

Negotiating Tradition: Hidden Resistance of Batak Toba Women to Marpariban Arranged Matchmaking

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate the methods by which Batak Toba women in Habeahan Naburahan Village, Samosir Regency, resist the concealed practice of marpariban matchmaking. As part of the Batak Toba kinship structure, Marpariban matching is a traditional practice that places women in a position where they are unable to select their life partners. A form of resistance that is not overtly articulated has emerged as a result of this. Information was gathered using descriptive qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, documentation, and observation. Relevant data and information are provided by informants who are Batak Toba women in the village of Habeahan Naburahan who have firsthand experience with the Marpariban matchmaking practice and family members who participate in the customary matchmaking procedure. The findings and analysis revealed that the Batak Toba women in this hamlet oppose this matchmaking practice through covert resistance. Some of these behaviors are putting off arranged marriages for school or work reasons, using religious legitimacy as a reason to say no without directly confronting the person, formally accepting arranged marriages with a passive attitude and little emotional involvement, and not talking openly about marriage plans. James C. Scott's theory of resistance says that these activities show that there is concealed resistance, or a sort of resistance that happens while people follow the rules. This suggests that Batak Toba women tend to use subtle opposition as a tactic to preserve their independence inside the patriarchal system rather than openly rejecting the Marpariban norm.

Keywords: Everyday resistance; women's agency; Marpariban arranged matchmaking; Batak Toba society; customary marriage



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INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a basic social structure that controls not only close relationships but also family ties, inheritance, and the passing down of culture. The institution of marriage serves as a means of intergenerational transmission of social mores and cultural values in many traditional countries. Marriage customs around the world still show a lot of family participation, especially in societies where kinship and lineage are still important to how society works (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA] - Population Division, 2020). This situation makes marriage a significant place where gender roles and power dynamics are repeated

In the last few decades, the way people get married around the world has changed a lot, especially when it comes to when they get married and start a family. Data from the United Nations indicates a general increase in the age at which people marry across all regions. This decrease is due to bigger demographic changes that are happening because of education, urbanization, and changing gender role (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023). Furthermore, global studies on fertility and family formation highlight that reproductive choices, access to family planning, and women's life-course ambitions are increasingly linked to the time and expectations of marriage (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

[UNDESA] - Population Division, 2022). In Indonesia, these worldwide changes interact with ongoing family engagement in marriage decisions, especially in rural and traditional areas, where collective norms continue to influence women's marital paths. Matchmaking not as a personal preference, but as a cultural and moral necessity (Sitindjak, 2020).

In modern Batak Toba society, the legitimacy of *Marpariban*-planned matchmaking is being questioned, despite its historical justification as a socially stabilizing institution. Ethnographic research indicates that modernization, enhanced educational opportunities, and the reinterpretation of religious texts have altered the perceptions of marriage and customary obligations among younger generations (Hutagaol & Nurussa'adah, 2021a). Marriage is no longer viewed merely as the fulfillment of adat; it is now recognized as a personal commitment necessitating emotional connection and individual preparedness (Dinda et al., 2023).

Women endure the greatest immediate stress amid these socio-cultural changes. While traditional systems frequently regard women as passive participants in matchmaking decisions, extensive demographic research in Indonesia reveals a steady transformation in women's life-course trajectories. According to empirical study, educational level is one of the most important factors that affect a woman's age at first marriage, along with her job status and where she lives (Imron et al., 2020; Najib et al., 2021). Additionally, research on early marriage demonstrates that women are much more likely to marry young and non-volitionally when they have little educational options and high family pressure (Berliana et al., 2018). These results show that education is not only a social and economic resource but also a way for women to deal with their expectations for marriage. In traditional settings, like *Marpariban*-planned matchmaking, seeking education or a job serves as a socially acceptable justification for postponing or opposing family-arranged marriages without direct confrontation (Simanjuntak, 2005).

Studies on gender and traditional marriage in Indonesia have shown that women in arranged marriages are at risk of moral coercion, psychological pressure, and having less capacity to negotiate (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, 2023; Padang & Lase, 2022; UNDP - UN Women, 2018). The fact that these kinds of forces don't necessarily cause open resistance is crucial. To get around traditional authority figures and keep confrontations to a minimum, women typically resort to adaptive techniques.

