

BATAK DANCES:
NOTES BY CLAIRE HOLT

Preface

In 1938 Claire Holt, Rolf de Maré, and Hans Evert travelled through Sumatra in order to film and photograph dances for the Archives Internationales de la Danse.* They recorded dances in West Sumatra and Nias, but the material collected among the Batak of North Sumatra forms the largest part of their work. They arranged to see and photograph dances in Toba Batak villages on the south shore of Lake Toba and on Samosir Island, and in towns and villages of the Simelungun, Karo, and Pak-Pak Batak. Mrs. Holt took over one hundred and fifty photographs of Batak dances but published only a few of them during the following thirty years. She had planned to use them along with the photos taken by Evert and de Maré in a book about Sumatran dance, but other projects and responsibilities intervened. I have selected some of Mrs. Holt's photographs and have also abstracted from and edited Mrs. Holt's notes relevant to these pictures. Photographs were included because they show gestures or choreographic arrangements clearly, or because they showed dances or ceremonies not illustrated elsewhere. Unhappily and unavoidably too many beautiful and interesting ones have had to be excluded.

Most of the Toba and some of the Karo and Simelungun dances which Mrs. Holt and de Maré recorded had been parts of lengthy traditional rites and were performed for them out of context. Although by 1938 the Christian missions had converted villagers (and indeed whole villages) in the Lake Toba shore and Samosir areas, some villagers remained faithful to the old Batak religion and performed the associated ceremonies. Moreover, conversion and western education had not erased the Christian and Islamic Batak' ties to their *marga* (clan)--ties which required ceremonies that often included dancing. Traditional dance continues to be part of weddings, funerals, and the reburial of ancestral bones. The de Maré team therefore was able to see some dances that remained fresh and alive in Batak life. Other dances were revived for them by performers who remembered the forms but for whom the religious content was either already lost or an ambiguous shadow of a former commitment.

A striking vestige of the *parbegu* (spirits) religion was the presence of the *datu* or priest-healer in Christian and Islamic villages. In two Toba villages Mrs. Holt visited, the *datu* was a prominent performer, dancing alone while making offerings to the

* De Maré was the founder and director of the Archives Internationales de la Danse in Paris. See "Dances of Sumatra and Nias: Notes by Claire Holt," *Indonesia*, No. 11 (Spring 1971), for a discussion of de Maré, the Archives, and the "dance-quest" they sponsored; and for extracts from Mrs. Holt's Nias field notes.

village guardian spirits and leading other villagers in dances that celebrated consanguinal and affinal ties. Mrs. Holt and de Maré responded to the Toba datu's performances with connoisseurs' appreciation for their expressiveness and skill, but it was not until they arrived among the Simelungun Batak that they recognized dancers who had consciously cultivated expressive possibilities. The Toba Batak dancers--datu as well as others--had the bearing if not always the convictions of self-effacing celebrants focussed on a sacred rather than aesthetic goal. The Simelungun datu seemed to be intent upon perfecting their performances in order to impress and entertain their audiences. Even among the Simelungun, however, it was not possible to draw a hard and fast line between secular and sacred. The Simelungun datu at Pematang Raja seemed more a self-conscious artist than his Toba colleague, but he was as conscientious about the ritual details of his performance. The funerary mask plays were elaborate and approached the theatrical among the four Batak sub-*suku*, although the Simelungun *huda-huda* performed for them at Pematang Raja was the most complex. But these and other dances associated with death rites, whether those of the Toba, the Pak-Pak, the Karo or the Simelungun Batak, impressed Mrs. Holt and de Maré with their "other-worldliness." The funerary dances and mask plays they saw remained, if somewhat waveringly, more rite than theater.

