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Mission Batak traditions to Educational Transformation: The History, Dynamics, and Challenges of Church Schools in Tapanuli, 1950-2024

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Abstract

This study examines the historical transformation, institutional dynamics, and contemporary challenges of church-based education in Tapanuli, North Sumatra, Indonesia, from 1950 to 2024. Although missionary education played a foundational role in the development of formal schooling and Christian leadership among the Batak, the post-independence trajectory of church schools has received comparatively limited attention as a process of institutional transformation. This study employed a qualitative historical research design using archival documents, published historical sources, oral histories, field observations, and material evidence. The findings demonstrate that church-based education underwent three major transformations: the transition from missionary education to an Indigenous church-based educational system after independence; institutional professionalization and adaptation to national educational structures; and contemporary transformation in response to educational competition, technological change, professional standards, and cultural expectations. The study further demonstrates that Batak communities actively appropriated educational institutions as instruments of literacy, social mobility, leadership formation, and "hamajuon" (social progress). However, tensions remain between inherited Western educational epistemologies and the need to strengthen Batak cultural and Indigenous knowledge within Christian education. The study concludes that the future relevance of church schools depends on integrating theological identity, educational quality, technological innovation, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Church schools should therefore be understood as dynamic institutions of educational, ecclesial, cultural, and social transformation.

Keywords: *batak tradition; church schools; christian education; educational transformation*

Introduction

Education has historically been one of the most important institutional arenas through which Christian missions interacted with Indigenous societies. Missionary education was rarely limited to the transmission of religious doctrine; it frequently involved literacy, teacher preparation, social organization, health services, and the formation of new forms of community leadership. In many colonial contexts, missionaries were among the earliest providers of formal education for Indigenous populations, while their educational activities simultaneously became sites of negotiation among religious conversion, colonial interests,

Indigenous agency, and emerging aspirations for social change (Jensz, 2012). The relationship between mission and education was therefore inherently complex: schools could function simultaneously as instruments of Christianization and as spaces through which Indigenous communities acquired new forms of knowledge and social mobility. This complexity is particularly evident in the history of Christian education in Indonesia. Missionary organizations contributed significantly to the development of educational institutions in several regions of the Dutch East Indies, including the Batak lands of North Sumatra. Historical research on colonial education in Tarutung demonstrates that the development of formal schooling was closely associated with Protestant mission activities and subsequently interacted with Dutch colonial educational policies (Tampubolon et al., 2022). In the Batak context, the emergence of mission schools was consequently part of a broader transformation in which Christianity, education, colonialism, and local society became increasingly interconnected. Recent historical research further demonstrates that the interaction between the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG), Batak traditions, and Dutch colonial influence produced significant social and cultural transformations in North Tapanuli between 1861 and 1940 (Siahaan et al., 2025).

The educational legacy of the Batak mission should nevertheless not be interpreted solely through a narrative of missionary success. International scholarship on missionary education emphasizes the importance of examining Indigenous agency and the tensions between missionary institutions, colonial governments, and local communities (Jensz, 2012). Hölzl (2017), for example, demonstrates that Indigenous teachers and catechists were not simply passive recipients of missionary educational projects; they became important actors in the development of local Christianity and emerging educated communities. A similar perspective is relevant to the Batak case, where education contributed to the emergence of intellectualism and aspirations for *hamajuon* or social progress among Toba Batak communities (Napitupulu, 1998). Research on Tarutung likewise indicates that schools associated with the Christian mission played an important role in introducing modern forms of education and intellectual life to Batak society (Purba & Siagian, n.d.). At the same time, the historical relationship between Christian education and Indigenous culture requires critical examination. Postcolonial scholarship has demonstrated that missionary education could privilege Western epistemologies and educational practices while marginalizing Indigenous knowledge systems. In the Indonesian context, Lauterboom (2019) argues that Christian religious education remains marked by traces of colonial educational structures and calls for a decolonial transformation of educational content, relationships, and pedagogical practices. Similar concerns have been identified in other postcolonial contexts, where religious education inherited epistemological assumptions established during the missionary and colonial periods (Matemba, 2021). These perspectives suggest that the history of church-based education should be examined not only in terms of institutional expansion but also in terms of how educational authority, knowledge, culture, and religious identity have been negotiated over time.

