

Negotiating tradition and modernity in fertility, gender, and contraception among the Batak Toba in North Sumatra, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Batak Toba community experiences reproductive practices at the intersection of customary values, religious teachings, and modern health paradigms. Shifts in fertility values and gender roles influenced by modernization have given rise to new forms of negotiation in the acceptance of contraception.

Objectives: This ethnographic study aims to analyze how the Batak Toba community negotiates traditional and modern fertility values.

Methods: The research was conducted in Samosir Regency and involved 18 informants.

Results: The findings indicate that cultural values emphasizing the importance of sons as lineage successors - embodied in the philosophy of *hagabeon-hamoraon-hasangapon* - remain fundamental in shaping fertility constructions and the concept of the ideal number of children. Modernization, manifested through education, economic opportunities, and urbanization, has introduced new patterns in gender roles and stimulated the development of discourse surrounding contraception. The negotiation of contraceptive acceptance occurs at the intersection of customary practices, religious teachings, and medical discourse. Modernity does not fully replace tradition; rather, it creates a process of selective adaptation that reflects the interaction among local value systems, religious institutions, and modern health policies.



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Conclusions: These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how the negotiation between tradition and modernity shapes fertility preferences, gender roles, and contraceptive practices in the Batak Toba community, while highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity in the formulation of reproductive health policies.

Key words: fertility, Batak Toba culture, value change, modernity, contraception

Introduction

Changes in values and social norms related to fertility, gender roles, and contraceptive use constitute a global phenomenon accompanying modernization, urbanization, and the expansion of education (1). Demographic transitions in many developing countries are influenced not only by economic and health factors but also by transformations in cultural values and shifts in gender relations (2). In many traditional communities, high fertility is closely associated with social status and lineage continuity (3). However, modernization has shifted orientations from the quantity to the quality of children (4). Nevertheless, traditional values related to gender roles, as well as preferences regarding the number and sex of children, persist (5) and are often negotiated alongside modern values introduced through education (6), media (7), and health policies (8,9).

In the Indonesian context, fertility cannot be separated from social and cultural constructions. The Batak Toba community in North Sumatra, for instance, continues to strongly uphold the belief that having many children is a pathway to happiness and life success. Historically, the concepts of *Hamoraon* (wealth), *Hagabeon* (descendants), and *Hasangapon* (honor) have long served as benchmarks of achievement (10). The patrilineal kinship system positions sons (*sinuan tunas*) as heirs to the clan name and customary rights, thereby assigning them higher value than daughters. A woman who does not bear a son is highly vulnerable to divorce, even if she has many daughters (11). This strong patriarchal culture limits women's autonomy in determining their reproductive health rights (12). These values have historically shaped fertility preferences and attitudes toward contraception (13).

Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of the cultural meaning of children and fertility values in Batak Toba community. Naibaho (2019), for example, demonstrates that children are culturally perceived as symbols of family continuity and social status, contributing to strong expectations regarding family size (14). Similarly, Karota and Afyanti (2022) show that the expectation of having a son continues to influence reproductive decision-making in Batak Toba families (13). These studies illustrate how cultural norms related to lineage shape reproductive behavior. However, there remains limited research examining how these traditional expectations are negotiated within the context of contemporary social change.

The introduction of Christianity in the nineteenth century brought new values, such as an emphasis on the nuclear family and moral responsibility in child-rearing, yet it did not eliminate the preference for sons as heirs to the clan (14). Subsequently, during Indonesia's New Order Period (1966–1998), the government promoted population control through the Family Planning Program, which expanded access to modern contraception from the 1970s onward. This program successfully reduced the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) from 7.20 children per woman in 1971 to 4.5 in 2018 and further to 2.98 in 2020 (15). Nevertheless, the acceptance of contraception at the community level continues to involve complex considerations related to custom, religion, and health (16). Women, in particular, often experience tension between fulfilling customary expectations and pursuing greater autonomy in reproductive decision-making (13). Modernization through migration, urbanization, and higher education has encouraged new patterns in gender roles and family orientation (6). Younger generations of Batak

Toba are increasingly open to the concept of smaller families; however, traditional values remain highly influential in reproductive decision-making (17). Thus, reproductive practices related to fertility preferences, the desired number and composition of children, and contraceptive use in Batak Toba community occur within a framework of negotiation between tradition and modernity.