The dances chosen to be illustrated here remain in form and feeling part of dedicatory religious ceremonies. Mrs. Holt, however, also photographed dances in Simelungun and Karo villages that were presumably influenced or even originated from outside the context of traditional Batak religion and society. Content was clearly secular and the style seemed to owe much to the tastes of the aristocratic Simelungun and Karo courts and ultimately to Javanese and coastal Malay traditions. Some of these dances may have been fairly recent inventions and, in at least one case, they may have been newly created by the performer himself. Others may have had a much longer history, related to the growth of the kingdoms and their contacts with Islamic Malay communities. In Pematang Raja, Mrs. Holt also saw "just for fun" dances that owed most to the westernized school system and a "physical education" concern. These dances clearly had roots in Batak soil but were developing in a secular, even supra-*suku* direction. They can be thought of as ancestors of the popular Indonesian social dances of the post-Revolutionary period.

Arlene Lev



When lineage groups gather in order to invoke a common ancestor, they are called *sagondang*, "a drum community," for Batak believe that ancestral souls can be summoned only by the beats of the drum. "Gondang" is the largest drum of the Batak orchestra, but the orchestral ensemble is also called gondang. In addition to one large drum, the Toba Batak orchestra usually includes five smaller drums often with cover tops carved in the shape of stylized faces (*taganing*), a clarinet-like instrument (*sarune*), two or three hanging or held gongs (*ogung*, *hesek*), cymbal-like instruments, and occasionally a lute-like *hasapi*.

The datu, like the gondang, is essential to lineage ceremonies. At Huta Siampipira on Samosir Island and at Huta Sibalahotang near Baligé, datu directed and participated in all the dances performed for us. When they danced alone, their performances were focussed on a *tunggal panaluan* or magic staff. At Sibalahotang, two staffs were stuck into the ground side by side. The datu backed away from them and at a distance of some twenty feet performed a series of salutations, raising his hands, palm pressed to palm, to his forehead (*somba*). He addressed the staffs using broad gestures which suggested both command and entreaty. Saluting them again and again, he gradually approached taking small treading steps, his knees just barely flexed. He stopped very close to the shorter staff and spoke again. He turned his back to it and, with his right hand, grasped it from behind. Slowly, he moved off bringing the staff forward until he held it in front of him with both hands.

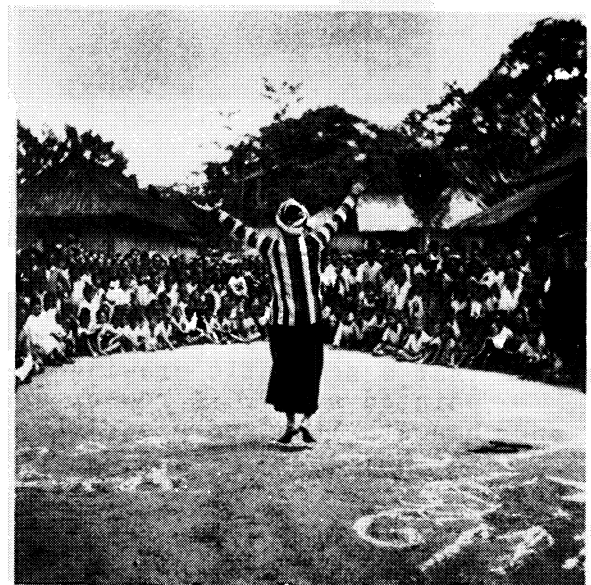


The head of the staff, decorated with a bunch of dark fibers, came to rest on his arm. For a while the datu danced on in small, even steps, cradling the staff. Then he stopped and rested it, iron point down, on the ground. He spoke again and then, with the staff in his right hand, he moved off on a curving course, gliding, raising the staff like a weapon, making it sway and then hover. To the steadily accelerating rhythm of the music, he stabbed left, right, and then toward the ground. The dance ended as he replanted the staff beside its taller companion.