This issue is increasingly important in contemporary discussions of culturally responsive and Indigenous education. Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes the importance of recognizing learners' cultural identities and incorporating culturally

meaningful knowledge into educational processes (Gay, 2018). Research involving Indigenous education further suggests that culturally responsive, sustaining, and revitalizing pedagogies can strengthen learners' engagement with cultural knowledge while challenging educational structures that marginalize Indigenous epistemologies (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021). Similarly, research on culturally responsive pedagogy in Māori education demonstrates that meaningful connections between students' cultural worlds, relationships, and academic knowledge can reshape classroom learning (Glynn et al., 2010). These perspectives provide an important conceptual lens for examining the contemporary relevance of church schools whose historical identities emerged through encounters between Christianity and local cultures. For the Batak context, this question is particularly significant because the history of Christian education has been inseparable from cultural transformation. The historical development of mission education in the Batak lands involved not only the introduction of Christianity and Western-style schooling but also complex processes of cultural negotiation and adaptation (Siahaan et al., 2025). Recent scholarship on Batak Christian education has consequently begun to call attention to the need for greater recognition of Batak epistemology and local cultural resources within Christian educational practices (Tampubolon et al., 2026). This development indicates that the contemporary challenge is not simply whether church schools should survive, but how they can reinterpret their historical identity in ways that remain educationally relevant while engaging critically and constructively with local cultural heritage.

The post-independence period provides an important context for examining this transformation. After 1945, church-based educational institutions increasingly operated within a national education system in which government schools and other private educational institutions became significant competitors and partners. Church schools therefore had to negotiate new expectations concerning educational quality, professionalization, institutional governance, national curriculum requirements, technological change, and the changing expectations of families. The historical legacy of mission education remained important, but its institutional meaning was transformed as Indonesia developed a more comprehensive national education system. Against this background, the period 1950–2024 provides a particularly important historical window for examining the transformation of church schools in Tapanuli. Rather than treating church schools merely as remnants of missionary history, this study approaches them as institutions that have continuously negotiated religious identity, local culture, educational modernization, and social change. The study focuses particularly on the historical educational centers of Pearaja, Pansurnapitu, and Sipoholon, which occupy significant positions in the development of HKBP's educational and ecclesiastical history. This study aims to examine the historical development, institutional dynamics, and contemporary challenges of church schools in Tapanuli from 1950 to 2024. It asks how church-based education transformed following Indonesian independence, what social and institutional dynamics shaped its development, and what challenges have emerged in sustaining its educational and ecclesial identity in a rapidly changing society. By connecting the history of missionary education with postcolonial transformation and contemporary debates on culturally responsive education, this study seeks to contribute a more nuanced understanding of church schools as dynamic institutions situated at the intersection of religion, education, culture, and social transformation.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative historical research design to examine the development, institutional dynamics, and contemporary challenges of church-based schools in Tapanuli from 1950 to 2024. A historical approach was selected because the primary objective of the study was to reconstruct and interpret changes in church-based education across a defined historical period rather than to measure relationships among predetermined variables. Historical educational research requires systematic attention to the nature of sources, their historical context, periodisation, and the interpretation of changes across time (García & García, 2020; Kipping et al., 2014). The study adopted a historical-interpretive perspective. Rather than presenting the development of church schools as a chronological sequence of events, the research examined how educational institutions responded to changing religious, political, social, cultural, and educational conditions following Indonesian independence. The period 1950–2024 was selected because it encompasses the post-independence transformation of church-based education, the consolidation of Indonesia's national education system, subsequent institutional developments, and the contemporary challenges facing church schools. The historical analysis was organized into three broad periods: (1) the post-independence transition (1950–1970), (2) institutional development and adaptation (1971–2000), and (3) contemporary transformation and challenges (2001–2024). These periods were used as analytical categories rather than rigid historical boundaries. Their purpose was to facilitate comparison of institutional changes and to identify continuities and discontinuities in the development of church-based education.