However, previous research on fertility and family planning in Indonesia has largely emphasized quantitative aspects, such as contraceptive prevalence and demographic determinants (18), while qualitative studies exploring meanings, values, and socio-cultural negotiation dynamics remain limited (19). The same gap is evident in studies of fertility among the Batak Toba. The lack of qualitative ethnographic research focusing on the negotiation between tradition and modernity in this context highlights a gap in understanding, particularly regarding how communities interpret and respond to changing values in reproductive practices. To address this gap, this study employs the perspectives of demographic transition theory (Kirk, 1996) and fertility decline theory (Caldwell, 1982), which explain how fertility behavior is shaped through the interaction of cultural norms, gender relations, and broader processes of modernization (20,21). Therefore, this research is important in providing an in-depth understanding of the processes through which these values are negotiated, while also serving as a foundation for the formulation of culturally sensitive reproductive health policies and interventions. The aim of this study is to analyze how reproductive decisions related to fertility preferences, gender roles, and contraceptive use are negotiated between traditional cultural expectations and contemporary social change within Batak Toba community.

Material and methods

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore in depth the process of negotiation between tradition and modernity in fertility practices, gender roles, and contraceptive use within Batak Toba community. The research was conducted in a community predominantly inhabited by the Batak

Toba ethnic group in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The Batak Toba are one of the largest ethnic groups in the province and are well known for their patrilineal kinship system, which places strong cultural emphasis on lineage continuity and the importance of male descendants.

A total of 18 participants were selected using purposive sampling, and the sample was subsequently expanded through snowball sampling to reach individuals with relevant experience and knowledge related to the research topic. The participants represented two generational groups within Batak Toba community to capture differences in perspectives on fertility and reproductive decision-making. The first group consisted of older-generation informants (aged 49 years and above), including customary leaders, religious leaders, and community members who were no longer of reproductive age. The second group consisted of individuals of reproductive age (15–49 years), particularly married women who had experience in decision-making related to fertility and contraceptive use.

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (a) participants belonged either to the reproductive age group (15–49 years) or the older generation (>49 years); (b) they had involvement in or influence over family or community discussions related to fertility, gender roles, or family planning; and (c) they had resided in the study area for at least five years to ensure familiarity with local cultural values. Participant characteristics, including age, number of children, occupation, and social roles, are summarized in Table 1.

Data collection was conducted over one year (January–December 2024) and involved participant observation of daily community activities, including attendance at traditional ceremonies and family gatherings. In-depth interviews were conducted in Batak Toba or Indonesian according to participant preference. This study also included document analysis of customary regulations, church records, and reports from the Family Planning Program obtained from community health centers (*puskesmas*) and the Office of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, Population Control, and Family Planning. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach.

The analysis process involved stages of data familiarization, coding, categorization, and the

Table 1. Characteristics of Informants.

Informant Code	Age	Number of Children	Occupation	Role	Generation
Informant 1	68	5	Farmer	Mother	Older generation
Informant 2	65	8	Farmer	Mother	Older generation
Informant 3	52	3	Housewife	Mother	Older generation
Informant 4	67	6	Farmer	Mother	Older generation
Informant 5	60	5	Farmer	Mother	Older generation
Informant 6	59	3	Housewife	Mother	Older generation
Informant 7	64	7	Trader	Mother	Older generation
Informant 8	38	2	Trader	Mother	Reproductive age group
Informant 9	41	3	Housewife	Mother	Reproductive age group
Informant 10	36	3	Teacher	Mother	Reproductive age group
Informant 11	38	2	Farmer	Mother	Reproductive age group
Informant 12	40	4	Farmer	Mother	Reproductive age group
Informant 13	42	3	Farmer	Mother	Reproductive age group
Informant 14	44	4	Private Employee	Mother	Reproductive age group
Informant 15	42	-	Civil Servant	Head of Health Center	-
Informant 16	39	-	Midwife	Health worker	-
Informant 17	67	-	Community elder	Traditional leader	-
Informant 18	44	-	Pastor	Religious leader	-

