

Batak Toba Ethnic in Indonesia as a *Locus Theologicus*: Exploring the Spiritual, Wisdom and Aesthetic Values of *Ragi Idup Ulos*

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Abstract

Batak Toba is one of many ethnic groups in Indonesia that reside around Lake Toba and are now scattered worldwide. Since the colonial period, this group has become a target for Protestant Christian missions and Catholics, who make it a “locus theologicus” based on their respective characteristics. One tradition of Batak Toba is ulos, such as “ragi idup”, which holds religious, wisdom, and aesthetic meanings. This study examines “ragi idup” ulos as a “locus theologicus” through its spiritual values rooted in wisdom and civilization. The meaning to be achieved in this paper is that the wearing and giving of ulos “ragi idup” is the warning and giving of wisdom in life. Qualitative methods and interviews with knowledgeable individuals help identify religious and wisdom values that can bring theology together using a symbolic approach.

Keywords: Batak Toba; aesthetics; local wisdom; religious meaning; *ragi idup ulos*

Introduction

Indonesian national treasures include its diverse range of ethnic groups, each with its own unique culture and values. One such group is Batak, whose historical origins can be traced back to the area around Lake Toba in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Semantically, Batak is a given name that was indicated by the Germans and the Dutch when they came to North Sumatra, Indonesia. The word “Bata” which was later revealed to be “Batak” identifies the name of a mountainous area. People who live in this mountainous area are called Batak people. Derivatives of the Batak are the Batak Toba. Semantically, “Toba” is a beautiful or fresh water source synonymous with “tao” (lake) which means dammed source or water. Therefore, *tao Toba* (Lake Toba) is abundant and beautiful water. The synonymous word for tao Toba is “tapianauli” (beautiful water source) (Simanullang, 2021), which is currently known as Lake Toba. The semantic starting point of the Batak Toba language was confronted with a historical study made by Ichwan Azahari from various sources who thought that the Batak Toba was the invention of German and Dutch missionaries who had come to Indonesia in the colonial period (Siregar, 2022). It should be noted that the semantics of the Batak Toba language existed long before colonialism, meaning that Ichwan Azhari’s opinion needs to be supported by other sources, especially from semantics that are still alive in the Batak region. Over time, Batak has given birth to six sub-ethnic groups, including Batak Toba, Batak Simalungun, Batak Karo, Batak Pakpak-Dairi, Batak Mandailing, and Batak Angkola (Tinambunan, 2022, p. 261). This study focuses specifically on Batak Toba, who was the target of Protestant Christian missions during the colonial period. Nommensen initiated the mission in Batak Toba region, known as a “locus theologicus” based on the principle of civilisation (Nommensen, 1987, pp. 42-64) (Steenbrink, 2006, p. 116). This principle remains influential currently because it emphasised the importance of adapting faith to the local culture, rather than simply copying European traditions (K. and J.S.A. Steenbrink, 2008, p. 162). However, it is important to note that not all Christian churches accept the incorporation of cultural traditions into worship (Tambunan, 2013; Tinambunan, 2022, pp. 267-268).

The Catholic Church entered Batak region between 1928-1930, which developed from Sibolga, Central Tapanuli (Fah, 1974, pp. 24–28; Tinambunan, 2015, pp. 39–40). The presence of Catholicism aimed to integrate local traditions in celebrations and religious practices with applicable theological provisions to avoid syncretism. With the Vatican II Council and its decrees (*Ad Gentes* 9, 26), the Church embraced the values of cultural traditions that uphold local wisdom. This idea was further developed and emphasised in Church documents (*Redemptoris Missio* 52-54), which valued and upheld local wisdom values. Two Batak theologians have successfully made Batak a “locus theologicus”. Anicetus Sinaga made Batak Toba traditions a “locus theologicus”, specifically in the liturgy (Sinaga, 2009), supported by his position as the leader of the local church in the Sibolga and Medan Dioceses, where this aspect constantly developed. Anicetus Sinaga believed that Batak’s local wisdom was a derivative of this ethnic group’s belief in *Mula Jadi Nabolon* (The Creator of Everything) (Sinaga, 1981). Joosten was enthusiastic about making Batak a “locus theologicus”. He emphasised local wisdom values, particularly in aspects of Batak Toba and Karo traditional houses (Axel, 2021; Sitanggang, 2021) found in Pangururan and Berastagi. Leonardus Egidius Joosten, who is known by the nickname Leo and has been “in Batak” with the Ginting Suka clan, already wrote various Batak books and dictionaries. One of the widely used books is about the genealogy of the Batak ethnic group in collaboration with Promes (Promes, 2017).

