

# **SURAT BATAK**

**FOR MY VERY VERY REASONABLE AND  
BEARING FRIEND  
WHO MAINTAINS ANCIENTSCRIPTS.COM  
MR. LAWRENCE K. LO**

## A. Background

Batak tribe, mainly living in northern region of Sumateran Island (Sumatera Utara) in Indonesia, has been established for around 800-1000 years. Within that long period, Batak people developed several subtribes and clans. The largest one (in population number) is Toba subtribe, followed (in no particular order) by Karo, Simalungun, Pakpak-Dairi, Angkola-Mandailing, and Nias (Niha) people.

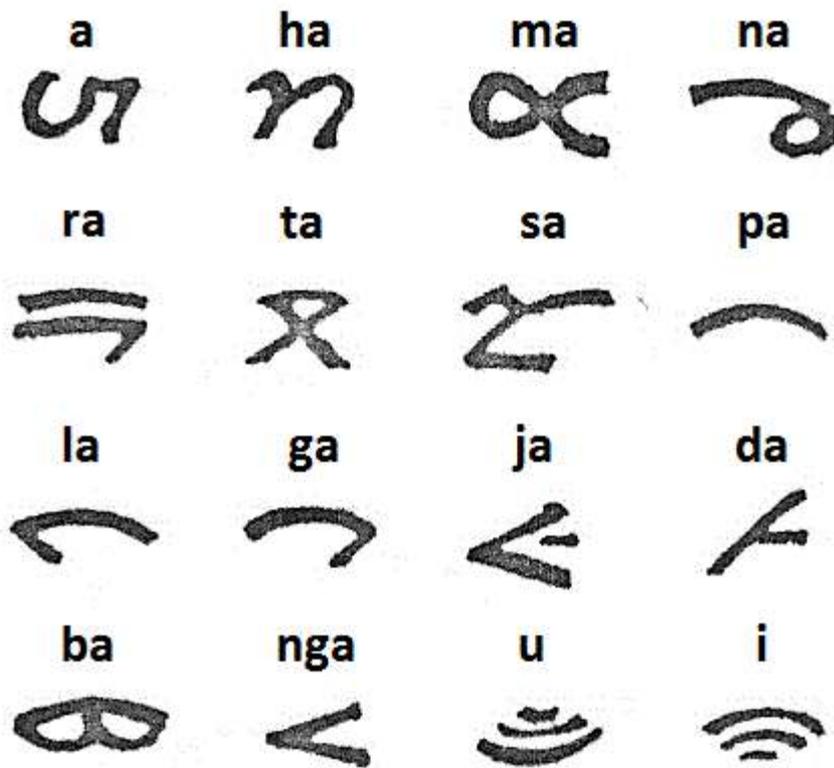
Batak tribe has its own writing system which existed since 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. Batak people themselves call their writing system Surat Batak (Surat = letters/writings).

In the early times of Surat Batak, writing know-how was exclusive to ancient healers (*datu; tabib*) and only that select role of Batak society could write and read it. That is why many of the salvaged bibles consisted of four main themes: potionmaking, amulets or magical equipments, teachings, and future foreseeing. Much of the writings, written on the dried and multiplefolded thin barks of *alim* tree or the leaves of *lontar* tree and called Pustaha Laklak (Pustaha = bible; Laklak = tree bark), are now preserved and can be found and studied in libraries in North Sumatera and Jakarta, Indonesia. Scholars assumed that the writing system developed from some Indian (maybe Pallavan/Pallawan) writing system through paleo-Sumateran writing system.

## B. Original Surat Batak

Surat Batak had an original set consisted of 16 syllabary letters called Ina ni Surat (Ina = mother) where all the letters end in -a (as in English word *up* or Spanish *mama*) sound, and a subset of Anak ni Surat (Anak = child) that modifies the ending sound of Ina ni Surat, not unlike Arabic and Javanese writing system, and nullifies the need of entirely different symbols for every syllabary possible in the language (e.g. in Japanese Katakana/Hiragana writing systems). It is written from left to right.

Ina ni surat:



The consonantal sound of each ina ni surat is very much similar with their Roman alphabet counterparts (*b*- sound for *ba*, *m*- sound for *ma*, and so on) with the exception of **ra** which sounded hard as in Russian letter **Р** sound or Spanish spelling of the letter **R**.