Feminist and gender studies emphasize that women's responses to institutional restraints go beyond mere compliance or rejection. Frameworks for women's empowerment show that agency often works within, not outside, of social institutions. The result lets women negotiate norms and assert their independence in ways that are acceptable in society (Kabeer, 2005; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, 2023; UNDP - UN Women, 2018). Such discussions are particularly obvious in life-course decisions, including marriage, when women's choices are influenced by intersecting elements of gender norms, familial expectations, and material accessibility. Global data further substantiates effective strategies employed by women to traverse and discreetly reform gendered structures, such as marriage and family systems, without open confrontation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, 2023). This viewpoint offers a crucial framework for comprehending women's tactics in traditional matchmaking settings as expressions of negotiated agency rather than direct defiance (Mesra et al., 2021).

The idea of daily resistance proposed by James C. Scott (Scott, 2010) offers a helpful framework for comprehending these tactics. According to Scott, subordinated actors often challenge dominance in ways that are difficult to define yet widely acknowledged. In the context of *Marpariban* planned matchmaking, people may oppose by putting off marriage to go to school or work, using religious reasons, or saying they agree with the marriage without really agreeing. These behaviors are examples of latent resistance that are part of ordinary social interactions (ANI, 2023).

Most of the research on *Marpariban* so far has focused on the rituals, symbols, and ways that Batak Toba marriage customs communicate (Hutagaol & Nurussa'adah, 2021a). Other research examines post-marital ramifications, particularly the susceptibility of women in pariban marriages (Padang & Lase, 2022). However, there has been a lack of attention paid to the resistance that women exhibit throughout the stage of arranged matchmaking itself, particularly resistance that manifests itself in a covert manner rather than through outright rejection.

To fill that need, this essay investigates the covert opposition that women displayed during *Marpariban* arranged matchmaking in Desa Habeahan Naburahan, which is located in Kabupaten Samosir. Due to the fact that traditional matchmaking continues to be socially meaningful despite broader socioeconomic shifts, the

backdrop of the village is significant. In line with larger national changes shown in demographic statistics, field data show that women do not necessarily reject tradition openly. Rather, they navigate it by utilizing resources such as education, jobs, and religious reasoning (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023).

The uniqueness of this study resides in its analytical emphasis on concealed resistance as a mechanism of cultural negotiation within traditional matchmaking. Using Scott's theory as a framework, this piece presents Batak Toba women as dynamic figures who quietly transform tradition through their practices. The findings improve gender and anthropology studies by showing that traditional behaviors are not set in stone; instead, they are constantly redefined by women's everyday actions in response to changing social situations

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive methodology to investigate women's covert resistance to *Marpariban*-arranged matchmaking within Batak Toba society. A qualitative approach was used because the study wanted to learn about the social meanings, lived experiences, and everyday activities that are part of traditional matchmaking, including subtle forms of resistance. Qualitative research facilitates a comprehensive examination of social phenomena by emphasizing individuals' viewpoints and contextual interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sugiyono, 2019).

The investigation was carried out in Desa Habeahan Naburahan, which is located in Kabupaten Samosir. This is a place where *Marpariban*-arranged matchmaking is still socially accepted and performed. The research site was deliberately chosen for its robust adherence to Batak Toba customary standards, while concurrently undergoing social transformations pertaining to schooling and gender roles. We used purposive sampling to choose informants, concentrating on people who had direct knowledge and experience with *Marpariban* (Hutagaol & Nurussa'adah, 2021b). The core respondents consisted of Batak Toba women who had either experienced or were currently experiencing *Marpariban* arranged matchmaking. Additional informants included family members involved in matchmaking decisions and community people knowledgeable about traditional marriage traditions.

Methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation were utilized to get the necessary information. For the purpose of investigating women's experiences, perceptions, and strategies in response to family-arranged matchmaking, in-depth interviews were carried out. The interviews were of a semi-structured nature, which enabled the participants to freely express their opinions while also ensuring that they were in line with the research aim. The purpose of the participant observation was to record the social contacts that occur on a daily basis, the discussions that take place within families, and the customary customs that are associated with *Marpariban*. Documentation, including field notes and pertinent local documents, was utilized to augment interview and observational data. Triangulation was made possible by the employment of several data collection methods, which raised the findings' trustworthiness (Simanjuntak, 2006).

Data analysis occurred along with data collection via an interactive and thematic methodology. As part of the process of identifying recurrent patterns and themes associated with women's resistance methods, interview transcripts and field notes were methodically arranged, classified, and categorized. The study looked at common behaviors, including putting off marriage, using education or religion as an excuse, and showing passive compliance with social norms. The theory of everyday resistance developed by James C. Scott, which stresses covert and indirect forms of resistance within uneven power relations, was then used to explain these themes (Scott, 2010). This theoretical framework facilitated the researcher's integration of empirical data with expansive discourses on gender, power, and agency within customary systems.

Several qualitative validity tactics were used to make sure the research was trustworthy. These included using multiple data sources and methods, spending a long time in the field, and carefully interpreting the stories of the participants. These steps reduced bias and ensured that the results accurately reflected the participants' experiences..

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that *Marpariban*-organized matchmaking, historically viewed as an ideal and mandatory form of marriage in the Batak Toba community, has experienced a progressive transformation in significance in Desa Habeahan Naburahan. While traditional conventions are still a crucial cultural reference for keeping family ties strong, more and more women are questioning whether *Marpariban* is a good way to decide their marital destinies. Instead of just going along with it, Batak Toba women come up with different ways to resist that let them deal with social pressure while keeping their families and communities together.

Delaying Marriage as an Institutionalized Form of Hidden Resistance

The fact that delaying marriage is a socially acceptable method of resistance is one of the most significant discoveries that came out of this research. Table 1 (Forms and Categories of Women's Resistance to *Marpariban* Arranged Matchmaking) shows that the most common way participants resisted arranged marriage was by delaying marriage. Women intentionally delayed marriage by pursuing higher education, obtaining jobs, or stressing the necessity for personal and economic preparedness. Modern ideas of social mobility and achievement were in line with these explanations, so families largely accepted them.

Table 1. Forms and Categories of Women's Resistance to Marpariban Arranged Matchmaking

Informan Name (Age)	Form of Resistance	Category of Resistance
Royanna Habeahan (27)	Delaying marriage by citing education and employment	Hidden resistance
Lilis Habeahan (29)	Invoking religious legitimacy	Symbolic resistance
Hotmauli Habeahan (29)	Direct refusal toward family arrangements	Open resistance
Friska Marbun (32)	Subtle refusal combined with career advancement	Hidden resistance

The data in the table show that women of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds use marriage delay as a plan, not as an ignorant or unplanned reaction. Table 1 (Forms and Categories of Women's Resistance to *Marpariban* Arranged Matchmaking) shows that women who put off getting married often did so for socially acceptable reasons, such as going back to school or improving their professional prospects. These arguments show that women are aware of the dominant societal beliefs that put a high priority on getting an education and being financially ready. This lets them see delay not as breaking cultural norms, but as a responsible and forward-looking choice. A communal pattern of negotiation is revealed by the table, in which women make use of culturally acceptable narratives in order to manage the expectations of their families. In this way, the table does not only capture the activities of individuals.

This trend aligns with contemporary gender and marriage research indicating that postponing marriage has emerged as a prevalent approach for women to enhance decision-making autonomy in circumstances characterized by significant familial influence in marital arrangements. Research at both global and regional levels indicates that women who continue their education or join the workforce are more adept at negotiating the date of marriage without open confrontation, especially in communities characterized by strong kinship values (Najib et al., 2021; UNFPA Technical Brief, 2021). Moreover, research on women's agency underscores that these strategies exemplify a form of "negotiated compliance," wherein adherence to socially esteemed objectives—such as education and economic contribution—simultaneously serves as a mechanism of resistance against constraining marital expectations (Kabeer, 2005; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, 2023; UNDP - UN Women, 2018).

