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Integrating Batak Dalihan Na Tolu Values in Christian Character Education within Family Context

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Abstract

Character education is a fundamental aspect of human development, particularly within the Christian educational context, where moral formation is inseparable from biblical teachings. This study examines how the Batak cultural philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu can be integrated into family, based Christian character education. Employing a qualitative literature review approach, the research analyzes twenty validated sources, including scholarly journals and books, to explore the interplay between local cultural values and Christian moral formation. Findings indicate that the principles of Dalihan Na Tolu, namely, somba marhula-hula, manat mardongan tubu, and elek marboru, resonate with Christian virtues such as respect, responsibility, and relational harmony, and can effectively complement family, based character education. Integrating these local values within a Christian framework provides a contextualized and culturally sensitive approach to character formation, enabling families to cultivate virtues aligned with both cultural norms and biblical principles. This study contributes to the discourse on contextualized Christian education by demonstrating how indigenous cultural systems can reinforce moral and spiritual development in family settings.

Keywords: *christian character education; cultural integration; dalihan na tolu, family based education*

Introduction

Character education is recognized as a fundamental aspect in shaping personal integrity and ethical behavior. Within Christian education, character formation is not merely the development of general morality but is rooted in biblical principles guiding faith, informed living (Boiliu, 2025). Christian character education aims to cultivate attitudes and behaviors reflecting the life of Christ, such as love, humility, responsibility, and integrity. These values are internalized not only through knowledge acquisition but also through their manifestation in daily life, both individually and collectively (Arthur, 2021). Studies show that Christian character education plays a significant role in forming learners moral and spiritual identity. Faith, based education supports not only spiritual growth but also social ethics that enable responsible participation in community life (Arthur et al., 2017). Accordingly, character education becomes a vital avenue for nurturing individuals who are faithful and socially conscientious, reflecting love, justice, and ethical responsibility in their relationships.

The family serves as the primary environment for moral and spiritual development. It is the first social unit where children encounter values, including faith and morality. In Christian pedagogy, families are regarded as centers of faith education, tasked with instilling biblical principles in children from an early age (Boiliu, et al., 2021). Research confirms that parental involvement significantly influences children's moral and spiritual formation. Beyond verbal instruction, parents shape character through modeling daily behaviors that embody Christian values. The family's lived example reinforces moral and spiritual norms, making the household a dynamic space for continuous character formation (Bengtson et al., 2018). In culturally diverse contexts like Indonesia, character education cannot be separated from local cultural wisdom. Indigenous traditions often embed moral guidelines transmitted across generations (Masrukhi et al., 2024). When these values are integrated critically with Christian teaching, they enhance the contextual relevance of character education, connecting ethical formation with the community's lived reality (Susanto et al., 2025). A prominent example in Batak society is the Dalihan Na Tolu philosophy, a social framework governing kinship among the Batak Toba. It consists of three principles: *somba marhula-hula*, *manat mardongan tubu*, and *elek marboru*. These emphasize respect, relationship harmony, and familial responsibility (Kobstan & Ariawan, 2025). Beyond its customary function, Dalihan Na Tolu operates as an ethical guide shaping interpersonal conduct and social cohesion (Angga, 2017).

Previous studies explored Dalihan Na Tolu from anthropological, social, and cultural perspectives, highlighting its role in sustaining communal balance and social harmony. Scholars note its alignment with moral tenets of various religious traditions, including Christianity, suggesting potential for ethical integration (Panjaitan et al., 2024). Nevertheless, most studies focus on Dalihan Na Tolu as a cultural or social system. There is a research gap regarding its explicit application in family, based Christian character education (Simamora et al., 2024). Limited research has examined how its principles can support Christian virtue development within households. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how Dalihan Na Tolu values can be integrated into Christian character education in family settings. The research seeks to develop a contextualized framework harmonizing Batak cultural wisdom with biblical teachings, enabling families to cultivate holistic Christian character in children, promoting spiritual integrity, moral responsibility, and social ethics (Habeahan & Prayitno, 2022).

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using a literature review approach to examine how the principles of Dalihan Na Tolu can be integrated into family based Christian character education. A qualitative approach was chosen to facilitate an in depth understanding of cultural, social, and theological dimensions related to moral and spiritual formation (Creswell, 2021). The data sources consisted of scholarly books, peer reviewed journal articles, and official publications relevant to Christian character education, Dalihan Na Tolu, and family based moral formation. Sources were selected based on credibility, relevance, and academic rigor. To ensure validity, this study employed source

triangulation by comparing and cross checking information from multiple disciplines, including theology, education, and cultural studies.

The data analysis process followed a thematic analysis approach. First, relevant literature was identified and organized into key themes, such as local wisdom, Christian ethics, and character education. Second, the data were coded and categorized to identify patterns and relationships between Dalihan Na Tolu values and principles of Christian education. Third, the findings were interpreted using a contextual theological framework to explore their implications for family based character education. The data were presented descriptively through a systematic synthesis of the literature. The presentation emphasizes the integration of cultural values and biblical teachings in shaping moral and spiritual character within the family context.