Before he began the ceremony, a datu at Pematang Raja, among the Simelungun Batak, patiently drew intricate white lime designs on the ground. Next to an embellished diamond within a square, he drew a circular pattern filled with intricate shapes, and above that a schematic drawing of a human figure flanked by two five-pointed stars. A row of arrows pointed toward the human figure and beneath it a scorpion-like shape was drawn. The datu placed an egg in the center of the diamond-shaped trunk of the human figure.

After preliminary handling of the magic staff, the datu's dance consisted of a series of lightly skipping approaches and retreats to and from the egg. Again and again, the datu directed the sharp iron point of the magic staff toward the egg and, finally, he stabbed--and missed. Picking up his staff, he hopped off once more, talked to the staff, and repeated the approach and thrust. At last he succeeded. He hopped around the broken egg, using the staff as a pivot. As if in triumph, he took short jumps with outstretched arms, facing in each of the four cardinal directions.





Some Batak ceremonial dances reflect the hierarchical relationship between a chief or *radja* and the members of his community; while others showed the lateral relationships among intermarrying *marga*. In Huta Sibalahotang, we saw a dance called *tortor radja*.

The chief, the datu, and six young men, all with heavy *ulos* (ceremonial shawls) thrown over their right shoulders, stood in a row. They turned to the right and moved off counter-clockwise in a curving line, taking tiny steps like the ticks of the hand marking seconds on a watch dial. As they moved, hardly covering any ground at all, they gestured with arms and hands. The chief and the datu gradually detached themselves from the file and stood facing the dancers who continued to tread in one place. Each younger man in turn left his place in the file, advanced with folded palms raised to his forehead approaching first the datu and then the chief, passed his hands along their cheeks, was caressed by the older man, and then with folded hands receded to his place. After each man had in this manner addressed the chief and datu, the dancers remained in formation and danced in place.



At Huta Sibalahotang we were also shown a women's dance called *paniaran*. We were told only that it was the dance performed around an animal to be sacrificed at a feast. The datu led the women in what was essentially a slow procession. The women stood in a row, marked rhythm with slight up and down movements of the body, their hands placed palm to palm in front of the chest. Then very slowly, following the datu, they formed a circular file and proceeded forward with small steps. While one flexed hand rested lightly on the hip, they gradually stretched the other hand forward, turning palm forward. They turned toward the center of the circle and moved their hands level with their shoulders.







We saw how the paniaran fits into a ceremony at Huta Siampipira. Although Siampipira was a Christian village, the village chief, Radja Japan Hariandja, seemed eager to show us an abbreviated version of a *hordja horbo* ceremony. One type of *hordja horbo* is held by a sub-marga group, descendants of a common ancestor, in order to honor their ancestor and the spirits, hoping to secure prosperity for themselves and their posterity.

The Siampipira datu had built an elaborate altar of palm-leaf fronds at one end of the street-like space between the two rows of village houses. On the ground nearby, he had drawn a group of white lime magic symbols. He began the proceedings with offerings to the protective images of the village (*panghulu balang*), two very crude stone figures about a foot high decorated with leaves and flowers. Under the datu's direction, the radja and another man trotted around the altar carrying the *panghulu balang*. They were followed by two men moving in the same running step, dragging a dog and a chicken on leashes. Three magic staffs were stuck in the ground amid the offerings near the altar. The datu then performed a dance with *tunggal panaluan* similar to the datu dance already described.