interpretation of emerging themes related to fertility preferences, gender roles, and contraceptive use. Data validity was ensured through method triangulation, source triangulation, member checking with selected participants, and peer debriefing among researchers. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to the interviews, and their participation was obtained voluntarily through informed consent. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the relevant institutional ethics committee (Approval Number: 886/KEPK/USU/2024).

Results and discussion

In this section, the results and discussion are presented in an integrated manner to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the ethnographic findings. To protect participant confidentiality, all informants are identified using numerical codes (Informant 1–Informant 18), indicating their roles within the

community. The initial stage of thematic analysis generated several interrelated themes that reflect cultural values, gender roles, and contraceptive practices in Batak Toba community (see Supplementary Table S1). For clarity, the findings are presented in three main thematic sections: the persistence of traditional values, shifts in gender roles, and the negotiation of contraceptive use.

Persistence of traditional values

The persistence of traditional values can be seen in the role of sons as clan heirs, children as symbols of social status and family pride, and the way these values are preserved through customary rituals and cultural socialization within families and communities.

Sons as heirs of lineage/clan

In the Batak Toba community, sons are regarded as heirs of the clan (*marga*). The *marga* is a family or clan name that signifies one's social and cultural

identity and lineage, functioning to determine kinship relations between individuals, the legal basis for inheritance under customary law, and in contexts of marriage and social cooperation (20).

One participant explained:

"...for the Batak, it is the son who will continue the tarombo (genealogy). Daughters are not included in the genealogy as heirs of lineage; instead, they enter the genealogy of 'someone else' (their husband) ..." (Informant 17, Traditional Leader).

This statement illustrates how patrilineal norms continue to function as the main reference point in defining the ideal family. While daughters are still valued, the exclusive inheritance of clan identity through sons means that Batak Toba community perceives a family as incomplete without a male child (17). The presence of sons is seen as an addition of *sahala* (authority/prestige) (21) and a social advantage, since lineage and clan identity are only passed on through males (21,22).

A traditional *umpasa* (oral poetic couplet) states: *"Ndang tutu sibupi ianggo so marsugasuga, Dang tutu na uli ianggo so marbulahula"* (It cannot be called *sibupi* without thorns; it cannot be called good without having a *hula-hula*). This reflects the importance of sons in Batak Toba community: life cannot be considered good without *hula-hula*, which refers to sons. Without sons, a clan lineage ends (*napunu*) (23). This belief persists today despite greater exposure to education and reproductive health programs.

The preference for sons because of their role in continuing lineage is also found in other parts of Indonesia (24). In Aceh, sons are seen as heirs and symbols of social status (5). In Bali, when a family lacks male heirs, daughters are pressured to marry in *sentana* unions (female succession marriages) (8). Among the Bugis community, inheritance rules tend to prioritize the paternal line (patrilineal), thereby reinforcing a preference for sons (25). This phenomenon is global in nature, as son preference remains prevalent in many developing countries (26), particularly within patrilineal societies in South Asia and Africa, where it significantly influences fertility levels and contraceptive use (2). In Southeast Asia, similar patterns persist, although preferences for sons have gradually declined over time (27).

Family planning programs have had limited success in shifting these preferences. Despite expanded access to contraception since the 1970s (28,29), decisions to stop childbearing are often made only after a family has had a son. In other words, although modern medical methods are available, traditional values continue to function as the primary filter shaping reproductive decisions. This reflects a form of cultural resilience, in which Batak Toba customary values position high fertility—particularly the presence of a son—as a prerequisite for family honor. As a result, modernization tends to be selectively adopted. This condition helps explain why fertility decline in customary communities often occurs more slowly than in more egalitarian urban societies.