The research was conducted in Tapanuli, North Sumatra, Indonesia, with particular attention to three historically significant locations associated with the educational development of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP): Pearaja, Pansurnapitu, and Sipoholon. These locations were selected purposively because of their historical relationship with the development of Christian education and teacher preparation in the Batak region. Historical documentation records the development of teacher education from Parau Sorat to Pansurnapitu and subsequently to Sipoholon. The Seminarium in Sipoholon, for example, developed into an institution for the preparation of guru huria, and its institutional development continued through subsequent transformations in curriculum, facilities, and educational function. An earlier historical study of the HKBP Seminarium Sipoholon similarly employed field research, interviews, observation, and library research to reconstruct its institutional development from 1901 onward. The selection of these sites therefore enabled the study to connect institutional history with the broader transformation of church-based education in Tapanuli.

The study employed four principal categories of sources: first, institutional and archival documents, including church records, school documents, institutional reports, historical publications, curriculum documents, administrative records, and other documents related to the development of church schools; second, published historical sources, including books, journal articles, theses, and previous studies concerning HKBP, Christian missions, Batak society, and education in Tapanuli; third, oral history sources, obtained through interviews with individuals who possessed direct or accumulated knowledge concerning the development of church schools; and fourth, field observations and photographic or material

evidence, where available, particularly concerning historical educational sites and surviving institutional facilities. The use of multiple source categories was intended to prevent the historical narrative from being dependent upon a single institutional or personal account. Historical research is particularly sensitive to the selective production and preservation of documents; consequently, source criticism and comparison among different types of evidence are essential to establish historically defensible interpretations (Kipping et al., 2014). Oral history was used to complement documentary evidence and to recover experiences that may not have been preserved adequately in institutional archives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge of or involvement in church-based education during the study period. The participants included former and current teachers, school administrators, church leaders, alumni, and other individuals with direct knowledge of the development of church schools in the selected locations. Participants were not selected to achieve statistical representation; rather, they were selected because their experiences and memories could contribute historically relevant evidence concerning institutional change, educational practices, organizational decisions, and contemporary challenges. Oral testimony was treated as historical evidence rather than as an automatically accurate reconstruction of the past. Particular attention was therefore given to differences between personal memory and documentary evidence. This approach is consistent with methodological scholarship emphasizing that oral accounts should be interpreted critically and, where possible, examined alongside institutional archives and other historical sources.

The analysis followed a historical-interpretive procedure consisting of source criticism, chronological organization, thematic coding, contextual interpretation, and synthesis. Initially, documentary and interview materials were organized chronologically according to the three analytical periods. The researchers then identified recurring themes concerning institutional transformation, educational mission, curriculum, teacher development, church-school relations, cultural identity, educational modernization, and contemporary institutional challenges. The next stage involved comparing evidence from different sources. Statements derived from interviews were compared with documentary evidence, while institutional accounts were examined against published historical scholarship and material evidence. This process constituted source triangulation. Triangulation is useful in historical and history-education research because different sources may provide complementary, contradictory, or incomplete perspectives; however, triangulation was not treated as a mechanical guarantee of validity. Instead, contradictory evidence was retained and interpreted as part of the historical complexity of the phenomenon. Finally, the researchers synthesized the evidence into a historical narrative explaining continuity, change, and institutional adaptation from 1950 to 2024. The analysis therefore moved beyond describing individual events to interpreting how changes in the political, educational, social, and ecclesial environment influenced the development of church-based education in Tapanuli. The study considered the provenance and purpose of each source and examined discrepancies where they occurred. This approach is consistent with methodological discussions emphasizing that historical triangulation must be accompanied by critical attention to evidence and the limitations of each source. Particular attention was given to retrospective institutional narratives, because such accounts may reflect contemporary interpretations of earlier events. Similarly, oral histories were interpreted with