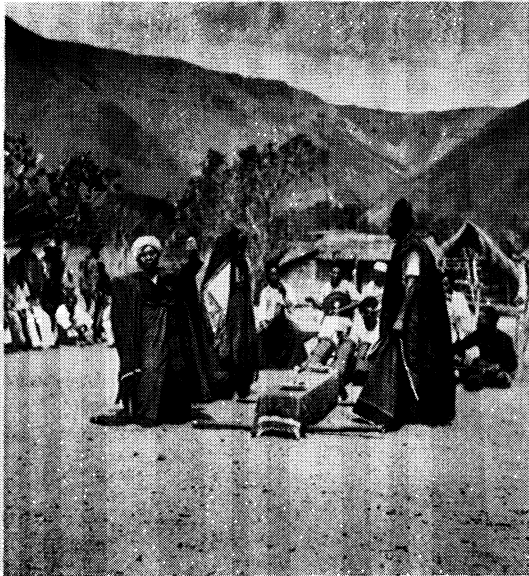
In the middle of the village street a sacrificial pole (*borotan*) had been erected, decorated with branches and leaves so that it took on the quite natural appearance of a tree. A young water buffalo with palm streamers and leaves adorning its head was led by some twenty men to the *borotan*. Women were lined up on both sides of the village street--on one side the married women, on the other the unmarried girls. While the girls danced in one place, the married women slowly formed a file and, led by the datu, circled around the tethered water buffalo with the same stately gesture as in the Sibalahotang paniaran, stretching one arm forward while moving the other towards the hip.



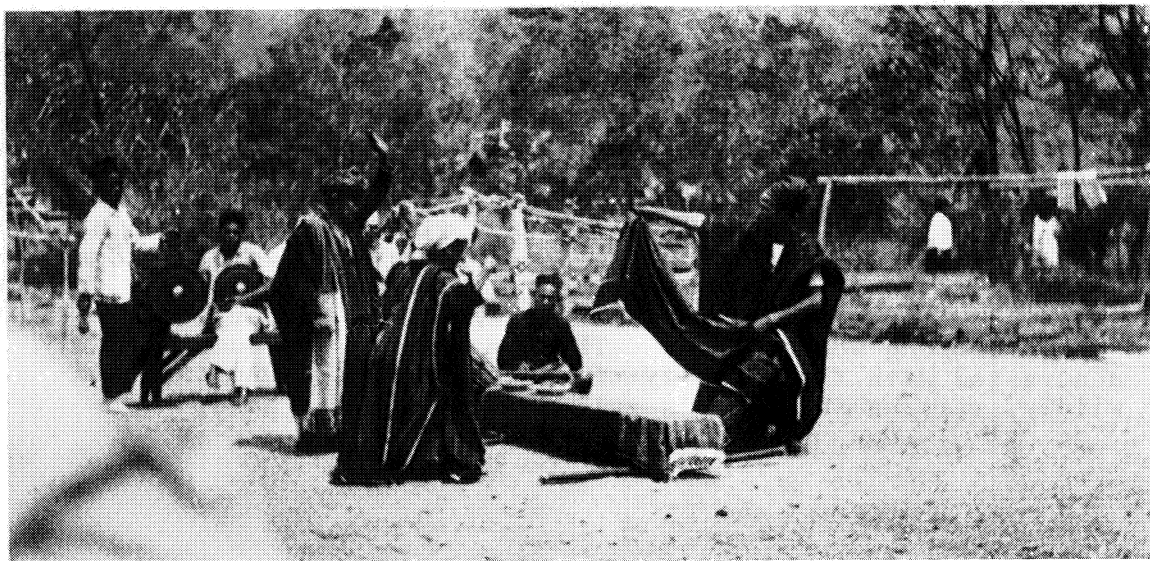
At Djandji Matogu, a Toba Batak village on the southeastern coast of Lake Toba, we were shown a dance of lament, *onda-onda*. The dancers stood silhouetted on a high bank of the lake. Some were shrouded in their heavy shoulder cloths, which they had thrown over their heads obscuring all but the general lines of their gestures. Their movements contrasted with all the Toba Batak dances I have described above. They inclined forwards from the waist, swayed, raised arms above their heads, and held their heads with their hands in the perhaps universal gesture of grief.



The Karo Batak dance of lament, *mulih-mulih*, contrasted strongly with the Toba onda-onda. We saw it at Kampong Lingga, a village not far from Kaban Djahé. The dancers stood in a row, backs straight, heads inclined. Each dancer raised one arm until the forefinger and thumb lightly touched the crown of her head, then very slowly she sank on bending knees. Just as slowly she rose and moved the lifted arm down to her waist. Again she dipped, reaching up with the other arm in the same intriguing gesture.