So, rather than being a straightforward rejection of tradition, the findings in Table 1 support the idea that postponing marriage functions as an ingrained kind of resistance.

From an analytical standpoint, marriage delay operates as a sort of covert resistance as defined by Scott (1985). It would appear that women are conforming to family norms, but by staying unmarried for longer, they are really undermining the power of traditional matching. Through the use of this strategy, women are able to gain time, enhance their bargaining positions, and avoid direct confrontation. Similar trends have been observed in extensive demographic research, indicating that education and employment substantially affect women's capacity to postpone marriage (Imron et al., 2020; Najib et al., 2021). In the framework of

Marpariban, delay serves as a nuanced yet successful strategy for negotiating autonomy while not overtly rejecting cultural norms

Preference for Partner Selection Based on Emotional Compatibility

Another important type of resistance found in this study is that women want to choose their partners based on love and emotional compatibility, not family ties. Several ladies were hesitant to tie the knot with a *pariban* suitor because they felt no emotional connection or reciprocated favor. As an alternative, they started looking for partners outside of the traditional circle of kinship, even though this decision caused pressure from their families (Table 1).

This choice indicates a significant evolution in the concept of marriage, transitioning from a communal institution focused on lineage preservation to a personal connection rooted in emotional satisfaction. This activity is considered symbolic resistance within Scott's framework since it allows women to dispute the ideological grounds of *Marpariban* without an actual conflict taking place. Through the use of emotional criteria, women gently challenge the traditional authority of kinship-based matchmaking, all the while preserving social validity within the family system.

At the same time, this trend toward emotional compatibility as a criterion for partner selection indicates a more widespread revolution in the institutional logic of marriage. Current sociological studies suggest that marriage is becoming less about strict rules and more about personal feelings of closeness, trust, and emotional satisfaction (Cherlin, 2020). In traditional settings like *Marpariban*, this change doesn't completely get rid of kinship customs, but it does add new ways for women to judge whether a marriage is good for them. Through the practice of placing an emphasis on emotional compatibility, women subtly question whether or not lineage-based dating is sufficient to meet the requirements of modern-day relationships. This form of resistance is therefore not only personal or romantic in nature; rather, it is structural in origin, since it represents a challenge to the cultural parameters that are used to define a "proper" marriage while still staying rooted within socially accepted narratives of harmony and personal well-being.

Religious and Rational-Modern Justifications as Discursive Resistance

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that women frequently turned to religious reasoning and rational-modern reasons to defend their opposition to *Marpariban* planned matchmaking. The majority of participants (Table 2) said that religious teachings do not require marriage to a specific relative and instead placed an emphasis on factors including financial stability, emotional maturity, and the ability to avoid marital strife in the future. There are several reasons why women disapprove of *pariban* marriage. These explanations serve as socially acceptable stories that enable women to express their disapproval without directly questioning conventional authority. Women recast themselves as rational, ethically accountable agents by establishing the resistance movement's foundation in religious and rational discourse, rather than as rebels against tradition. These tactics illustrate how resistance can be exercised through frameworks that are culturally recognized. They make it possible for women to negotiate marital expectations while simultaneously limiting the impact of societal sanctions.

Table 2. Reasons for Women's Rejection of Pariban Marriage

Informant Name (Age)	Reasons for Rejection
Royanna Habeahan (27)	Aspiration to pursue higher education and employment, and to marry based on love
Lilis Habeahan (29)	Religious prohibition and concerns over faith-related conflict
Hotmauli Habeahan (29)	Lack of emotional attachment and desire to determine her own life choices
Friska Marbun (32)	Awareness of women's rights and concerns for mental well-being

According to the information that is summarized in Table 2, religious legitimacy serves as a potent moral shield that women use to express their opposition to the practice of *marpariban* matchmaking. When women frame denial as a question of religious principle rather than personal desire, they transfer the source of authority from conventional obligation to transcendent moral rules. This allows them to exercise superiority over men. Recent research on religion and family decision-making underscores that religious discourse frequently equips women with socially accepted language to challenge conventional behaviors without being regarded as rude or deviant (Pew Research Center, 2019). By utilizing faith-based arguments, women are able

to reframe their resistance as moral conformity rather than cultural transgression in situations where religion exerts a substantial amount of influence on the normative sphere. This tactic successfully reduces family pressure because questioning religious justification runs the risk of moral delegitimization in the community.