awareness of the effects of memory, temporal distance, and individual positionality. The combination of archival documents, published scholarship, oral testimony, and field evidence consequently provided a more nuanced basis for reconstructing the transformation of church-based education.

Findings and Discussion

The findings indicate that the history of church-based education in Tapanuli between 1950 and 2024 cannot be adequately understood as a simple continuation of missionary education. Rather, it represents a prolonged process of institutional transformation in which the educational mission of the church was repeatedly redefined in response to political change, the development of Indonesia's national education system, professionalization, social transformation, and changing understandings of Batak Christian identity. The historical trajectory of Pearaja, Pansurnapitu, and Sipoholon demonstrates that church-based education evolved from an institution primarily associated with missionary expansion into a more differentiated educational system that simultaneously pursued ecclesial formation, professional competence, cultural continuity, and institutional sustainability. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on missionary education, which emphasizes that missionary schools should not be interpreted merely as instruments of religious conversion. Missionary education often became a site where religion, literacy, social mobility, colonial structures, and Indigenous agency intersected (Jensz, 2012). In the Batak context, this intersection was particularly significant because education rapidly acquired a meaning that extended beyond the original missionary agenda. Education became a mechanism through which local communities could gain literacy, social status, professional opportunities, and access to emerging forms of modernity (Napitupulu, 1998). Consequently, the post-independence history of church schools should be interpreted as a continuation of this process of local appropriation and institutional adaptation.

Post-Independence Transition: From Missionary Education to Church Education

The first period, 1950-1970, was characterized by the gradual redefinition of church education following the establishment of the Indonesian Republic. The institutional environment that had supported missionary education during the colonial period was fundamentally altered. The church was no longer operating within a colonial framework in which missionary organizations could establish educational institutions as part of a broader evangelization strategy. Instead, church schools increasingly became participants in a national educational system regulated by the Indonesian state. The findings demonstrate considerable institutional continuity. The educational infrastructure, institutional memory, teacher-training traditions, and Christian pedagogical orientation inherited from the missionary period remained influential. Rather than abandoning the educational structures established during the earlier period, HKBP gradually appropriated and reorganized them according to its own ecclesial needs. This pattern supports the argument of Hölzl (2017) that Indigenous actors in missionary educational systems were not merely passive recipients but became important agents in shaping the development of local Christianity and educational institutions.

The transformation of Seminarium Sipoholon provides particularly strong evidence of this process. Silalahi (2014) demonstrates that the educational history of the institution began with the preparation of Batak teachers through the earlier seminaries at Pansurnapitu. The teacher-training institution was subsequently transferred to Sipoholon, where it developed into an important center for the preparation of church workers. After its closure during the period of war and political instability, the institution was reopened in 1962 with a more specific orientation toward the preparation of *guru huria*. This represented a significant institutional reorientation because the educational function of the institution was no longer primarily directed toward preparing teachers for general schools but toward preparing teachers who would serve within the church (Silalahi, 2014). The distinction is historically important. During the missionary period, the teacher could simultaneously perform the functions of school teacher, catechist, evangelist, and church worker. Following independence, these functions increasingly became differentiated. The transformation of Seminarium Sipoholon therefore reflects a broader process of professional and institutional differentiation in which church education developed a more explicitly ecclesial identity. This finding also illustrates that institutional transformation did not necessarily mean the abandonment of the missionary legacy. Instead, the legacy was selectively retained and reinterpreted. The institutional objective changed, but the emphasis on education as a mechanism for producing Christian leaders remained. In this sense, post-independence church education represented not a rupture with the past but a process of institutional translation from missionary education into an Indigenous church-based educational structure.

