak communities are being pressured to relinquish their land, resulting in the erosion of their livelihoods and traditional values. This article aims to articulate a theological and pastoral framework for church involvement in land justice and cultural preservation. Using a qualitative method grounded in contextual theological reflection and socio-cultural analysis, the research draws from biblical principles, particularly the theology of land, stewardship, and Imago Dei. Intersecting them with Batak Toba customs. The findings suggest that churches can serve as prophetic mediators by fostering partnerships among communities, governments, and investors, and by strengthening vulnerable communities through holistic diakonia. This includes education, advocacy, and economic empowerment. Theologically grounded and culturally rooted, this approach empowers churches to be agents of justice, dignity, and sustainable development.

Article History

Received 2025-05-08

Accepted 2025-06-19

Published 2025-06-20

Keywords

Diaconal Role of the Church
Ancestral Heritage
Land Exploitation
Toba Land

How to cite this article:

Butar-Butar, M. C. P. and Sinaga, L. (2025) 'Preserving the Ancestral Heritage: As a Diaconal Role of the Church Against Land Exploitation in Toba Land', *ARUMBAE: Jurnal Ilmiah Teologi dan Studi Agama*, 7(1), pp. 14–24. doi: 10.37429/arumbae.v7i1.1552.



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Introduction

The ongoing exploitation of land in the Lake Toba region is a cause of concern given the significant demand for tourism and mining activities. The process of land conversion is usually carried out without due consideration of potential environmental and social impacts. As a result, the ecosystem around Lake Toba has been adversely affected, leading to a decline in biodiversity and a deterioration in soil quality. This dilemma not only manifests at a local level but also reflects significant challenges in managing natural resources in Indonesia. Should this damage escalate, it is likely to have a negative impact on the quality of life of those affected. It is of utmost importance to take immediate measures to protect the soil to prevent more serious consequences. In addition, the phenomenon of local and global migration, which is moving unhindered into areas considered promising for economic improvement, brings its challenges for local communities in terms of land tenure and tribal authenticity (Sinaga, 2023). This environmental and economic tension surrounding land use underscores the need to examine how local communities define and relate to territory beyond physical boundaries.

For the Batak people, territory holds vital significance, as it not only constitutes their livelihood but also embodies spiritual dimensions (Sihombing, 2023). This study examines the

significance of using identity symbols in representing the cultural and historical legacies of previous generations. The phenomenon of population displacement entails a break in the continuity of cultural practices and traditions passed down through the generations. This process implies the interruption of the connection with the cultural legacy, resulting in a loss of identity and continuity of cultural heritage. The defense of traditional territory is not only an economic challenge, but also a cultural and symbolic one, as it is inextricably linked to the preservation of the dignity and pride of the Batak community. As previous research has shown, there is a positive correlation between the association of cultural values and the protection of physical environments. The land serves as a significant foundation for preserving cultural continuity.

However, Batak communities often face significant challenges in defending their customary lands. Economic pressures and government policies that favour industry have contributed to the weakening position of local communities, as exemplified by the recent revision of the Mineral and Coal Law (Minerba) by the Indonesian Parliament on 18 February 2025. Considering that this law was passed only to comply with the Constitutional Court's decision and seems sudden, the Minerba Law certainly weakens the position of local communities in determining their stance on the presence of mining (Girsang, 2025). This law also appears to offer a significant opportunity for miners to obtain easy licenses without having to consider the ecological impact (Marpomari Mahulaa, 2019). Many communities lack the knowledge and resources to effectively counter land use. Frequently, these communities are marginalized and see their land rights compromised due to unequal negotiation processes. If customary land continues to be expropriated, Batak communities will see a significant part of their existence compromised. This situation makes the protection of customary lands even more urgent.

In this context, the church assumes a prominent role as community support. Churches can play a crucial role in raising public awareness about the protection of customary land. Furthermore, churches can act as intermediaries between communities, governments, and businesses to promote solutions that ensure equity (Kamarullah, 2005). The promotion of dialogue by churches is instrumental in containing conflicts and building a social fabric based on trust. Churches can also play an educational role in fostering their congregations' understanding of land rights. Active involvement of churches is necessary to help communities preserve their inherited land.

The church may also manage training and advocacy programs to empower communities. With the provision of legal information and advocacy strategies, churches actively contribute to the safeguarding of community rights. Diakonia programs focused on customary land conservation may provide practical and moral sustainability. It also enables churches to collaborate with environmental organizations to strengthen the community's position. This support aims to contribute to the empowerment of Batak communities in their efforts to oppose the exploitation of natural resources. By this approach, the rights and identity of the community are preserved, while also ensuring the protection of the environment.