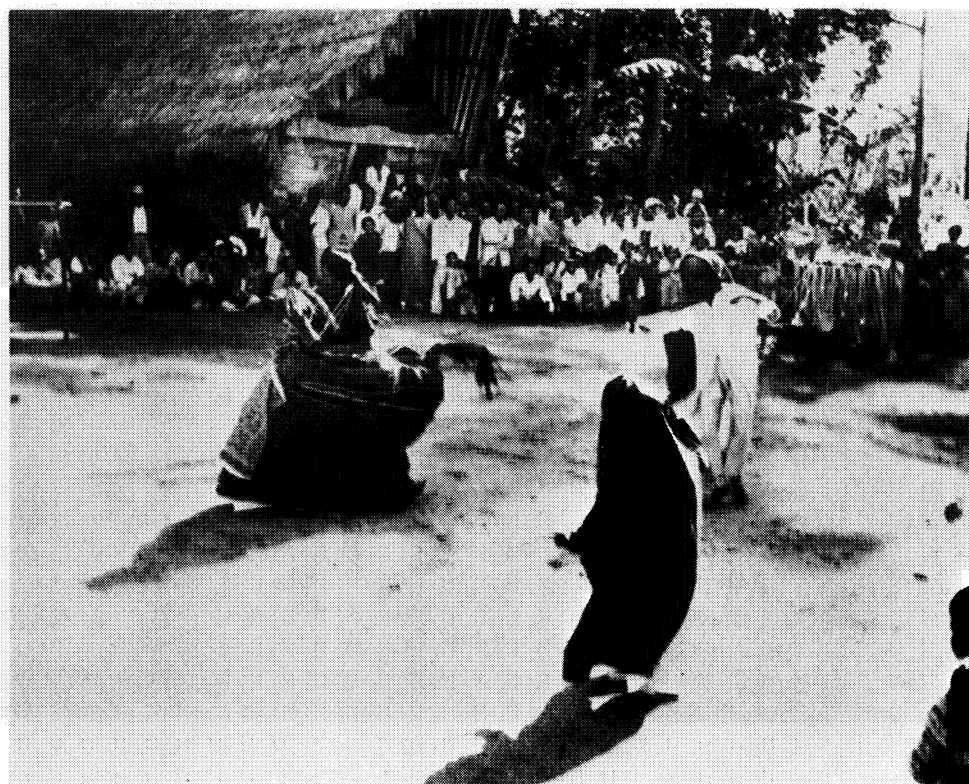


At Harianboho, on the southwest shore of Lake Toba, we saw *lotung-lotung*, the dance performed by children beside their parent's coffin. A man taking the role of the son stood at one side of a crude facsimile coffin, while two women impersonating daughters stood across from him. At either end of the coffin, the man placed plates which should have contained offerings. His gestures became pantomimic. He bent toward the box, touched it with widespread hands, recoiled, put his hands on his chest, grasped his head, and swayed from side to side. He passed his hands just above the box as if caressing it. The women steadily and smoothly moved up and down while twisting from the waist and arching their arms upwards. They swayed to the left and right, bending slightly backwards and forwards in the process. The son picked up a small batch of twigs and made a sprinkling motion along the box. Four young men lifted the coffin and, as they carried it away, the son placed his arms around the shoulders of the two daughters and the three, in one tight mass, followed the bearers with short jogging steps.