The consonantal sound of ina ni surat **ga** is always *g*- (as in English *gay*) and never *j*- (as in English *jam*).

The consonantal sound of ina ni surat **nga** is always *ng*- (as in English *flying*) and never *ngg*- (as in English *anger*).

The letter **ha/ka** is sounded *h*- (as in English *hard*) or *k*- (as in English *kart*) dependent on the word in which the letter is written. (At first, there was only **one** symbol/ina ni surat to denote those two sounds. Future progression of Surat Batak separated these two sounds onto two different

symbols. That's why the symbols for **ha** and **ka** and their future variations are always almost identical.) Therefore, to read the script when written in Batak language, a modest knowledge in the language is needed.

Ina ni surat **u** and **i** are used when the corresponding *u* or *i* sounds are read distinctively as a different syllable, not a 'sliding' diphthong sound.

	
aha (a global exclamation sound expressing surprise or abrupt perception; also Tobanese word for what)	ula (Tobanese for to work)
	
ina (Tobanese for mother)	anak (Tobanese for child; see below for anak ni surat)

Anak ni surat:

<b>-e</b>	<b>-i</b>	<b>-u</b>	<b>-o</b>
			
<b>-ng</b>	<b>halt mark</b>		
			

There are initially six anak ni surat (every single traditional anak ni surat had its name and different subtribes assigned different names to the same anak ni surat):

1. *Hatadingan/hatalingan*, depicted as a short horizontal line (-), is written on top of ina ni surat modified, to the left end. It changes the sound of the ending into *-e* (as in English word *went*).
2. *Haluaan/hauluan*, written as a circle (o) at the same height after an ina ni surat that one wants to modify to change its end sound into *-i* (as in English word *me*).
3. *Haboritan/haboruan/haborotan* is used to change the ending of ina ni surat into *-u* sound (as in English word *do*). Unlike other anak ni surat, it's the only one drawn attached to the ina ni surat, usually to its right and lower end. *Haboritan's* shape changes to form some small greater-than (>) or less-than (<) signs with the ina ni surat it attaches to.

The only time *haboritan* isn't fixed onto *ina ni surat* is when it is used to modify **pa**, where it is written under the *ina ni surat* (as a connected **pa** and *haboritan* will create confusion with another *ina ni surat ga*).

4. *Hasialaan/sikora/siala*, written like a multiplication mark (×) at the same height after an *ina ni surat* to change its end sound of that syllable into *-o* (as in English *no*).
5. *Hamisaran/hamisara/paninggil*, depicted the same way as *hatadingan* is, only to the right end. It adds *-ng* end (as in English *hung*) to the syllable. When the said *ina ni surat* is also modified by either *haluaan* or *hasialaan*, *hamisaran* is written on top of them.
6. *Pangolat*, drawn like a backslash (\) right after the modified *ina ni surat* at the same height, is a distinct *anak ni surat* in that it doesn't change the end sound of a syllable but altogether mutes one.

 ini (Tobanese for this)	 busur (Tobanese for bow)
 den	 andung (Tobanese lamentation chant)
 red	 seng (Indonesian for zinc)
 gong	 teng (East Lesser Sunda dialect for roof made of dried cocoa tree leaves)
 pusing (Tobanese for vertigo)	 ngung (Indonesian for buzzing sound)
 laguna	
 lugano (a South American surname)	

### Numbers and Signs

There was no numbers system in the ancient Surat Batak. One just wrote in words the numbers they wanted to tell.

Original Surat Batak writings had no spaces for separating either individual words or different sentences. Pustaha just contained many lines of uninterrupted letters.

As for signs and marks, there were only two simple ones:



was used to tell the reader that while the current line in the writing had reached its end the space wasn't enough for a word being written and that it was continued in the next line (below the one that has this mark) - drawn at the end of that line like an oversized right parenthesis and behaving much like a **hyphen**. This was vital because of the point presented above that there were no spaces between words and sentences (and the fact that there wasn't any word processor those days).



a primitive **period** sign. Depicted rudimentarily resembling a four-hand rotor, it was written to tell the reading person that a full "paragraph" (section about a main topic) had ended. New paragraph is written right after the sign, not in a new line.