Children as symbols of social status and family pride

The persistence of traditional values is also reflected in the view that social status and family honor can be measured by the number of children. High fertility is associated with greater family prestige. This belief is rooted in the Batak Toba philosophy of *hagabeon* (many descendants), *hamoraon* (wealth), and *hasangapon* (honor and high social standing) as indicators of life success (30). These values remain significant in Batak Toba community despite the growing influence of modernization narratives that promote smaller family sizes.

"If someone asks, 'how many children do you have?' and we answer, 'ten,' we feel proud. People will say, 'you are so fortunate, mother.'" (Informant 2, Mother).

This indicates that fertility is perceived not merely as a biological matter but also as a marker of social and spiritual prestige. A traditional *umpasa* declares: *"Laklak di atas pintu, singkoru ni golomgolom, maranak ma hamu sampulu pitu, marboru sampulu onom"* (Bark above the doorway, beads of *golomgolom* in hand. May you have seventeen sons and sixteen daughters). The message underscores the importance of children and their impact on social status. For Batak Toba people, descendants are the most valuable wealth in life (23).

Conversely, childlessness brings stigma.

"But if someone asks, 'how many children do you have?' and the answer is none, we feel small... In the past,

if someone died childless, they were called *mate pupur* (dying childless).” (Informant 2, Mother).

In Batak Toba community, having children is inseparable from the continuity of family and clan identity (31). A man who dies without having children is referred to as *mate pupur*. Families in this situation are treated differently and are considered to have failed in fulfilling their familial role. They lose legitimacy within customary relationships and rituals. For example, a widow who has children typically receives *ulos tujung* (a traditional Batak woven cloth symbolizing mourning); however, in cases of *mate pupur*, this cloth is not given, signifying the absence of a continuing bond with the deceased husband’s clan (32).

The importance of children for social status is not unique to Batak Toba community. Similar patterns are found among Makassar, Nias, and Malay communities, where fertility significantly influences social standing (33). Kamaruddin (2016) also found that ethnicity plays a significant role in shaping fertility levels in Indonesia. Likewise, in Malaysia, fertility rates vary by ethnicity, with Malay women having a higher probability of having larger families compared to Indian women (34).

The role of rituals in preserving values

Customary rituals serve as important mechanisms for preserving traditional values. The three major life-cycle rituals, marriage, birth, and death, emphasize the importance of descendants, particularly sons, as conveyed through *umpasa* (traditional poetic expressions) and communal discourse.

Marriage represents a crucial stage in the context of fertility, not only as a social celebration but also as a cultural arena in which fertility values are reinforced.

“In wedding ceremonies, parents always convey *umpasa* that pray for the couple to have children soon. We hear this in every customary event—marriage, birth, and *saur matua* (a funeral ceremony for parents who have had complete descendants).” (Informant 4, Mother)

The *mambosuri* ritual during pregnancy (around seven months) highlights that childbirth is both a biological and social event legitimizing family continuity (35). Death rituals, particularly *saur matua* funerals (the highest honor of dying with grandchildren from

both sons and daughters), are the most powerful medium for reinforcing fertility values.

“When I die one day, I want to be surrounded by many descendants, on the right and left, dancing (*manortor*) around me. Even if they migrate elsewhere, they will return for me.” (Informant 5, Mother).

These rituals convey a collective expectation that childbirth is not merely a private matter but a social responsibility embedded within the cultural structure. Through marriage and death rituals, the importance of having children is continuously transmitted and reaffirmed, demonstrating how tradition continues to shape reproductive choices amid the forces of modernization.

Shifts in gender roles

Traditional values in Batak Toba community clearly distinguish the roles of men and women. Only sons have a role in continuing the family lineage, which creates unequal social positions by placing women as subordinate to men.

“My husband’s main wish is simply to have a son. Whether it’s three or however many, because they are the ones who continue the family line.” (Informant 6, Mother).