In Batak culture, the ulos holds a significant role in both customs and religion. Initially, it served as a form of clothing for the Batak people, with each part of the body having its own designated ulos

and function. For instance, the head had a unique ulos with its own purpose, as did other parts of the body (Simarmata, n.d.). Specific ulos were used for various daily activities, such as carrying a baby or sleeping (Tobatoba, 2017). However, with modernization, the way Batak people dress has changed, and ulos is now seen as a modern clothing attribute, often draped or given as a gift. Its significance has become increasingly ambiguous, with its role being more of a customary accessory. The ulos holds multiple meanings, encompassing expressions of life, attitude (wisdom), and aesthetics (Desiani, 2022, p. 128). To understand the religious significance of ulos, we must start with its function, which is then reflected in its aesthetics. Therefore, wearing an ulos represents a commitment to applying its values and meanings in daily life.

“*Ragi idup*” or “*ragidup*” is an ulos from Batak Toba that can also be found in other sub-ethnic groups with different names but similar meanings and functions (Simarmata, n.d.). *Ragi idup ulos* is a commonly used type of ulos, not solely due to its aesthetic appeal over other types, such as *ragi hotang* (rattan). “Ragi” in ulos refers to the intention of using ulos in accordance with the expectations of the giver and receiver in relation to the religious meaning conferred. Meanwhile, “idup” refers to the beauty of the meaning of ulos with harmonious colour combinations. Slightly, it is valued for the nuanced meanings it conveys, reflecting the human journey from the womb to death (Lubis, Sandi, 2021, p. 267). These meanings are expressed through three essential aspects. For instance, the colours are a combination of white, black, and red, which are the classic colours of *ulos*. *Ragi idup ulos* begins with the word “tumtuman”, meaning a group that refers to collaboration among weavers (Tobatoba, 2017). To ensure that there are no symbolic errors, including colours, the *ulos* is usually woven by four to five people and then united (*ditumtum*). Each weaver has a specialisation, and the weaving process of this is quite complex. The third important element is the weavers as the ulos makers. The weavers are also colour mixers and people who pray during the weaving process, which aligns with the intention of the ulos. In most cases, they have to meditate or even go into seclusion during the weaving process. In the study, the author interviewed the weaver of *Op. Valen (Nai Marudut)* Situmorang on 1 April 2022 in the *ulos* village of Hutaraja, Pangururan, Samosir. Nai Marudut stated that during the weaving process, she prayed according to the *ulos* being woven, including *ragi idup*. In this context, weaving is a manifestation of the form of prayer according to the intention of *ulos*.

Ragi idup ulos is introduced through its colours and patterns, while the process of its production and the role of the weavers are discussed to reveal its internal aspects. To gain a complete understanding of its significance in the context of “locus theologicus”, the following aspects are examined: the significance of *ragi idup ulos* and its inclusion in this study, how it can be considered a locus theologicus, and its relationship with theology, civilisation, and aesthetics. This study aimed to examine “*ragi idup*” *ulos* as a “locus theologicus” through its spiritual values rooted in wisdom and civilisation.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology to examine religious values and their implications in *ragi idup ulos* through a symbolism approach. It was reinforced by field studies, involving interviews with competent informants, such as weavers and *ulos* experts. This study was conducted in the *ulos* village of Hutaraja, Pangururan on Samosir Island. This location was selected to emphasise the originality of weaving and the qualifications of the informants. The interviews were conducted to reinforce the findings (Wutich et al., 2021, p. 7), provided that the informants had genuine competence.

The basic step involved experience in using *ulos* in various religious and traditional celebrations. Such life events required a deep understanding of various writings, including books or articles in journals

and other communication media, to experience the meanings from each use of *ragi idup ulos*, which had its own symbols (Manurung et al., 2020, pp. 35–37). A symbolism approach was used to interpret the meanings of the symbols with the help of ethnography for clarity (Wutich et al., 2021). *Ulos*, as a cultural heritage, had religious symbols that required an understanding to identify their meanings. The religious meanings of *ragi idup ulos* were implemented in culture and life. Religious meanings served as the cohesive element for culture, ensuring its continuity, and eventually, they became the guiding principles for civilisation. The true measure of a civilisation is based on how well it implements these principles in its social life.