### C. Evolution of Surat Batak

Later needs for symbols denoting several new, distinct sounds emerged as Batak language broke into separate generations along with buildup of the subtribes (at one or several points the different subtribes by then each had its own completely discrete language, i.e. people from one subtribe cannot understand and speak others' language).

Furthermore, Surat Batak was modified when Batak communities in their homeland were introduced to people from other ethnicities and cultural backgrounds (such as gospel missionaries from Europe) and therefore adopted even more foreign sounds in their languages.

Below, Surat Batak from Toba subtribe is given as an instance of the already developed systems. Each subtribe had their own complete set of letters (by complete the writer meant that every distinct set was sufficient to write down all sounds in each subtribe's spoken language counterpart).

Ina ni surat (Batak Toba set):

a	ha/ka	na	ma
			
ra	ta	ba	wa
			
i	u	nga	la
			
pa	sa	ja	ga
			
da	ca	nya	ya
			

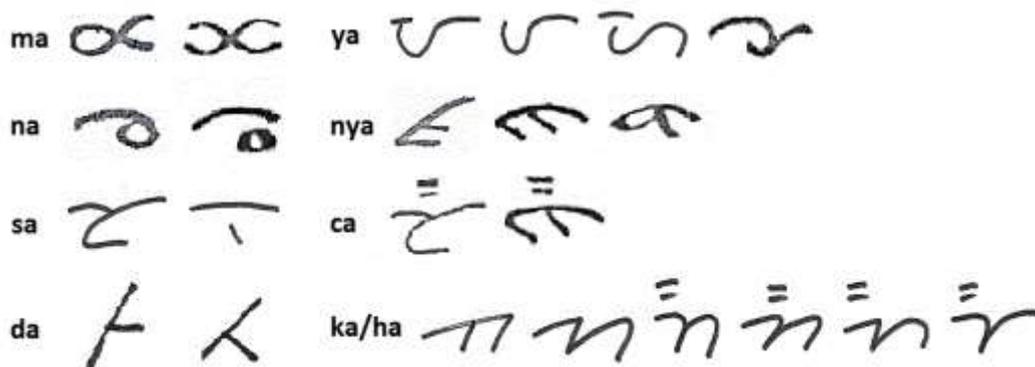
Ina ni surat **wa** (as in English *wild*), **ya** (as in English *yak*), and **nya** (as in Russian name *Sonya*) were created earlier somewhere along the way, naturally so for they mainly (at first) just denote 'sliding' sound of the

words in spoken language, before there was even the need to write foreign w- or y- sounds from foreign or adopted words; very much like the letter Я, Е, Ё, Ю (ya, ye, yo, yu) in Cyrillic alphabet was created in contrast to writing the letter and sound И (-i-) followed by А, Э, О, У (a, e, o, u) to denote/emphasize sliding -y- sound in each instance. Notice that **nya** was usually used by non-Tobanese writing system, while Toba's Surat Batak only made use of **wa** and **ya**.

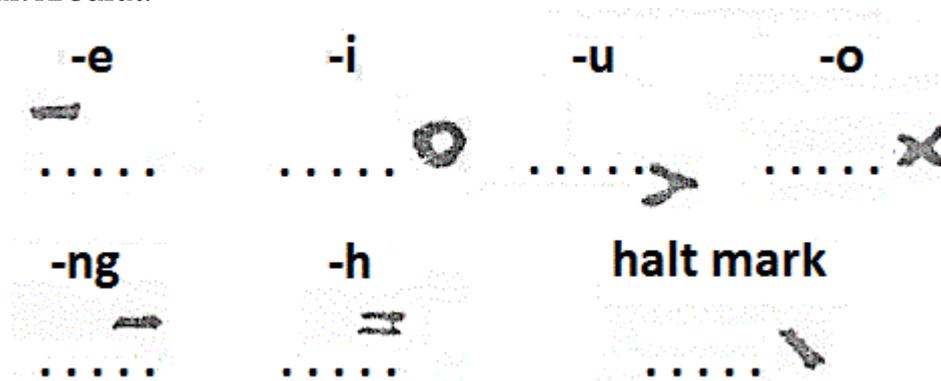
The **ca** was inducted when the necessity to write adopted or foreign c- sound (as in English Chuck) began to arise, and by then the previous three in a ni surat had been drifting to the same treatment too.