By contrast, daughters are considered to continue the genealogy of “others” (their husband’s family). The role of wives is described as *sipatimbo parik ni amanta* (reinforcing the husband’s lineage).

“So we women are *sipatimbo parik ni amanta*” (Informant 7, Mother).

This expression carries a profound meaning, as it refers to ancestral inheritance. In the patrilineal kinship system of the Batak Toba, the role of the wife is to support the preservation and continuation of the husband’s lineage through the children she bears. Land ownership and inheritance remain predominantly controlled by men (36), while women have only limited access, thereby reinforcing their dependence on patriarchal structures (37).

Nevertheless, this study identifies a shift in gender roles—particularly in reproductive decision-making—driven by education, economic opportunities, and urbanization. Several female informants reported that they have begun to express their opinions

regarding contraceptive use or to refuse subsequent pregnancies for health and economic reasons. This indicates a transition from fully patriarchal reproductive authority toward a more negotiated pattern.

The impact of education on women's negotiation capacity

Modernization through education has contributed to shifts in gender roles. Women are increasingly involved in household decision-making, including in matters of reproduction, although the process of negotiation with patriarchal norms remains ongoing.

"Nowadays, women have attained higher levels of education and work in offices, so if they wish to use family planning or space births, they can discuss it directly with their husbands." (Informant 15, Head of Health Center)

Education is a key variable that enhances women's authority in household decision-making, including in health-related issues (38). Women with higher levels of education tend to have stronger bargaining power in reproductive decisions (39), and female education is an important determinant of fertility decline (40).

Among Batak Toba women, higher education enables them to be viewed not merely as bearers of their husband's lineage, but also as individuals with greater influence in household decision-making (41). Education also strengthens their bargaining position both within the community and in customary contexts (42).

Nevertheless, shifts in gender roles do not automatically eliminate patriarchal dominance. Many women remain bound by customary expectations, particularly if they have not yet given birth to a son.

"Sons are very important. If I don't have a son yet, I must follow my husband's wishes." (Informant 1, Mother).

This shows that women's reproductive agency is partial and influenced by the sex of their children. Women gain stronger roles once they have a son, but weaker roles if they do not.

Thus, modernization does not eliminate patriarchy; rather, it creates a bargaining space that enables women to negotiate their positions. In the Batak Toba context, this negotiation occurs both within the household (e.g., number of children and contraceptive use)

and in the public sphere (e.g., participation in education and economic activities). Therefore, gender roles are not static but constitute a dynamic arena in which tradition and modernity intersect.

Economic opportunities as a factor in fertility change

In addition to education, economic opportunities also significantly influence shifts in gender roles within Batak Toba community. This study finds that changes in livelihoods and increasing economic opportunities have contributed to shaping attitudes toward fertility. Historically, Batak Toba livelihoods were largely homogeneous and agrarian.

"In the past, what mattered was labor. The more children, the larger the fields. The more children, the more workers to herd buffalo or cultivate rice fields. If you had only one child, what work could they do?" (Informant 17, Traditional Leader).

Traditionally, children were viewed as both economic and social assets: the more children a family had, the greater the labor force available for agricultural activities. However, with modernization and economic diversification, families increasingly perceive having many children as a financial burden. The expansion of economic opportunities in the Lake Toba tourism sector has further reinforced this shift. Many women now work as traders, entrepreneurs, or in the service sector, balancing their time between productive work and domestic responsibilities.

"Nowadays, many women work as civil servants, police officers, souvenir traders, lodging owners, and in various other occupations—they are no longer limited to being farmers or housewives." (Informant 17, Traditional Leader)

Women's economic participation enhances their bargaining power within the household, particularly regarding contraceptive use and the number of children. Dalimunthe & Lubis (2019) identified a similar pattern, showing that women with their own income are more likely to refuse repeated pregnancies (30).

However, customary values continue to balance these dynamics. While economic considerations encourage a preference for smaller families, sons remain perceived as the primary source of economic

and social security. Some economically well-established families still strive to have a son even after having two or three daughters. Thus, economic opportunities open space for the rationalization of reproduction but do not fully override traditional preferences.