Preserving customary land is a shared responsibility, not merely of the Batak community. The preservation of customary land could help maintain the continuity of culture and identity that has existed for a long time. Building on these general considerations, the church, as an institution with broad influence, could consider actively promoting social justice and the rights of indigenous peoples. Selectively protecting indigenous lands could also contribute to the protection of divine creation and environmental sustainability. Through collaboration, we can collectively help preserve our environment and secure the rights of communities. A review of previous research, such as the work by Andrew J. Semotiuk (Semotiuk et al., 2022), indicates that although extensive studies exist on cultural conservation, environmental stewardship, and economic development, very few have critically examined the church's mediatory role in these domains. This gap underscores the novelty of our approach, which uniquely integrates

theological insights with practical strategies for indigenous land stewardship. Such a concerted effort could ensure that indigenous lands remain sustainable for future generations.

Research Method

This research employs a literature review method informed by a biblical approach and a diaconal theology perspective to analyze the church's role in resisting land exploitation in the Lake Toba region. Therefore, the author collected and analyzed a wide range of relevant literature sources, including biblical texts, theological literature, and studies on the land rights and cultural identity of the Batak people. In this regard, the author focused on the theological principles that link land ownership to moral and social responsibility, a topic of great interest. On top of that, the author proactively engaged directly with the Batak community of Toba residing in the affected neighborhoods. Besides, there had been informal dialogues with the directly impacted people.

This approach enables writers to gain firsthand insight into the challenges facing society, as well as the church's role in protecting their rights. Through a combination of literature analysis and interaction with society, this study aims to provide a comprehensive picture of how the church can contribute to the preservation of ancestral heritage and the fight against injustice, in the hope that its findings can serve as a reference for more inclusive and sustainable policies and programs in the future.

Results and Discussion

The Land as the Cultural and Spiritual Identity of the Batak People

Land is more than a place to live or a source of sustenance for the Batak. The Batak people hold the spiritual and cultural significance of land in high regard, and this study focuses on the Toba Batak, whose cultural narratives are deeply intertwined with their ancestral lands. Filled with cultural and spiritual values, the land has meaning as an inheritance from their ancestors. Indeed, many Batak view land as both an ancestral legacy and a sacred gift from God — a dual perception that reinforces ethical stewardship and underscores the urgency of preserving it as a source of spiritual sustenance and cultural continuity. The stories and history that have shaped their identity as Batak people are embedded in every piece of land (Siregar, Sihombing, and Hutabarat, 2023). Honoring the ancestors and carrying on existing traditions meant caring for and preserving the land. Many important traditional activities and ceremonies take place there. Therefore, the loss of land is the loss of a part of their identity and cultural heritage. In the tradition of the Batak people, land plays an important role in determining the rights and responsibilities of the family. Land has also come to symbolize social status and strength within the community. This heritage land is used for various traditional ceremonies, including weddings and funerals. These ceremonies serve as a means of strengthening family ties and perpetuating traditions across generations. Land is their way of staying connected to history and their cultural heritage. The land has served as a reminder of the need to preserve and respect the heritage of their ancestors. Moreover, the rich lived experiences of communities directly affected by environmental degradation have been incorporated as cultural data to deepen the analysis of these spiritual and identity-bound dimensions.

The Batak people face a significant threat in the form of land appropriation for economic purposes. The loss of territory is accompanied by a diminution of their connection to history and culture. It has been observed to result in the deterioration of customs, the demise of linguistic varieties, and the erosion of traditional values. This phenomenon poses a significant challenge, as it potentially results in the younger generation growing up without a solid understanding of their cultural roots. This situation compromises the cultural and social identity

of the Batak people. Consequently, the preservation of customary land is a means of safeguarding their identity and traditions (Deogam, 2020).

The Batak people must persist in their efforts to defend their traditional lands. The dissemination of cultural and spiritual values to the younger generation is of paramount importance. Education and active involvement are therefore seen as pivotal in ensuring the safeguarding of these rights. Additionally, the protection of this land requires the provision of support from the government and various other parties. Awareness to protect the land will help preserve Batak traditions and culture. This approach ensures the preservation of ancestral heritage, thus preventing it from being consigned to oblivion.

Land is important to the Batak people. The preservation of the land is intrinsically linked to the safeguarding of their identity, traditions, and dignity as Batak people. It is incumbent upon all parties concerned to collaborate to ensure the protection of the land from any potential harmful exploitation. It would be prudent for churches, communities, and governments to offer their support to the Batak people's struggle. It is crucial to recognize the significance of this heritage land as a symbol of history and life for future generations.