Validity is strengthened by supplementing the qualitative method with the symbolism approach of *ragi idup ulos* and weaving practices that provide a correspondence between religious meanings and the qualitative method (Wilson, n.d., pp. 11–12). This approach strengthens the religious dimension of *ragi idup ulos* as an essential aspect that is then expressed in the local wisdom.

To make Batak Toba in *ragi idup ulos* a “locus theologicus”, a theological foundation is needed as a starting point. Two documents of the Church, *Ad Gentes* from the Second Vatican Council and *Redemptoris Missio*, open up culture as a “locus theologicus”. The culture, with good values of wisdom sown in the human heart that correspond to the uniqueness of the local community, needs to be elevated and perfected (*Ad Gentes* 9). This practice is also carried out by Christ during his life and in his incarnation in human culture (*Ad Gentes* 10) to enhance its cultural values. The Church continues Christ's work currently, meaning it also participates in human culture (*Ad Gentes* 11) where it is present (*Redemptoris Missio* 3). The opportunity for the dimension that can become a meeting point between the Church and culture is peace, justice, freedom, brotherhood, and humanity (*Redemptoris Missio* 17). The Church's presence in the cultural context does not eliminate valuable culture and customs but preserves them and opens itself up to culture as long as they do not conflict with the Gospel (*Redemptoris Missio* 24).

The meeting point between theology and *ragi idup ulos*, which needs to be discussed, lies in wisdom as a shared impact. The dimensions of theological virtues include peace, justice, freedom, brotherhood, as well as humanity, and the *ulos* is also oriented towards these dimensions. Therefore, the integration of the two is not a superficial connection that maintains their respective identities without merging them. Instead, theology and *ragi idup ulos* merge on this analogous dimension of wisdom without losing their respective identities as differences. This needs to be emphasised to avoid equating the two and eliminate the danger of syncretism. The connection between theological virtues and *ragi idup ulos* is then implemented in human life. In this context, this methodology becomes applicable to make the *ulos* a “locus theologicus”.

Findings and Discussion

Ragi idup is a type of Batak Toba *ulos* that plays a significant role in the social life of this community. However, there are several misconceptions about the name of the *ulos* that need clarification. *Ulos* is not a songket in the Indonesian language because it has a different context. It refers to the clothing used daily based on time, place, needs, and users. In modern times, this analogy translates to clothing for parties, church, customary and religious ceremonies, civil affairs, and daily activities. *Ulos* is used for various purposes, including covering the chest, wrapping around the waist, covering the head, draping over the shoulders, and more. It is worn by people of all ages, from the womb to death, for religious, customary, and daily activities, such as working, sleeping, and carrying babies, or worn by pregnant mothers. *Ragi idup ulos* encompasses all of these and is used in any situation, including

important events. The term “ragi” refers to the pattern or type of *ulos* used in specific situations, such as parties, weddings, or customary affairs. In contrast, “idup” does not translate to “life” in the Indonesian language, but rather refers to a human journey from womb to death. This means that *ragi idup ulos* shows the importance of the *ulos* in each stage of life.

The process of making *ragi idup ulos* involves weaving, which started after the influence of Indian traders in the 12th-14th centuries. The size of *ragi idup ulos* usually ranges from 2 m x 0.7 m, though this depends on the region. Although the *ulos* are produced in textile factories currently, the quality and value are incomparable to the woven ones. Creating *ragi idup ulos* requires collaboration among five weavers with different expertise. Each weaver works on one of the three parts that make up the *ulos*. Furthermore, one weaver creates embroidery on both sides and both ends, which are decorated with tassels. Finally, another weaver combines all the parts. The intricate process and collaboration of weavers make *ragi idup ulos* a valuable and cherished item in Batak Toba community.