Pansurnapitu, Sipoholon, and the Formation of Indigenous Educational Leadership

The historical significance of Pansurnapitu and Sipoholon becomes clearer when examined through the concept of Indigenous agency. The establishment of teacher seminaries in the Batak region created opportunities for local people to acquire formal education and assume new social roles. Silalahi (2014) notes that the development of teacher education was closely connected with the growing demand for teachers as the number of schools increased. The seminary therefore served an institutional function that extended beyond theological education: it produced Indigenous educational personnel capable of sustaining the expanding school system. The popularity of teacher education among Batak communities is particularly significant. Education was increasingly associated with opportunities for social advancement, professional employment, and public recognition. This confirms the observation of Napitupulu (1998) that the development of Christian education contributed to the emergence of intellectualism and aspirations for *hamajuon* among Toba Batak communities. Education became part of a broader cultural project of progress.

This finding complicates conventional interpretations of missionary education. If missionary schools are examined exclusively from the perspective of institutional intent, education may appear primarily as an instrument of Christianization. However, when examined from the perspective of local communities, educational institutions could be appropriated for purposes that extended beyond missionary intentions. Batak families could interpret education as a means of social mobility, intellectual development, and participation in modern society. This process illustrates the multidirectional character of educational

transformation. Missionaries introduced institutional structures, but Indigenous communities appropriated those structures and invested them with new meanings. Consequently, church education in Tapanuli emerged from an interaction among missionary initiatives, Indigenous aspirations, church institutionalization, and broader processes of modernization. The development of *guru huria* provides an important example of this transformation. The church teacher became not simply an instructor but an institutional representative of Christianity within local communities. Thus, teacher formation became simultaneously educational and ecclesial. The historical development of Seminarium Sipoholon demonstrates that the preparation of church teachers remained a central institutional concern even as the form and level of education changed (Silalahi, 2014).

Institutional Development and Professionalization, 1971–2000

The second period, 1971–2000, demonstrates an increasing emphasis on institutional professionalization. The development of Indonesian education generated new expectations regarding teacher qualifications, curriculum, institutional management, and educational standards. Church-based educational institutions were therefore required to adapt to a more formalized educational environment. One of the clearest manifestations of this transformation was the development of Seminarium Sipoholon into the Sekolah Guru Huria in 1962 and subsequently into the Sekolah Tinggi Guru Huria (STGH) in 1987 (Silalahi, 2014). The institutional transformation was accompanied by changes in student entry qualifications, curriculum, duration of study, and educational objectives. Whereas earlier teacher education could recruit students with relatively basic educational backgrounds, later institutional development increasingly required graduates of secondary education and provided a more advanced level of professional preparation (Silalahi, 2014). This transformation indicates that church-based education was not inherently opposed to modernization. On the contrary, it adopted elements of modern professional education to maintain its institutional relevance. The development of STGH demonstrates a process through which ecclesial education sought greater academic legitimacy without abandoning its vocational purpose.

The institutional history also reveals an interesting tension between expansion and quality. Silalahi (2014) reports that the institution maintained relatively small student cohorts and a limited number of instructors. Such a pattern suggests that the institution was oriented toward producing qualified church workers rather than maximizing enrollment. The finding is important because it indicates that institutional success in church education cannot be measured exclusively by quantitative expansion. The quality of spiritual, theological, pedagogical, and vocational formation constituted an equally important dimension of institutional effectiveness. This pattern corresponds with broader research on religious education, which argues that faith-based educational institutions frequently operate with multiple objectives that cannot be reduced to conventional academic achievement alone (Matemba, 2021). Church schools must simultaneously address academic, spiritual, moral, and communal expectations. Their institutional identity therefore requires a more multidimensional understanding of educational quality.