### Variations

Several different areas of Batak locality devised minor variations on the shape of the elements of in a ni surat. Some possible alternatives are given below.



### Anak ni surat:



Anak ni surat *sikorjan* (its shape much like an equals sign =), is always written on top of the letter modified, to the right end. It adds *-h* sound (as in *ah*) to the syllable. Unlike *hamisaran*, it cannot be written on top of both *haluaan* and *hasialaan*.

Some other subtribes aside from Toba also had one anak ni surat to indicate that one read twice the length of consonantal sound of ina ni surat immediately following it, called *keberatan podi*, and the shape was like a usual greater-than sign (>), written at the same height with ina ni surat.

bah! (a very widely used Batak particle expressing emphasis, surprise, anger, curiosity, etc.)

oh (a global exclamation sound expressing surprise or abrupt perception)

Kostya (a character in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina)

baoa (Tobanese for male)

sian (Tobanese for from)

uang (Indonesian for money; spelled u-wang)

cahya nyawa (Indonesian for "light of the soul")

cucumu (Indonesian for your grandson)

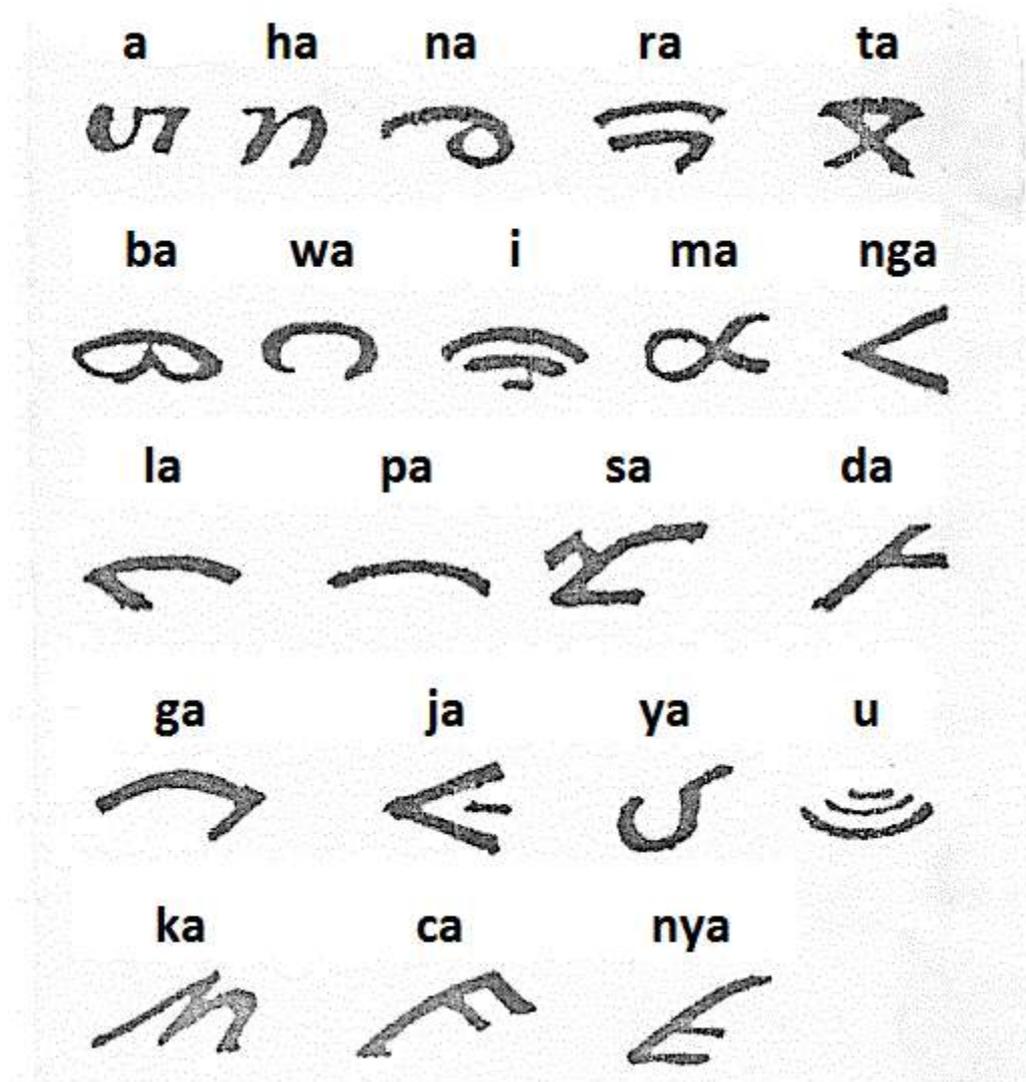
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#### D. The Modern Age