The *ulos*' most significant element is *ragi*, which represents its significance and intensity of use. As previously mentioned, the *ulos* is woven collaboratively by multiple weavers, and each part has a unique meaning that represents the stages of human life, from birth to death (Huget, 2016). The central *ragi* (see figure 1) and the end before tassels (see figure 4) of the *ulos* represents this journey. *Ragi* is unbroken by different shapes, symbolising the highs and lows of human life, marked by various events. The central *ragi* is flanked by two identical *ragi* but are quite different each with a significant meaning that should not be misplaced during use. The male and female genders of humans are represented on either side of *ragi* of life, indicating the completeness of humanity. The left side of the *ulos* (see in figure 1 and figure 2) represents males, while the right is for females (see in figure 1 and figure 3). This implies that *ragi idup ulos* is suitable for both males and females. The female identity *ragi* should be displayed in front in case it is won by a female. Suppose it is won by the male character *ragi* should be displayed in front. This method of use was emphasised by *ulos* expert Septian Sinaga in Pangururan in an interview with the author on 29 March 2022. Septian Sinaga emphasised that this aspect is often ignored by users, especially those who have *ulos* made by factories that do not display these symbols. These two *ragi* are highly specific and can only be created by competent weavers, indicating that factory-produced *ulos* cannot capture the meaning. These three *ragi* are encompassed by embroidery in two forms as shown in Figure 1. The embroidery on the left and right sides is woven to resemble a frame (Figure 1), while the ends are adorned with tassels of combined black and white colours, which enhances the *ulos*' physical beauty.



Figure 1. *Ragi idup ulos*. Collection and photo by Septian Sinaga



Figure 2. The male's side of the *ragi idup ulos*. Collection and photo by Septian Sinaga



Figure 3. The females' side of the *ragi idup ulos*, collection and photo by Septian Sinaga

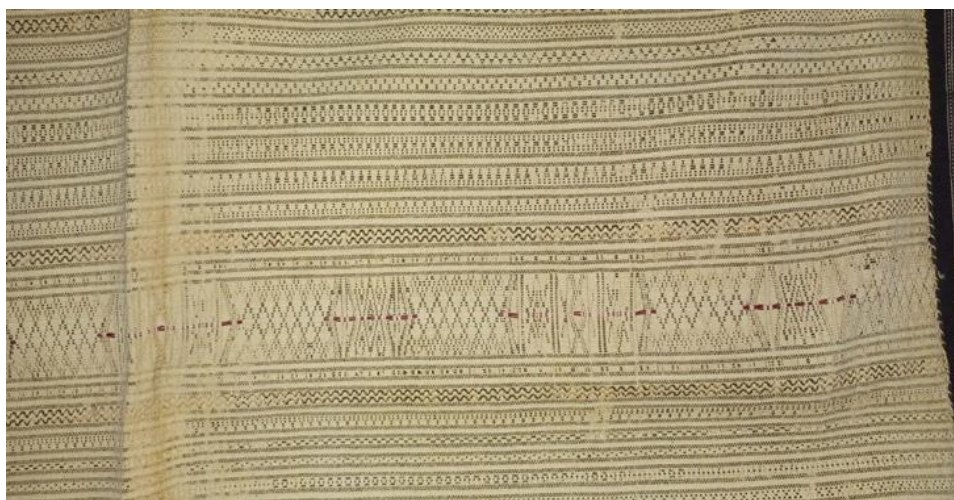


Figure 4. "Sigumangi", one side of the *ragi idup ulos* as the symbol life. Collection and photo by Septian Sinaga

To create a *ragi idup ulos*, colour is an essential aspect because only three colours are traditionally used, including black, white, and red. The distinguishing feature of *ragi idup ulos* is its dominant use of black and white, with red used sparingly. These three colours are commonly used in Batak *ulos* textiles, and they are also combined in *ragi idup* and relate to the cosmos, meaning that everything in Batak Toba belief (the creator of everything) is created with them. The creator of everything is not directly related to humans, though the colours used are taken from plants widely found in Batak region, symbolising the immanence of divinity. Batak Toba and other sub-ethnic groups have a close relationship with nature, even becoming a part of it. Therefore, the colours taken from plant sap are a part of the cosmos linked to the creator. To personify the presence of the creator, the colours are used as symbols of his attributes. Black symbolises wisdom in mastering nature, white is purity and sincerity, while red represents courage to face challenges (Manurung et al., 2020, pp. 34–35). These three colours represent the immanence of the transcendent creator of this world through the attributes represented by black, white, and red.