Theoretically, these findings align with demographic transition theory (43). However, in Batak Toba community, fertility transition is strongly mediated by son preference and culturally embedded values within the kinship system. This results in a hybrid transition: modern economic factors drive fertility decline, while cultural values sustain specific reproductive motivations. Therefore, fertility change in Batak Toba community cannot be explained solely by economic factors but rather by a complex process of negotiation among economic, cultural, and gender dimensions.

Urbanization and migration as drivers of reproductive transformation

Urbanization exposes Batak Toba communities to more egalitarian values, reshaping perspectives on fertility and contraception. Young families in urban areas tend to be more open to shared domestic and reproductive roles. Younger generations of Batak Toba who migrate for education or employment are exposed to modern values that emphasize family planning, gender equality, and reproductive health. This exposure influences their ideals regarding family size when they return to their hometowns or interact with relatives in rural areas.

“In the city, most people agree that two children are enough. Women also have a say. But in bona pasogit (the homeland/village), many still follow the husband’s or parents’ decisions.” (Informant 16, Health Worker).

This highlights the distinction between urban and rural contexts. In urban areas, women tend to have a stronger role in reproductive decision-making, influenced by greater exposure to education, employment, media, and family planning programs. In contrast, in rural areas, patriarchal structures and the value of large families remain dominant, where husbands or extended family members often play a decisive role in fertility-related decisions.

“In the city, people usually have only two children. More than that is too costly. So I began to think the same way.” (Informant 8, Mother).

Migration accelerates the internalization of small-family norms. Young urban families tend to have fewer children and negotiate greater equality within marriage, including in fertility-related decisions (8). In contrast, in rural areas, reproductive decisions remain strongly influenced by patriarchal authority, as also found by Utomo (2022) in rural Indonesia (19). Thus, migration introduces more egalitarian gender norms that contribute to reshaping fertility practices (6).

These findings suggest that urbanization and migration are not merely processes of geographical mobility, but also sites of interaction between traditional and modern values. Migrants bring back new ideas about small-family norms, yet must reconcile these with customary expectations in their home villages. As a consequence, reproductive practices in Batak Toba community are hybrid in nature: cognitively, people increasingly accept modern norms, while socially, they continue to uphold traditions as markers of collective identity.

Negotiating contraceptive use

The acceptance of contraception in Batak Toba community is shaped by a process of negotiation among customary values, religious teachings, and health considerations. Several participants explained that contraception is acceptable if the primary reason is to protect the mother’s health or to space births, but not for permanently limiting the number of children.

“If family planning is for protecting the wife’s health, so she doesn’t get exhausted, and for spacing children, that is acceptable. But if it is to stop having children altogether, especially if the couple does not yet have a son, adat does not approve.” (Informant 17, Traditional Leader).

This statement indicates that health serves as a key mediating factor between traditional values and modern discourses on contraception in Batak Toba community. Health becomes a middle ground: contraception is acceptable when it is understood as a means of protecting the wife’s health and spacing births. However, when contraception is used as a method to permanently stop childbearing, particularly when a

son has not yet been born, customary resistance tends to emerge. Husbands, in particular, often oppose contraceptive use if they do not yet have a son (17).

This reinforces the idea that the presence of a male child remains a crucial requirement within the Batak Toba patrilineal kinship system, where sons are regarded as heirs to the clan and guarantors of lineage continuity. The authority of the husband plays a highly significant role in this patriarchal system, where final decisions often rest in his hands (44).

This reflects a process of selective adaptation to modernity, in which customary principles are maintained while accommodating health-related needs. Modernization does not simply erase traditional values but modifies their application according to social context (45). Thus, family planning is not understood solely from a health perspective but is negotiated alongside customary norms that emphasize fertility and the cultural importance of having a male child.