Table 2 also demonstrates that, in addition to religious arguments, modern reasoning is playing an increasingly important role in legitimizing women's refusal to enter into arranged marriages. This is especially true with regard to concerns regarding emotional well-being, personal autonomy, and mental health. Researchers observe that modern discussions regarding mental health increasingly influence individuals' rationalizations for significant life choices, such as marriage, particularly among women (WHO, 2022). Women who talk about psychological preparation, emotional compatibility, and mental well-being are standing up for their rights in a way that is consistent with widely accepted ideas about health and self-care rather than their own desires (Purba et al., 2024). These rational-modern reasons serve as protective measures, legitimizing rejection and reducing the likelihood of social sanctions. This allows women to navigate customary expectations while preserving their social legitimacy. Resistance is integrated within prevailing narratives of responsible adulthood, which allows for this to happen

Scott (2010) argues that in order to demonstrate resistance while reducing social risk, oppressed groups frequently turn to dominant moral discourses. Within the context of this scenario, religion and contemporary logic serve as protective myths that legitimize women's refusal within the bounds of what is considered socially acceptable. By using these discourses, women reframe themselves as morally accountable agents instead of cultural deviants, thereby converting resistance into a negotiation integrated within established value systems.

Open Resistance and the Role of Social Resources

Although hidden resistance was more prevalent, the study also identified instances of open resistance, where women explicitly refused *marpariban* matchmaking. This form of resistance was less common and typically associated with women who possessed higher levels of education, stable employment, and greater economic independence (Table 3).

Table 3. Socio-Economic Background of Women Rejecting Pariban Marriage

Informant (Age)	Highest Education	Occupation	Marital Status	Relevance to Rejection
Royanna Habeahan (27)	Bachelor's degree (S1)	Village administrative officer	Married	Education increased awareness of the right to choose a marriage partner
Lilis Habeahan (29)	Diploma Nursing (D3)	in Nurse	Married	Education and religious faith as the basis for rejection
Hotmauli Habeahan (29)	Senior high school	Farmer	Married	Life experience and personal emotional considerations
Friska Marbun (32)	Diploma Midwifery (D3)	in Midwife	Married	Awareness of women's mental well-being

Beyond individual agency, recent scholarship emphasizes that women's capacity to openly resist restrictive marital arrangements is deeply shaped by their access to material and institutional resources. Research on women's economic empowerment demonstrates that education and employment do not merely increase income, but also enhance women's bargaining power within families and communities by strengthening their social credibility and decision-making authority (Doss et al., 2020). In customary contexts, such resources operate as protective mechanisms that reduce women's dependence on kinship-based support systems, making explicit refusal more feasible. Open resistance, therefore, should be interpreted as a structurally enabled practice rather than an isolated act of defiance, emerging when women's accumulated resources allow them to renegotiate power relations without complete social exclusion. This perspective reinforces the argument that transformations in women's social positioning play a critical role in reshaping customary marriage practices from within.

Open resistance reflects a stronger assertion of agency, supported by access to social and economic resources. This finding aligns with gender empowerment theory, which emphasizes that women's ability to

make strategic life choices increases with access to education and economic capital (Kabeer, 2005). While such resistance carries higher social risk, it demonstrates that customary authority is increasingly contested as women's structural positions improve.

Rethinking Everyday Resistance in a Customary Context

The findings of this study, taken as a whole, provide substantial support for James C. Scott's idea of everyday resistance, which is characterized by actions that are subtle, indirect, and non-confrontational (Scott, 2010). By locating resistance within a gendered customary system, this research, on the other hand, extends Scott's theory. Within this system, women are required to maintain a constant balance between autonomy and social harmony (Yuniati Ningsih et al., 2022).