The Religious Meanings as A Meeting Point of Locus Theologicus

Every tradition has a supernatural background, known as the transcendent, that serves as the foundation of its endurance (Urbaniak, 2015). The transcendent, which becomes a traditional belief, is not only inherent in itself but also immanent in the culture, as it can be expressed through individuals who exhibit transcendent attributes, such as in their attitudes, actions, and words. The closeness of the transcendent to humans is also evident in various symbols in daily life and rituals. In this context, a symbolic approach is needed, hence, those who participate in rituals can experience the transcendent and integrate it into wisdom (Wutich et al., 2021, p. 7), better known as virtues. In this way, the transcendent becomes an integral part of human life (Wilson, n.d., p. 12) and immanent.

Batak Toba's belief is in “Mula Jadi Nabolon”, the transcendent and divine creator of everything (Lumbantobing, 1956, p. 27). “Mula Jadi Nabolon” is immanent in Batak Toba's spiritual leaders, such as Raja Uti and other figures who serve as intermediaries between the transcendent and the world (Angerler, 2016, p. 306). The attitude displayed is wisdom presented through symbols, such as *ragi idup ulos*. As discussed earlier, the *ulos* is a reflection of human life's journey in the world that has a relationship between each stage (from the womb, birth, childhood, adulthood, marriage, having grandchildren, and death), one event to another (such as happy-sad, good-bad, and others), and unity in life (Desiani, 2022, p. 133). The spiritual life presented by the *ulos* is a combination of *ragi* with colours symbolising life that seeks to pursue purity by connecting with the divine, wise attitudes in facing all events experienced, as well as the courage to move forward confidently in life (Siringoringo et al., 2018, p. 7). This spiritual life is further strengthened by religious values embodied through the presence of the divine by symbols in the *ulos* and its spiritual form because it has been sanctified through weaving. Therefore, the *ulos* becomes a spiritual symbol of human life's journey.

In Batak Toba tradition, receiving an *ulos* (*mangulosi*) is considered synonymous with receiving blessings (*pasupasu*). This attitude becomes a bestowal of divine grace in the lives of the people who receive the *ulos* on their journey in this world. The underlying basis is the spiritual life that depends entirely on the Creator (Papenhuyzen, 2016, pp. 282–283). Theology offers an analogy of creation in *ragi idup ulos*, where humans are always reminded of their Creator. Primarily, the *ulos* provides the means to believe in the Creator and understand and depend on him. This belief, which is a cultural wealth through *ragi idup ulos*, helps the Church theologise with clarity and the spirit of the Gospel (*Ad Gentes* 15). Regarding this belief, the Church acknowledges that the Gospel has been instilled by God in culture. *Ragi idup ulos* can be used to develop Christian life (*Ad Gentes* 18), specifically in terms of

creation theology. The creation theology faith is already rooted in and flourishing alongside the culture of Batak Toba (see *Ad Gentes* 19). The role of theology through the Church is to perfect the religious belief of *ragi idup ulos* (*Redemptoris Missio* 54) and improve its quality in religious and cultural meanings.

Local wisdom - theological virtues

Religious meanings always give rise to a particular attitude in a culture, which is referred to as local wisdom or virtues. In essence, virtues are comparable to moral wisdom in theology. This is because wisdom characterised by goodness is also an implication of theological virtues. *Ragi idup ulos*, which is an element of Batak Toba culture, embodies wisdom (Nugroho et al., 2021) in the form of human and natural purity, sincerity, and justice. This culture is blessed by the Church (*Redemptoris Missio* 17). In with this local wisdom, the Church engages in dialogue with cultural values (*Redemptoris Missio* 25), specifically *ragi idup ulos*, as exemplified by Paul with the people of Lystra and Athens when discussing the cultural values of Greece (Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31). The Church recognises that the Holy Spirit is also at work in various cultures, including *ragi idup ulos* because it directs those who wear it towards wise living (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* 28, 29).