Factors Causing the Loss of Customary Land of the Batak

Economic Factors

A significant number of Batak communities are compelled to divest themselves of their land assets because of considerable economic pressures. The financial constraints experienced by the subjects of this study have resulted in a limited range of options available to them for fulfilling their daily needs. In such circumstances, land that should be considered a valuable inheritance is often sold for a quick profit. This has been pursued by several large companies seeking to exploit Toba's natural resources, a notable example being PT. TPL (Toba Pulp Lestari, formerly known as Indorayon) and the case concerning the residents of Nagasaribu village in Lintong Ni Huta regency (Simanjuntak, 2024). This decision will only provide a temporary resolution to the issue at hand; however, it will have detrimental long-term consequences. The sale of land has the potential to endanger the sustainability of their livelihoods and to compromise the cultural identity that has been handed down to them by their ancestors (Ngelow, 2022).

Literacy Issues

Lack of understanding of the strategic value of land also exacerbates this situation. It is essential to recognize that land is a valuable asset that can be passed down to future generations. For example, in Sidikalang town, Dairi Regency, local communities sold their land to Dairi Prima Mineral, a mining company in Dairi Regency, North Sumatra. Part of its concession is located in a protected forest area of approximately 18,170 hectares out of a total concession area of 22,030 hectares, and it will enjoy various luxuries. They have expensive cars and other tertiary goods, but they do not consider the potential impact on Dairi's land. This lack of awareness makes them vulnerable to the influence of investors or outsiders who want to acquire the land for their financial gain. This often leads to communities being trapped in unfavorable and detrimental agreements. A better understanding of the process will enable them to defend their rights and make more informed decisions regarding inherited land.

Accelerating the Development of the Lake Toba Region

Tourism development in Lake Toba is also putting pressure on land ownership. The government is committed to making this area a premier tourist destination to stimulate the economy. However, in doing so, the rights of local communities are often overlooked. It is unacceptable that many tourism projects acquire land without providing adequate

compensation. This is especially true in the Toba region, particularly in the Porsea sub-district of Toba Regency (Aruan, 2024). This makes Batak communities even more vulnerable to losing their land, adding to their already difficult lives. Investment from outsiders is tempting, but the reality is that it does not always favor local communities (Imamulhadi and Kurniati, 2019). Investors promise prosperity and economic progress, but the benefits largely accrue to large companies. Local communities receive little or no benefit and are increasingly marginalized. This dissatisfaction inevitably leads to conflicts between residents and those who are supposed to help them. If not addressed wisely, this condition will continue to harm Batak communities and damage their social relations.

The Impact of Land Exploitation on Communities

Social Marginalization

Social marginalization is a serious problem for local communities in the Lake Toba region. This is especially due to the loss of their ancestral lands and living spaces. When land that has been managed for centuries changes hands to an outsider, communities lose not only economic assets but also the right to access, causing community fragmentation and threatening established social structures, which in turn creates a sense of loss of identity, pride, and dignity. (Primawardani, 2017). The psychological impact of this situation is clear: it creates uncertainty and despair among individuals. Communities need to unite and fight for their rights, supported by social institutions and churches in advocacy efforts. Raising awareness of the value of land as an ancestral heritage is the key to communities building solidarity and collective strength to ensure the sustainability of their identity and lives amidst the challenges.

Cultural rift

The Batak community is experiencing a clear cultural rift, with land-based customary and kinship ties disintegrating. Land is an economic resource and the foundation for centuries of social and cultural relationships (Awange and Kiema, 2019). When communities lose access to their ancestral lands, they also lose a place to practice the traditions, rituals, and social interactions that bind the community together. This loss will erode the sense of community and solidarity that was previously built through collective activities on the same land. This has led to the endangerment of many cultural values, and there is a real risk that future generations will lose touch with their heritage. In the face of this cultural rift, communities must find ways to reinforce customary and kinship ties and preserve threatened traditions. This is the only way to maintain their identity as Batak people.

Environmental Damage

Environmental damage resulting from land conversion in the Lake Toba region has become a serious problem, impacting both the ecosystem and the lives of local people. Land conversion for tourism or mining leads to a loss of biodiversity and disrupts the ecological balance (Jones, 2022). Deforestation not only removes natural habitats for flora and fauna but also contributes to climate change and soil degradation. It also affects the lives of local communities that depend on natural resources. Reduced access to resources such as clean water and non-timber forest products threatens communities' food security and economic well-being. In the face of these challenges, it is imperative to implement sustainable land management practices that allow the environment and people's livelihoods to be maintained in harmony.