Results and Discussion

Christian Character Education as Theological Foundation

Christian character education is fundamentally rooted in the theological understanding that moral transformation is possible only through a life centered on Jesus Christ. Unlike conventional moral instruction, Christian education emphasizes a dynamic and relational process of spiritual formation in which individuals internalize Christ, like virtues, including love, humility, integrity, compssion, and responsibility (Grobien, 2019). These virtues are not abstract concepts; they are intended to be enacted in daily life, shaping decisions, relationships, and social interactions. The process of character formation in Christian education is inseparable from the concept of discipleship. Discipleship involves intentional imitation of Christ, encompassing intellectual comprehension, moral commitment, and practical obedience to biblical teachings. As Paul writes, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2), highlighting that transformation is both cognitive and moral (Rabon, 2024).

This approach ensures that learners are not merely informed about ethical principles but are empowered to live them in real, life contexts. Furthermore, scholars argue that moral education requires the integration of intellectual knowledge with habitual practice. Virtues such as patience, honesty, forgiveness, and self control must be practiced repeatedly until they become ingrained in character. Christian education therefore functions holistically, addressing spiritual, emotional, ethical, and social dimensions, positioning moral development as a continuous, relational, and context sensitive process (Arthur et al., 2017). Christian educational institutions, including churches, schools, and theological centers play an essential role in this formation. These institutions offer structured opportunities for applying biblical principles, fostering ethical awareness, and cultivating moral responsibility. Participation in communal worship, service projects, and mentorship programs allows learners to enact virtues in meaningful contexts, bridging tehoretical knowlwdge with lived (Nainggolan et al., 2023). For example, students who engage in community service not only practice compassion but also develop accountability and responsibility, reflecting biblical principles in tangible actions. In modern society, rapid technological advancement and cultural shifts introduce complex ethical dilemmas.

Christian character education serves as a moral compass, helping learners navigate these challenges while remaining faithful to scriptural teaching. Integrating biblical principles with contextual realities equips individuals to act ethically across diverse social settings, cultivating critical moral discernment and resilience in decision making (Arifiah & Siregar, 2022). For instance, ethical guidance in digital interactions and social media usage demonstrates how faith based moral frameworks can guide behavior in contemporary contexts. Importantly, Christian character education acknowledges that faith is not practiced in cultural isolation. Indigenous traditions and local wisdom influence moral understanding, and when aligned with biblical principles, these cultural elements can strengthen character formation. This integration enables believers to express their faith authentically while respecting their cultural heritage (Arthur, 2021).

Family Context in Charistian Character Formation

The family represents the first and most influential environment for moral development. Within Christian pedagogy, parents act as primary educators, shaping children's understanding of spiritual and moral values through example and instruction. Daily family interactions such as mealtimes, conversations, and shared activities provide practical arenas where virtues are modeled and internalized (Amirrudin Zalukhu, 2025). Parental modeling plays a pivotal role in character formation. Consistent demonstration of virtues such as honesty, patience, kindness, and forgiveness cultivates a home environment where children observe ethical behavior in practice. This aligns with Proverbs 22 : 6 "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Simamora et al., 2024).

Family practices such as shared prayer, Bible reading, and participation in worship reinforce the integration of faith into everyday life, bridging theological concepts with lived experiences (Nababan et al., 2025). Social virtues are also nurtured within the family. Interactions among siblings, parents, and extended kinship networks provide opportunities for children to develop empathy, cooperation, and respect. Conflict resolution within the family helps children practice patience, understanding, and ethical decision making, complementing formal instruction (Li, D., 2023).

Early exposure to structured family based moral guidance predicts stronger integrity, social responsibility, and relational sensitivity in adulthood. In Batak cultural settings, family structures are closely tied to extended kinship networks. *Dalihan Na Tolu* meaning "three legged stove" serves as a guiding philosophy for familial roles, emphasizing respect, solidarity, and cooperative responsibility. Integration of these cultural principles with Christian teaching enhances character formation, ensuring that traditional social ethics align with biblical virtues (Harvina et al., 2017). For example, children learn to respect elders while understanding that this respect is rooted in honoring God as instructed in Exodus 20:12.

Dalihan Na Tolu as Batak Cultural Philosophy

Dalihan Na Tolu is a philosophical system that structures social relationships among the Batak Toba. Its three pillars, *somba marhula-hula*, *manat mardongan tubu*, and *elek*

marboru, function as ethical guides that promote respect, solidarity, and responsibility within kinship networks (Erawadi, E.; Setiadi, 2024).

- Somba marhula-hula emphasizes honoring the wife's family, fostering humility and gratitude.
- Manat mardongan tubu encourages harmony among clan members, nurturing cooperation and mutual support.
- Elek marboru promotes kindness and moral discernment toward women's families, reflecting principles of compassion and relational equity (Napitupulu, Perkasa, Fauza, 2024).