In terms of wisdom, the Church is receptive to every culture and promotes its preservation (*Redemptoris Missio* 24), which in turn advances humanity, justice, and other aspects. *Ragi idup ulos* has the wisdom to shape humanity, and therefore, the Church makes this culture a collaborative partner through its wisdom (*Ad Gentes* 17). *Ragi idup* is the most influential type of *ulos* in the religious, traditional, and civilisational aspects of Batak Toba, providing an opportunity for the Church to develop it in the right way (*Ad Gentes* 21). However, a theologian (pastoral servant) remains cognizant of carrying out theological reflection based on the Gospel and Church teachings and collaborates with the authority of the Church to deepen the wisdom related to faith to avoid extreme pragmatic attitudes and syncretism. Knowledge and a deep understanding of the character of *ragi idup ulos* are necessary for this purpose (cf. *Ad Gentes* 22). The Church respects every culture that leads its followers and humanity towards wisdom. *Ragi idup ulos* is not a form of idol worship but a means of theology through wisdom, closely related to theological virtues.

The Church invites local pastoral servants to develop the "locus theologicus" by gaining knowledge and understanding of local culture, including *ragi idup ulos* (*Ad Gentes* 26). This help engages in dialogue with local culture (*Ad Gentes* 34) and understand how to practically instil the Word of God in each culture (*Redemptoris Missio* 28). The appreciation and practice of *ragi idup ulos* wisdom can facilitate the Word taking root in the community (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* 34), following established guidelines. Pastoral servants with a deep understanding of *ragi idup ulos* can effectively communicate the Church's teachings to their community (*Redemptoris Missio* 37b), making this cultural element essential for theology. This approach encourages the faithful to live their faith through the wisdom of *ragi idup ulos*, embracing inculturation (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* 54).

Wisdom aesthetics

When donning *ragi idup ulos*, it is customary to drape it over the back from left to right, as if one were "wearing" it. In this case, the giver imparts words of wisdom that align with the *ulos*' significance. These wise words typically take the form of a prayer for the recipient's present and future life, as well as life after death. Through wearing the *ulos*, recipients seek to honour its significance throughout their lifetime. This act serves to underscore the *ulos*' significance as more than just a tradition, accessory, or

souvenir. However, it symbolises the wearers' commitment to upholding the wisdom and values embodied in *ragi idup ulos* in life's journey (Sinaga et al., 2018, p. 497). Recipients cherish the *ulos* as if it were physically attached to their body, continually walking in its spiritual significance and relying on the Creator.

The Church upholds cultural hopes for salvation through Christ (*Redemptoris Missio* 25), while *ragi idup ulos* provides an opportunity to implant that salvation. The wisdom of the *ulos* helps implement faith that is oriented towards both the present and future life, hence religious meanings are also eschatological (Situmorang & Khair, 2016, p. 82). Pastoral servants who are also theologians have been given the ability to understand the eschatological meanings of life. The current life has a significant impact on the eschatological life entrusted by *ragi idup ulos*. The eternal life is preceded by the present life, which has an experience of wisdom that becomes an aspect of human mystical experience (Bharathi, 2021, 18-19). That experience is purified by the experience of faith for the life to come.

Conclusion

Ragi idup ulos which is a Toba Batak tradition symbolizes the wisdom of life. Every single part of *ulos* has meaning. The *ulos* is divided into five parts, with the central part representing the life journey, while the left and right are for males and females, respectively. The left-right embroidery resembles a frame and the tassels at both ends. Competence in weaving each part is required with one weaver combining all five parts. This makes the weavers' competence essential in conveying the intention of the *ulos*. Another essential aspect is the weavers' spiritual life, which is integrated into the weaving process. The colours are also significant because they symbolise the *ulos'* religious meanings.

The cultural richness of *ragi idup ulos* can be a "locus theologicus" because of its religious values. These values are embodied in the *ulos* itself, the weaving process, the weavers who implement their spiritual life in the weaving, and the three colours (black, white, red) as immanence symbols of the transcendent. In this context, *ragi idup ulos* can be a "locus theologicus" because it has religious values that can be connected to theology.

The religious meanings of *ragi idup ulos* are wisdom and aesthetics. The form of wisdom presented by the *ulos* is humanity, sincerity, and prudence, which are also theological aspects known as virtues. Therefore, this aspect of wisdom is a theological way of instilling and growing faith through *ulos*. In customs and civilisation, *ragi idup ulos* plays an important role in wedding parties, religious events, family gatherings, and other social events, and it can be worn by anyone. The intended purpose for recipients is not only physical acceptance but also the bestowed meanings. The recipients wear wisdom throughout their life spiritually for the present and the future. In this context, *ragi idup ulos* also becomes a "locus theologicus" for both present and future (eschatological) life.

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