Beyond health considerations, religion also plays a crucial role, particularly in emphasizing that children are gifts from God. Religion provides moral guidance that operates alongside customary values. As predominantly Christians, the Batak Toba community is strongly influenced by religious teachings related to children and fertility. Religious leaders in the region generally support family planning programs, as long as they do not contradict moral teachings and are intended to promote family well-being.

“Indeed, the Bible says ‘be fruitful and multiply.’ But elsewhere in the Bible it also says ‘be wise.’ In the Old Testament, childlessness was considered a curse, yet in the New Testament, it is taught that suffering (such as not having children) can be turned into a way to glorify God.” (Informant 18, Religious Leader)

This reflects how Batak Toba community interprets contraception by integrating religious values with modernity. Christian teachings emphasize that children are gifts from God, as stated in Psalm 127:3: “Children are a heritage from the Lord,” underscoring their spiritual significance (46). While children are regarded as divine blessings, humans are also believed to be endowed with wisdom to responsibly manage family life (21).

As a religious community, many ethnic groups in Indonesia also link childbearing with faith. Among

Javanese communities, children are viewed as blessings from God, making birth control through contraception sometimes perceived as opposing divine will (47). Similarly, Riau Malay communities believe that children are entrusted by the Creator and must be cherished as a source of comfort within the household (48).

According to Tegegne (2019), religion significantly shapes internal family relations and plays an important role in fertility transitions. His study showed that Muslim women in Ethiopia had higher fertility compared to Protestant women (49). Gotmark and Andersson (2020) likewise argued that religion is a key determinant of fertility, where beliefs about divine will and political motivations to “expand the community” are associated with higher fertility rates (1,50). In Ethiopia, Catholic women were also found to have higher fertility compared to Orthodox women (51).

In the Batak Toba context, cultural shifts are also evident in the interpretation of religion. Older generations tended to view having many children as blessings from *Mulajadi Nabolon* (the supreme deity in early Batak Toba *Parmalim* beliefs), as well as within Christianity (Protestant and Catholic traditions). Childlessness was often perceived as a curse, punishment, or divine trial (23). Today, perspectives are evolving: children are still regarded as divine gifts, but couples increasingly believe they have the responsibility to decide on the number of children.

Therefore, religion and culture influence the acceptance of contraception in ways that vary across communities and denominations. Different denominations may interpret religious teachings differently, and individual couples may choose not to strictly adhere to doctrinal positions (52). Within this framework, contraception is not necessarily viewed as contradictory to faith or tradition, but rather as a moral and spiritual responsibility to ensure family well-being. This reflects an ongoing process of cultural and religious reinterpretation that allows tradition, religion, and modernity to coexist within the reproductive practices of Batak Toba community.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The findings are based on ethnographic

fieldwork conducted within a specific Batak Toba community in North Sumatra; therefore, the interpretations reflect the socio-cultural context of that particular community and may not fully represent the diversity of Batak Toba populations in other regions. Additionally, although participants were drawn from various social roles—including mothers, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and health workers—the number of informants remains relatively limited, as is typical in qualitative ethnographic research. Nevertheless, the researcher's sustained engagement in the field and the use of multiple data sources strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Conclusion

This study shows that Batak Toba community continues to maintain traditional values that position male children as heirs to the clan, shaping perceptions of the ideal number of children. At the same time, modernization—through education, economic opportunities, and urbanization—has contributed to shifts in gender roles. The acceptance of contraception is negotiated at the intersection of customary values, religious teachings, and health considerations. This negotiation process produces a new pattern: contraception is accepted insofar as it supports maternal health. However, customary values remain the primary reference, particularly in rural areas, where reproductive decisions are often made through a compromise between tradition and modernity. These findings affirm that modernity does not fully replace traditional values but instead encourages a process of selective adaptation. This insight is important for policymakers and reproductive health programs in designing interventions that are sensitive to cultural contexts.

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Ethical considerations: This study received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee in North Sumatra. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews and observations. Participants' identities were protected through the use of anonymous codes, and all data were securely stored in accordance with research confidentiality principles.

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