Resisting Land Exploitation in the Biblical Context

The Story of Naboth and the Vineyard (1 Kings 21)

The narrative of Naboth and his vineyard, as depicted in 1 Kings 21, serves as a paradigmatic illustration of the concept of land as a defining element of identity within the biblical context. In this narrative, Naboth declines the offer by King Ahab to sell his vineyard, which represents his ancestral heritage. For Naboth, land was not merely an economic asset; it symbolized his connection with his ancestors and his identity as part of God's people (Dase, 2019). Naboth's refusal is indicative of profound values concerning land rights as an inheritance that ought to be safeguarded and protected. Moreover, the narrative underscores the prevalence of injustice and oppression in land-related conflicts. When Naboth refused to sell his vineyard, Ahab's wife, Jezebel, plotted his death so that she could take the vineyard for herself. This act illustrates how the pursuit of power and avarice can supersede justice, leading to the erosion of individual rights and the violation of moral values that ought to be upheld. The repercussions of these actions are evident in the punishment of Ahab and Jezebel, serving as a testament to the belief that God is omnipresent and will safeguard the rights of the oppressed.

This narrative also serves to illustrate the parallels that can be drawn between Jewish culture and Batak culture. While acknowledging these similarities, it is important to recognize that each tradition is founded on its own distinct cultural, historical, and spiritual roots. In this paper, rather than conflating the two, the aim is to reaffirm the unique identity of the Batak through a respectful, dialogical approach to theological enrichment—a model inspired by Stephen Bevans' *Models of Contextual Theology*. The notion of land as a symbol of hereditary identity must be approached with the utmost seriousness. Individuals from both cultural groups demonstrate a strong commitment to defending their customary lands, a practice underpinned by a profound sense of preserving the essence of their *Bona Pasogit* (hometown).

The Principle of True Ownership and Human Dignity

The Lord owns the earth and everything in it. This is the message of Psalm 24:1. Everything in this world belongs to God. This principle emphasizes that as creatures, we are stewards of the resources He has given us. We must care for them wisely. It is vital to understand that land and the environment do not just belong to individuals or groups. They represent a divine mandate that must be respected and preserved. The concept of *Imago Dei* in Genesis 1:26-28 is clear: humans are created in the image of God, which gives dignity and inherent rights to each individual (Keke Teguh Manik *et al.*, 2022). Everyone has the right to live with dignity, which includes access to the resources needed for survival. We must respect and protect the rights of all human beings. This is especially important for those who are marginalized or oppressed.

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

And to walk humbly with your God.”

As indicated by the quotation from Micah 6:8, which is also cited in the book of Genesis, the call for the church to act justly, love, and defend the oppressed is unambiguous. This action is a manifestation of a living faith, whereby the church not only bears witness to God's truth but also plays an active role in the fight for social justice. In the face of the various issues currently being experienced, including those relating to the exploitation of land and the oppression of local communities, the church is called to take a position in favor of the weak, to ensure that their rights are respected and protected (Aritonang, 2017).

The church, by comprehending the principle of true ownership, human dignity, and the demand for justice, can contribute to positive social change. The act of giving is associated with

the cultivation of a relationship characterized by care and consideration towards not only one's immediate neighbor, but also the natural world. Responsible stewardship of land and natural resources is incumbent upon us as custodians of God's creation, with the overarching objective of creating a more equitable and sustainable world for all.

The Diaconal Role of the Church in Countering Land Exploitation in the Toba Region

Education and Awareness

Educating people about the intrinsic value of land as an ancestral heritage means providing a theological and cultural understanding of the importance of protecting the land. In a theological context, land is seen as God's creation that must be managed responsibly. The Bible teaches that everything on earth belongs to God, and we as God's stewards must care for it (Sipahutar, 2020). Churches and communities must organize seminars, workshops, and sermons on the value of land as ancestral heritage. The HKBP church has already taken action to care for Toba by holding joint prayer events in Lumbanjulu village, Porsea, and in Tarutung, North Tapanuli. The event, titled 'Peduli Tano Batak', raised several crucial themes, one of which was an eco-theological call regarding the increasingly rampant destruction of nature. It engaged competent resource persons to discuss issues related to land management and its impact on people's lives. Sermons on land stewardship can link to biblical teachings on our responsibility towards creation. This enables congregants to understand and be inspired to take action. All church ministers must ensure that their sermons are appropriate to the local context. This is vital so that the congregation can feel the urgency of caring for the land of their neighborhood (Noordegraaf, 2004).