To accommodate personal desires and current ideals, Batak Toba women selectively reinterpret conventional standards. This procedure is done rather than completely abandoning *Marpariban*. This process shows that tradition is not set in stone; it changes all the time as people negotiate. The resistance of women to *marpariban* signifies not just personal autonomy but also a progressive evolution of cultural significance within Batak Toba marital customs (Siahaan & Yasin, 2020).

Recent theoretical advancements in the field of resistance studies further strengthen the analytical relevance of James C. Scott's idea of daily resistance. These developments support the concept's application to customary situations. In their article, Johansson & Vinthagen (2020) suggest that everyday resistance ought to be viewed as a relational and context-dependent practice that functions through negotiation, ambiguity, and moral legitimacy rather than through overt confrontation. Rather than occurring outside of conventional standards, this viewpoint helps shed light on how women's resistance to *marpariban* develops. By integrating resistance into culturally sanctioned practices—such as postponing marriage, redefining mate compatibility, or employing moral reasoning—women do not present themselves as adversaries of tradition; rather, they function as active agents who quietly redefine its significance. In this way, Scott's approach serves not just to detect covert forms of opposition but also to explain how power relations are gradually rebuilt through everyday social interactions inside customary institutions. This is because such exchanges take place within the context of customary institutions (Hasibuan et al., 2021).

Latest feminist critiques of empowerment narratives underscore the necessity of contextualizing women's resistance within broader systemic constraints. Kabeer (2020) highlights that women's agency cannot be limited to individual choice alone; rather, it must be understood in relation to access to resources, voice, and social acknowledgment. This conclusion is because women's agency is directly related to these factors. In relation to the outcomes of this study, this insight indicates that women's daily resistance to *marpariban* is influenced by their capacity to utilize educational, economic, and moral resources in socially acceptable manners. Instead of showing a straight path to independence, women's resistance shows a process of negotiation in which empowerment is used through techniques that take into account the situation and find a balance between self-determination and social belonging. Combining Kabeer's feminist critique with Scott's theory provides a more nuanced comprehension of resistance as both a gendered and structurally entrenched phenomenon within traditional marriage structures

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that women in Batak Toba society do not exhibit passive acceptance of *marpariban* planned matchmaking; rather, they exhibit various strategic forms of resistance that are ingrained in their everyday lives. The results show that women use a variety of ways to fight arranged marriages, such as putting off marriage and putting emotional compatibility first, utilizing religious and rational-modern reasons, and even outright denying planned marriages in some circumstances. These actions demonstrate that resistance functions on a continuum, influenced by women's access to social, educational, and economic resources, as well as their roles within traditional and family frameworks.

Utilizing James C. Scott's notion of daily resistance, this study elucidates how women navigate customary authority through nuanced, non-confrontational tactics that maintain communal harmony while enhancing personal autonomy. The findings significantly expand Scott's paradigm by contextualizing ordinary resistance within a gendered customary framework, wherein women must navigate the tension between personal ambitions and moral and relational obligations. As a result, resistance to *marpariban* is not

aimed at destroying tradition; rather, it prioritizes selectively reinterpreting and modifying the meaning of the term in order to adapt to shifting social conditions.

A further contribution that this study makes to the field of feminist scholarship is that it demonstrates that women's agency in traditional marriage practices is relational and structurally ingrained. Having access to education, jobs, and moral legitimacy allows women to express their resistance in socially acceptable ways. This supports the idea that empowerment comes from negotiated and context-sensitive processes rather than direct confrontation. In this context, women's resistance to marpariban represents a progressive alteration of societal norms around marriage, rather than a break with tradition. This is because marpariban promotes the idea that women should not be married.

In general, the findings of this research highlight the fact that traditional institutions, such as marpariban, are not fixed nor universally repressive; rather, they are continuously changed via the daily negotiations that take place between tradition and change. This study provides a comprehensive view of the interplay between gender, power, and agency within customary marriage systems by emphasizing women's lived experiences and resistance practices. These insights improve the conversation about everyday resistance and women's empowerment, while also laying the groundwork for future research on how marriage standards change in other traditional and family-focused communities

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