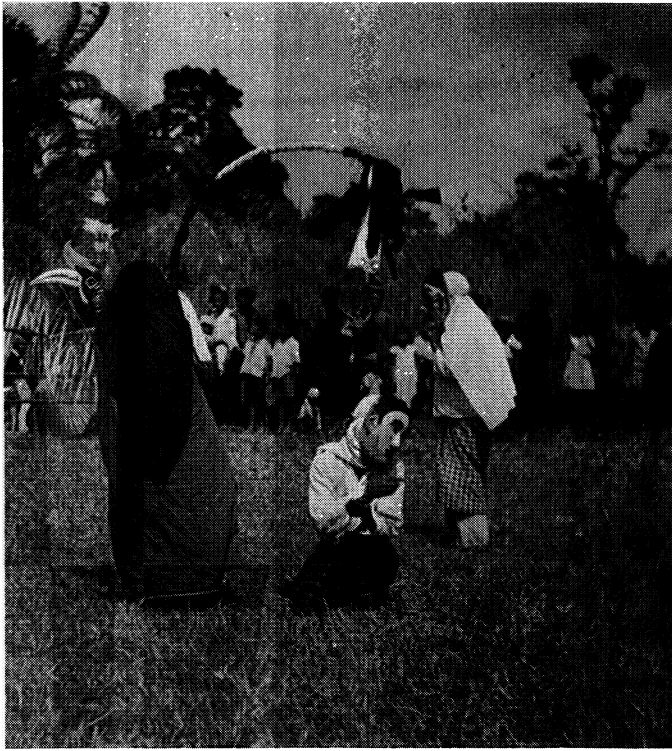
After we saw the hordja horbo dances at Huta Siampipira, we were shown a masked funerary dance. The dance, called *hoda-hoda*, is still performed at the funerals of high-ranking people in villages which are not christianized. The central figure was the hoda or horse. A dancer stood planted, as it were, amidst a horse figure--the wooden head connected to a fiber tail by a cloth-covered bamboo frame suspended from the dancer's hips. Two other dancers--one tall, one small--wore masks of dark wood. They slowly followed a weaving, twisting course around the village street, each rotating a pair of long wooden hands. Their movements and pace strongly contrasted with the vivacity of the horse dancer who careened wildly, raising the horse's tail and jerking its head.





The most elaborate version of the masked funerary dance that we saw was performed for us nearby the Simelungun town of Pematang Raja. The dance was called *huda-huda* here, although the central figure was a hornbill rather than a horse. The front yard of a newly deceased person (pretended in this case) had been enclosed with a bamboo and palm-frond gate (*galangan*) which we were told represented village walls. Within the enclosure there were a hornbill dancer, two other masked dancers, and two unmasked men carrying curved sticks. The latter two danced in a *pentjak* style near the v-shaped gate opening as if they were guarding against intruders. The hornbill head and long tail projected above the bent dancer hidden beneath a white cloth. The two other dancers wore similar striped jackets and matching masks surrounded by halos of long black fibrous hair; they waved thin rods decorated with feathers (*losir-losir*) and occasionally stuck them in the ground and danced off without them.





Outside the gate a procession arrived: another hornbill dancer cloaked in a dark cloth and two figures wearing masks. The smaller of these two, although dressed in a man's shirt, was said to represent a woman. The pentjak dancers sprang to the defense of the gate. The outsider masks crouched, piteously pleading with extended hands. They gave something to the guards, perhaps money. Then one of the insider masks came out of the enclosure, placed an arm around the male outsider's shoulders, and all entered the courtyard and began to dance. Women bystanders strew rice at the dancers, shouting "*horas!*" The wooden faces lent an eerie quality to the swaying movements of the dancers, the oblique postures, and playing hands. The hornbills stalked between them, turning their heads from side to side.



Among the Karo Batak at Kampong Lingga, we saw a mask dance called *gana-gana* or *gundala-gundala*. It was clearly related to the Toba hoda-hoda although the central figure was not a horse but a hornbill as in the Simelungun huda-huda. Moreover the dance was not (or perhaps no longer) associated with death rites. The performers told us that *gana-gana* was danced "just for fun" at festivities and at celebrations in honor of a radja. The hornbill mask was perched atop the dancer's head which was hidden beneath red cloth. The other dancers wore red coats and their masks were painted yellow.