Interactive seminars and workshops are crucial for imparting practical skills in sustainable land management and fostering an understanding of land rights. These are vital for building a more aware and empowered community that can face challenges head-on. This collective effort will foster a theological and cultural understanding of the importance of caring for the land within communities. It will ensure that this ancestral heritage is preserved and valued, while maintaining environmental balance and rich cultural identity.

Economic Assistance

Developing a local wisdom-based creative economy is a strategic step to improve community welfare while preserving existing cultures and traditions. Local wisdom, such as handicrafts, arts, and traditional food products, should be leveraged to create value-added products that are appealing in the market. This will increase income and strengthen cultural identity. It is vital to create economic resilience by empowering communities through micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) that do not rely on land sales for their operations. The church has directly applied the principle of transformative diakonia, which empowers communities and congregations affected by exploitation and fraud over their land rights (Widyatmadja, 2010). By providing training, access to capital, and marketing support, communities can develop self-sustaining and sustainable enterprises. These MSMEs provide alternative income opportunities and foster social networks and collaboration among community members. This approach empowers communities to enhance their well-being without compromising their ancestral heritage on their land. At the same time, they contribute actively to environmental conservation and the preservation of local culture.

Advocacy and Legal

Assisting communities in asserting their land rights through legal channels is a crucial step in safeguarding their interests in often unfavorable circumstances. By providing access to legal aid and education on land rights, communities can better understand their position and strengthen their arguments in defense of their ancestral lands. Furthermore, the role of the mediator is of paramount importance in facilitating constructive dialogue between communities, the government, and investors (Rusmarsidik, 2023). As mediators, we can facilitate effective communication and ensure that community voices are heard in the decision-making process. By facilitating open and transparent discussions, all parties can work together to reach fair and sustainable solutions, thereby protecting community rights without compromising the potential for beneficial development.

Pastoral Care

Spiritual and emotional strengthening is essential for communities under stress from land exploitation, as it helps them cope with the challenges they face. Spiritual support is vital in difficult situations. It provides hope and reassurance, reminding people of their faith values, which can be a source of strength. Communities can find ways to cope with the sense of loss and uncertainty they experience through activities such as communal prayer, counselling, and teaching about faith resilience (Wiriyasaputra, 2017). Emotional strengthening through community support is vital. Discussion groups and mentoring programs enable individuals to share their experiences and support one another, fostering a strong sense of solidarity. This reinforcement helps individuals cope with stress and strengthens social bonds within the community. It enables them to fight together to defend their rights and preserve the land as an ancestral heritage.

Strategy for Equitable Regional Development in Toba

Local communities must be involved as key stakeholders in the development of development policies. This guarantees that their needs and aspirations are accommodated. By involving communities in every stage of planning and implementation, they can provide valuable inputs that reflect local realities and cultural values. Encouraging environmentally friendly development should be a key focus. The Batak community's motto, *Marsipature Huta Na Be*, reminds us of the importance of maintaining the ecosystem that supports people's lives (Saragih, 2022). Development that maintains Batak cultural identity is vital for preserving traditions and heritage, as well as strengthening a sense of community pride. Community welfare is a priority in any development program. This is a crucial step to creating a sustainable, positive impact. Development policies must be inclusive and sustainable. Only then can they deliver tangible benefits to local communities while improving their quality of life. These policies must never compromise the environment or culture.

Conclusion

Local communities must be involved as key stakeholders in the development of development policies. This guarantees that their needs and aspirations are accommodated. By involving communities in every stage of planning and implementation, they can provide valuable inputs that reflect local realities and cultural values. Focus should be on encouraging environmentally friendly development. The Batak community's motto, *Marsipature Huta Na Be*, reminds us of the importance of maintaining the ecosystem that supports people's lives. Preserving Batak cultural identity is vital for maintaining traditions and heritage, as well as strengthening a sense of community pride. Community welfare is always a priority in any development program. This is a crucial step in creating a sustainable, positive impact.

Development policies must be inclusive and sustainable. Only then can they deliver tangible benefits to local communities while improving their quality of life. Under no circumstances can these policies compromise the environment or culture.

Acknowledgment

We would like to express our appreciation to the Deaconess School of HKBP for organizing the ministry practice, which provided the author with greater insight into the multifaceted impacts of mining on the lives of people living in the vicinity of Toba.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : MCPBB: Research Idea, analyzing data, writing an article.
Corresponding author.
LS: Writing and editing an article
- Funding statement** : None of the authors has received any funding or grants from any institution or funding body for the research.
- Conflict of interest** : The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
- Additional information** : No additional information is available for this paper.

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