Contemporary Transformation and the Challenge of Relevance, 2001–2024

The period 2001-2024 reveals a more complex institutional environment. Church schools increasingly operated within an educational landscape characterized by competition, technological transformation, professionalization, accreditation, changing parental expectations, and the expansion of alternative educational institutions. The central challenge consequently shifted from establishing educational access toward demonstrating institutional relevance and quality. The historical evidence suggests that the prestige of church-based education alone is no longer sufficient to guarantee institutional sustainability. Contemporary families evaluate schools through multiple criteria, including academic quality, teacher competence, facilities, technological capacity, student outcomes, character formation, and prospects for further education. Church schools must therefore communicate their distinctive contribution while simultaneously meeting broader expectations concerning educational quality. This situation creates a strategic tension. If church schools focus exclusively on their historical religious identity, they may risk appearing disconnected from contemporary educational developments. Conversely, if they adopt mainstream educational models without maintaining their ecclesial identity, they risk losing the distinctive characteristics that historically justified their existence.

The findings suggest that the most sustainable response is not choosing between identity and modernization but integrating the two. The church school of the contemporary period must be both academically credible and ecclesially meaningful. This interpretation is particularly relevant in light of recent scholarship on Batak Christian education. Tampubolon et al. (2026) argue that Christian education in Batak contexts requires a process of decolonization, particularly through curriculum transformation and the recognition of Batak epistemological resources. Their argument strengthens the present finding that institutional modernization cannot be separated from questions of cultural identity.

Ecclesial Identity and the Continuing Role of “Guru Huria”

Despite substantial institutional changes, the findings reveal remarkable continuity in the ecclesial identity of church-based education. The concept of *guru huria* remains particularly important because it expresses the integration of education, Christian formation, and ecclesial service. The persistence of this concept demonstrates that professionalization did not eliminate the vocational dimension of church education. Instead, professional competence became increasingly integrated with theological knowledge, spiritual formation, character, and ministry responsibility. This represents a significant difference between church-based teacher education and purely secular professional teacher preparation.

The historical development of Seminarium Sipoholon therefore reveals a process of institutional differentiation rather than secularization. The institution changed its educational level, organizational structure, and curriculum, but its fundamental orientation toward preparing Christian educational leaders remained persistent (Silalahi, 2014). This finding is consistent with the broader argument that religious educational institutions can modernize without necessarily becoming secularized. Modernization may instead involve the development of new organizational forms through which religious purposes are pursued under contemporary institutional conditions (Matemba, 2021).

Church Education and the Question of Batak Cultural Identity

A major finding of this study concerns the relationship between Christian education and Batak cultural identity. Historically, missionary education introduced new forms of knowledge, literacy, pedagogy, and social organization. These developments contributed substantially to educational transformation but also created tensions concerning the status of Indigenous knowledge. This issue is consistent with postcolonial critiques of Christian education. Lauterboom (2019) argues that Christian religious education in Indonesia continues to carry traces of colonial epistemological structures. Such structures can influence what forms of knowledge are considered legitimate, how teachers understand authority, and which cultural perspectives are privileged within educational institutions.

In the Batak context, this problem is increasingly recognized. Tampubolon et al. (2026) argue for curriculum transformation that takes Batak epistemology more seriously. Their work suggests that decolonizing Christian education does not mean rejecting Christianity or modern education. Rather, it involves questioning inherited assumptions about whose knowledge counts, how knowledge is transmitted, and how Christian faith can be articulated within Indigenous cultural contexts. The present study supports this argument historically. The development of church schools in Tapanuli demonstrates that Christianity and education were never simply external forces imposed upon a passive population. Batak communities actively appropriated, negotiated, and transformed educational institutions. Consequently, the contemporary curriculum should similarly recognize Batak communities as producers of knowledge rather than merely recipients of imported educational models.