With the growth and spread of Batak people, Surat Batak progressed to provide for the necessity presented by the also evolving spoken language, partly because of the encounter with outer society and culture.

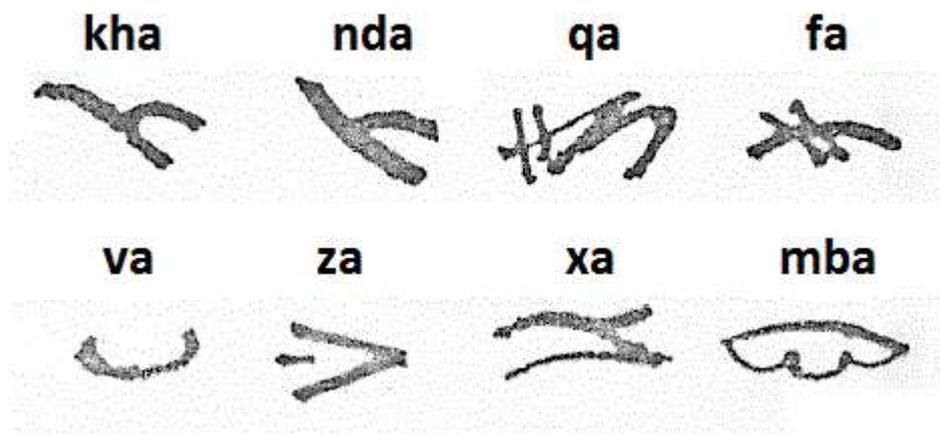
Modern Surat Batak got its legal definition following Presidential Resolution no. 116/B/1987 on preservation of traditional Indonesian culture that propelled the Ethnic Scripts Conference on 16-17 June 1988. Acting on the basis of the conference's outcome, North Sumatera local government decided to merge all existing sets of Surat Batak into an all-inclusive one with few adjustments as needed.

Ina ni surat:

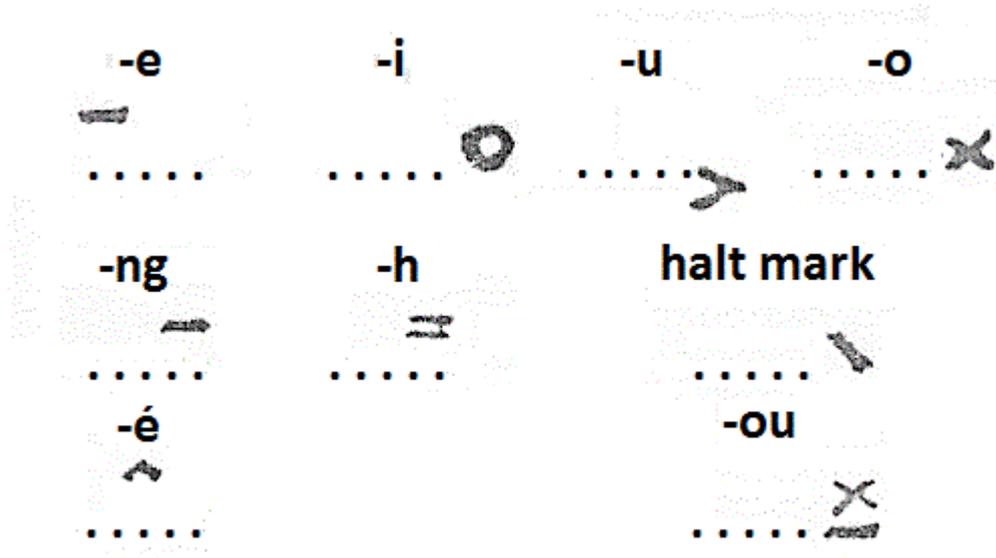


Below are ina ni surat:

1. Added in from Batak writing systems other than Toba (Karo, etc.; their language are rich with these sounds).
  - a. *kha* – sounded as in English *Christmas* (there is no need to write down a halted **ka** followed by **ha** anymore)
  - b. *nda* – sounded and used as in English *under* (there is no need to write down a halted **na** followed by **da** anymore)
  - c. *mba* – sounded and used as in English *amber* (no need to write down a halted **ma** followed by **ba** anymore)
2. Made up to complement their Roman equivalent. Note that each letter were fashioned to another letter available in classic Surat Batak with sound deemed closest.
  - a. **qa** – resembles classic **ka** with two crossing short strokes by the left end
  - b. **fa** – resembles classic **pa** with two crossing short strokes by the middle
  - c. **va** – resembles classic **wa**, only flipped vertically
  - d. **za** – resembles classic **ja**, only flipped horizontally
  - e. **xa** – resembles classic **sa**, only flipped horizontally

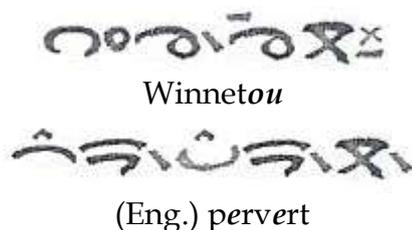


Anak ni surat:

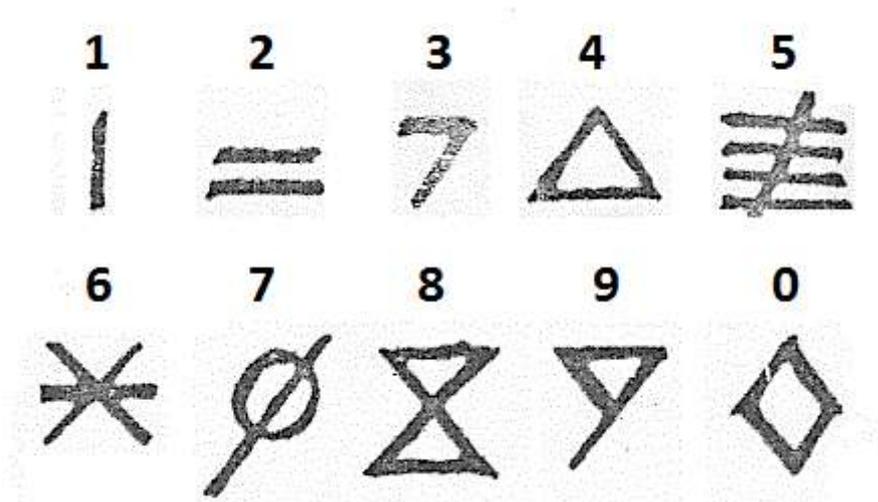


There are two other anak ni surat:

1. *-ou* sound (like English *row*) symbol, like an underlined multiplication sign, called *hatulungan*, was a non-Toba anak ni surat. It is written right next to *ina ni surat* modified and at the same height, just like *haluaan/hauluan* and *hasialaan/sikora/siala*, *-i* and *-o* sound symbols. Note that this symbol is not to be used when the *-o* and subsequent *-u* sound are not a single/diphthong sound, and therefore different syllables. In that case, use the *-o* symbol and then the letter *u* instead.
2. *-é* sound (like English *pervert*) symbol was made up, to smoothen Surat Batak use for writing in Indonesian language, as in Bahasa Indonesia there are many words using that sound. Its position is at the middle top of the letter modified. At least Toba language doesn't have any word with this sound, while it is possible that Karonese or other Batak languages have.



## Numbers and signs



As said before, the formation of numbers is a part of modernization attempt of Surat Batak and further facilitate its contemporary use. Writing numbers in Surat Batak is very similar to our daily Latin numerals.

◇◇:△◇

09:43 (time)

=\* ◇∅ =◇|◇

26-07-2010 (date)

|≡◇◇ ⇄ ~ ∅ U7

1500 rupiah (currency)

Signs and marks (period, colon, exclamation, etc.) from Roman alphabet system can be used (or not be used) freely just for the sake of clarity, as seen in examples above.