Anthropological research highlights that participation in rituals, ceremonies, and social interactions embeds these values into daily conduct, forming a social fabric conducive to collective well being (Jackline, 2025). These ethical dimensions align closely with biblical teachings on love, respect, and responsibility, providing a culturally grounded lens for contextualizing Christian virtues (Milla, 2024).

Integrating Dalihan Na Tolu into Family Based Christian Character Education

Integration of Dalihan Na Tolu with Christian education enables a contextualized approach to moral development.

- Somba marhula-hula parallels biblical teaching to honor elders and authority (Exodus 20: 12), fostering humility and gratitude.
- Manat mardongan tubu resonates with New Testament calls for unity, reconciliation, and community harmony (Ephesians 4: 2-3).
- Elek marboru reflects biblical values of compassion, fairness, and servant leadership (Philippians 2 : 3-4) (Togar Nainggolan, 2012).

Practical implementation occurs through family rituals, community gatherings, and kinship activities, providing experiential learning that complements biblical instruction. Children observing cooperative participation in community service of family ceremonies internalize relational ethics and moral responsibility. This approach preserves cultural heritage while promoting Christian virtues, demonstrating the feasibility of contextual theology in moral education (Gabriel et al., 2025). Theological reflection ensures that cultural practices harmonize with biblical ethics. Practices inconsistent with scripture are critically evaluated, while compatible traditions reinforce moral formation. Thoughtful integration of Dalihan Na Tolu serves both as a cultural resource and pedagogical tool for family based Christian character education (Tonny Andrian Stefanus, 2026).

Case Studies and Practical Examples

Several Batak Christian families demonstrate integration of Dalihan Na Tolu in daily life. For instance, a household may combine Sunday worship, Bible study, and family council meetings, using Dalihan Na Tolu principles to structure respect, decision making, and conflict resolution. Children are encouraged to participate actively, learning empathy, cooperative problem solving, and communal responsibility within a Biblical framework (Masniar H. Sitorus; Tiurma Barasa; Mangasi Sihaloho; Sondang S. A. Manik; Irma Halawa, 2024). In educational settings, teachers can adopt Dalihan Na Tolu principles to foster classroom

harmony, respect, and collaboration. Ethical dilemmas are discussed in light of Scripture, and students are encouraged to practice servant leadership, honesty, and compassion in group work. Such contextualized methods strengthen both moral and spiritual formation (Artariah Artariah, Suang Manik, 2024).

Critical Reflection and Recommendations

Integrating local wisdom with Christian education requires discernment. Continuous evaluation of cultural practices ensures alignment with Scripture. Training programs for parents and teachers enhance competence in combining Biblical teaching with local philosophy, promoting effective character formation. Curriculum design should include case studies showing Dalihan Na Tolu principles alongside Biblical narratives, enabling practical moral application (Yosefo Gule & Angel Aulia Bukit, 2023). Through such integration, Batak Christian communities develop a holistic framework of moral education that honors cultural identity while nurturing discipleship, compassion, integrity, and social responsibility. These approaches contribute to resilient moral communities capable of navigating contemporary ethical challenges while remaining faithful to biblical teachings (James A. Banks, 2014).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Christian character education is firmly grounded in biblical teachings and the ongoing process of spiritual formation. Beyond imparting moral knowledge, it seeks to cultivate individuals who emulate the character of Christ in their daily lives, reflecting virtues such as love, humility, integrity, compassion, and responsibility (Grobien, 2019). Theological reflection and spiritual practices provide the foundation for nurturing these virtues, aligned with scriptural instruction: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). The findings also highlight the family as the primary context for character formation. Through parental guidance, daily interactions, and shared spiritual practices, children internalize ethical values that guide attitudes and behaviors throughout life (Ester; Wahyu Asjarjo Rini; Yoel Triyanto; Mikha Agus Widiyanto; Andreas Fernando, 2022). Christian families thus serve as foundational communities where faith and moral development are intertwined, providing a relational and practical environment for holistic growth. Furthermore, the Batak cultural philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu provides a culturally grounded framework that complements Christian character formation. Its principles *somba marhula-hula*, *manat mardongan tubu*, and *elek marboru*, emphasize respect, social harmony, and compassion, resonating with biblical ethics (R. M. Simanjuntak; M. Kause; V. H. Siahaan; E. Modok; Y. Sagala, 2022). For instance, *somba marhula-hula* promotes honoring elders, in harmony with "honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20 : 12), while *manat mardongan tubu* encourages reconciliation and cooperation among community members. Integrating Dalihan Na Tolu into family based Christian education demonstrates the importance of contextualizing theological education within local culture. Finally, this study underscores a holistic model of Christian character education, connecting theology, family, and culture. For future practice, Christian educators and families are encouraged to develop structured strategies for moral and spiritual education that integrate Biblical principles with local cultural framework. Such contextualized

approaches ensure that character education remains Biblically faithful, socially responsible, and culturally meaningful.

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