From Cultural Preservation to Culturally Responsive Christian Education

The findings further indicate that cultural integration should move beyond symbolic representation. Incorporating Batak songs, language, traditional ceremonies, or cultural artifacts into school activities is insufficient if the underlying epistemological assumptions of education remain unchanged. Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes the importance of connecting educational processes with learners' cultural identities, experiences, and community knowledge (Gay, 2018). McCarty and Brayboy (2021) similarly emphasize the importance of educational approaches that sustain and revitalize Indigenous knowledge rather than merely recognizing culture as an additional classroom component.

Applied to church schools in Tapanuli, this means that Batak cultural knowledge can become a pedagogical resource for Christian education. Concepts such as communal responsibility, relationality, respect for elders, mutual assistance, and social solidarity can be critically engaged in relation to Christian theological concepts. Such an approach does not require romanticizing Batak culture; rather, it requires creating a critical dialogue between Christian faith, local cultural knowledge, and contemporary educational needs. The possibility of such dialogue is supported by the historical experience of the Batak church itself. Christianity became socially rooted partly because it interacted with local communities and was appropriated by Indigenous actors. The future of Christian education may require a similar process of contextualization, in which Christian education is not merely translated linguistically into Batak culture but epistemologically and pedagogically contextualized.

The findings identify five interconnected challenges for church schools in Tapanuli: educational quality, teacher professionalization, curriculum relevance, technological transformation, and institutional sustainability. First, educational quality has become an unavoidable concern. Historical reputation must be accompanied by measurable educational performance and effective institutional management. Second, teachers require both professional and theological competencies. The contemporary church educator must be capable of responding to technological, pedagogical, and social changes while maintaining Christian identity. Third, curriculum relevance must be reconsidered. A curriculum that simply reproduces inherited missionary structures may fail to address the experiences of contemporary Batak students. Conversely, a curriculum that removes ecclesial and cultural identity may weaken the distinctive mission of church education. Curriculum development therefore needs to integrate national educational expectations, Christian formation, local culture, and contemporary competencies. Fourth, technological change has fundamentally altered the relationship between schools and knowledge. Students can now access theological, cultural, scientific, and social information through digital platforms without depending exclusively on teachers or school libraries. The role of church schools consequently shifts from controlling knowledge toward developing students' capacity to interpret knowledge critically and ethically. Finally, institutional sustainability requires strategic adaptation. Church schools need governance structures, leadership capacity, financial sustainability, professional human resources, and institutional networks capable of responding to changing educational environments. These challenges suggest that ecclesial commitment alone cannot guarantee institutional continuity.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that church schools in Tapanuli have historically functioned as institutions of social transformation. Their contribution cannot be reduced to religious instruction because they also participated in literacy development, teacher formation, leadership development, social mobility, and the emergence of educated Batak communities. This conclusion reinforces the importance of *hamajuon* as a conceptual lens for interpreting the history of Batak Christian education. Education became associated with the aspiration to advance the community. The teacher seminary was therefore significant not simply because it produced church workers but because it opened pathways toward new forms of social participation (Napitupulu, 1998; Silalahi, 2014). The historical evidence consequently supports a reinterpretation of missionary education from the perspective of Indigenous agency. The development of church schools should not be narrated exclusively as the expansion of Western missionary institutions. It should also be understood as a history of local appropriation in which Batak communities transformed education into an instrument for religious, cultural, intellectual, and social development. This interpretation is consistent with Jenz's (2012) broader argument that missionary education involved complex interactions between missionaries, Indigenous communities, colonial authorities, and educational aspirations. In Tapanuli, these interactions produced institutions that continued to evolve long after the colonial missionary framework had disappeared.

From Missionary Legacy to Transformative Church Education

The overall findings demonstrate a historical movement from missionary education toward transformative church education. The missionary period established the institutional foundations; the post-independence period required institutional reorientation; the professionalization period strengthened educational legitimacy; and the contemporary period requires renewed engagement with culture, technology, quality, and institutional sustainability. Pearaja, Pansurnapitu, and Sipoholon can therefore be interpreted as interconnected historical nodes within this transformation. Pansurnapitu represents the emergence of Indigenous teacher preparation; Sipoholon represents institutional continuity and professional development; while the broader ecclesial environment of Pearaja represents the relationship between educational institutions and HKBP's organizational identity.

The most important implication is that the future of church schools cannot depend solely on historical prestige. Historical memory provides institutional legitimacy, but contemporary relevance requires continuous innovation. The challenge is therefore to transform historical inheritance into educational capacity. Such transformation requires at least four interconnected commitments. First, church schools must preserve their theological and ecclesial identity. Second, they must strengthen academic and professional quality. Third, they must critically integrate Batak cultural and Indigenous epistemological resources. Fourth, they must develop pedagogical and technological capacities appropriate to contemporary learners. In this framework, decolonization does not mean rejecting the Christian educational heritage of Tapanuli. Instead, it means critically reconsidering which elements of that heritage should be preserved, transformed, or reconstructed. The objective is to move from an educational model in which local culture is positioned at the margins toward one in which Batak cultural knowledge participates meaningfully in the construction of Christian educational knowledge (Lauterboom, 2019; Tampubolon et al., 2026).

The historical trajectory from 1950 to 2024 therefore demonstrates that church schools in Tapanuli have survived because they have repeatedly adapted to changing circumstances. Their future relevance will depend on whether they can continue this tradition of adaptation while remaining faithful to their theological vocation and culturally situated identity. Church schools should consequently be understood not as remnants of missionary history but as dynamic institutions capable of contributing to educational, ecclesial, cultural, and social transformation. The central finding of this study can thus be summarized as a movement from mission to transformation. Missionary education established the initial educational infrastructure; Indigenous communities appropriated and expanded its opportunities; the post-independence church reorganized its institutional structures; professionalization strengthened its educational legitimacy; and contemporary challenges now require a more contextual, culturally responsive, and technologically adaptive form of Christian education. The history of church schools in Tapanuli is therefore not simply a history of institutional survival. It is a history of continuous negotiation over the meaning of education, Christianity, culture, and social progress.

Implications

The findings of this study imply that the development of church-based education in Tapanuli today needs to be understood as a continuous process of institutional transformation while maintaining the historical values that constitute its identity. The transition from a missionary orientation toward a more professional church-based educational system demonstrates the importance of enabling church educational institutions to adapt to social changes, national educational policies, and the demands of professionalization without losing their commitment to Christian faith and character formation. The continuity of pedagogical traditions, leadership formation, and *guru huria* education further indicates that historical legacies are not merely valuable for documentation but can also serve as important resources for reflecting on the development of contextual models of church-based education. Therefore, church-based educational institutions need to integrate academic professionalism, the strengthening of educators' competencies, spiritual formation, and community engagement in a balanced manner so that education does not merely produce professionally competent graduates but also equips them to contribute to the development of the church and society based on Christian values.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the history of church-based education in Tapanuli between 1950 and 2024 is best understood as a process of continuous institutional transformation rather than as a simple continuation of the missionary educational legacy. The transition from the colonial missionary period to the post-independence Indonesian educational system fundamentally altered the institutional environment in which church schools operated. Nevertheless, the educational structures, pedagogical traditions, leadership formation, and ecclesial orientations established during the missionary period continued to shape the development of church-based education. The history of Pearaja, Pansurnapitu, and Sipoholon illustrates how these institutions repeatedly adapted their educational functions while retaining their broader commitment to Christian formation and community development. The first major conclusion concerns the transformation of educational purpose. During the post-independence period, church education gradually moved from a predominantly missionary orientation toward an explicitly church-based and professionally differentiated educational system. The development of *guru huria* education demonstrates this transition particularly clearly.

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