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Merdeka

A case study from Indonesia on traditional family counselling and organised attempts to help street children

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Medan has about 2.7 millions inhabitants and is the biggest and most important city of northern Sumatra in Indonesia. A brochure of the Department of Tourism, Post and Telecommunication writes: “Medan means ‘field’ or ‘battlefield’, and indeed Medan was once the battlefield where the Deli Sultanate and the Kingdom of Aceh were at war many years ago. Medan is the capital of the North Sumatra province and a trade centre and seaport of considerable importance.” After these comments a description of the traffic connections to the other parts of Indonesia and the neighbouring countries by air and ship follows and the sightseeing attractions are praised: “Medan, a city which is hundreds of years old, houses many valuable historical objects which can potentially be restored and turned into tourist objects.”

Medan, located in close proximity to the coast, is mostly populated by Muslims who belong to the Malayan ethnic group. But many people from other tribes and religions moved from nearer and farther regions into the city in the last twenty years. Among them are many Bataks, who originally settled about 70 km south east in the mountains around the Toba-Lake.

The case: Merdeka

The following case study leads us into this city, but far away from the tourist attractions, far away from the big business with its glittering stores and banks, far away from airport and seaport – nevertheless into the centre of the city where the daily battle of physical and mental survival is fought.

Merdeka is one of the Batak boys. He has two little brothers and two little sisters. His father is a man of 35 years old and works as a driver of a small bus in public transport.

Merdeka’s father, Mr. Sihombing, comes from a poor family background. He moved into the big town Medan to find his living, because there was no field for him to work on. When he first came into town he got a job as a bus conductor and

he met a girl, Boru Sidabutar, who is the daughter of a bus driver whose family background is similar to his.

After her marriage to Mr. Sihombing she works as a dealer selling goods early in the morning. She has to wake up at two o'clock in the morning to look for and to buy vegetables to be sold later at three o'clock. After buying a big bunch of vegetables she carries it to other traders and sells parts of it to them. These traders start their business at 4 o'clock and are working until about 8 o'clock in the morning. People like these traders who sell vegetables to house wives and other people in Medan usually buy things from women or men like Boru Sidabutar. They bring the goods from the night market to their place. Boru Sidabutar practically works from 2 to 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning on average. This is called the "morning market". It is the lowest level on the working, as well as the social scale. Because of this, this kind of work is usually done by women.

Boru Sidabutar has to drive for about one hour to go to the market and back home. After finishing her work she reaches home at about 10 o'clock. Meanwhile her children got up, two of them make themselves ready for school without her mother's care. The two others stay at home without food until her mother comes home. The father left home for work at about 6 o'clock. He has breakfast as well as lunch and supper in the bus terminal or at other places. He always eats his food without the family. He comes home at 8 p.m. after one hour of taking a rest and washing the bus and having supper. Because he is working so hard all day he and his fellow drivers drink 'tuak' or palm wine and get drunk at the end of the day. He returns home in this condition – and that means that he does not bring money home, but rather he is drunk and causes anger.

This is the picture of the husband of Boru Sidabutar as he works and lives from day to day. And this is how Merdeka and his brothers and sisters experience their father. These conditions have caused that Merdeka does not like to stay at home and therefore he left to live out on the streets. He goes home only once a month or week to see his two little sisters – he misses them very much – and to give a small amount of money to his mother. He comes home in the morning to avoid meeting his father. Some days he takes his two little brothers along with him after school to work as shoe polisher from about 3 to 6 o'clock.

The work as a shoe polisher in the area of 'Olympia', the central market in the city, is very hard work. All people look down upon them as the "rubbish of the community". The children are always chased away so they have almost no place to polish the shoes of passengers. As they ask people questions, and talk to them, they polish their shoes.

The security men always hit or chase these children away and many jobless young men try to take some money from these boys since they are smaller and weaker than others. The police, the security men and those who work in the central market – nobody likes the presence of these children and their work of shoe polishing boys.

The two little brothers of Merdeka feel secure when he is protecting them. He has the responsibility to take care of them when they are with him and it is a big responsibility to save some money to give it to his mother in addition to his own food and clothing.

He has his three meals per day in the central market. He sleeps in the corridor of the street after all the security men are sleeping, or he sleeps in a quiet place

somewhere which is not controlled by the security men. All these places have no sanitary facilities.

The traditional counselling of the extended family

We experience a broken family in which the children do not have any external or internal safety. This is unusual, as for Batak families these virtues are of the highest value. The belonging to a clan (“marga”) and to a closer family is basic for the existence of humans. The “Adat Batak”, comprising all the organisation, orders and customs of life, are grounded in inheritance, familial bonds and the observance of traditions. Through “adat Batak” relations, roles and behaviour is regulated.

Each clan originates in a certain village – until today they have the names of their villages. So you can find out easily where somebody comes from. Families and clans form a tribe, tribes form the different Batak peoples, e.g. the Toba, the Karo Batak, the Simalungun, with their own languages and dialects. When two Bataks are meeting somewhere and do not know each other their first question is to which family they belong to. It is important to know that for defining the family relations. Through these relations the behaviour between persons is defined, which is regulated by a complex system of honouring family members through placing them into higher or lower ranks.

The whole family system which is the foundation of the Bataks does not function any more in the family of Merdeka. Through the uprooting of the traditions, through the very difficult working conditions of father and mother, through the poverty, through the individualisation of the family and the loss of the connections in the clan the parents and the children live in a “place of disorder”. René Girard is talking of “loss of differentiation” in such situations and he states that this loss is causing violence, which explodes and finds victims. Here the whole family is a victim, especially Merdeka – he is the one who is the most distant from the family life.

There are several families and family members of the Sidabutar clan who live in Medan. They sense and see the difficult situation. Even in the present circumstances of being scattered around and living under the conditions in an urban surrounding they still feel their responsibility for Sidabutar, Sihombing, Merdeka and the other children. They can not withdraw from the responsibility for their relatives. But how can they take care?

The families of the clan belong to a Christian congregation – like all others. Once a month the clan is meeting in an other family’s house to have a community, to eat together, to discuss problems and to solve them. The representatives have invited the family of Merdeka for several times, but neither father or mothers came. Because they are not successful they are ashamed – and therefore they do not dare to show up.

Now the elders of the clan have decided to invite the clan into the house of Sidabutar. Such a decision is appropriate, it is an honour for Sidabutar and the whole family to have the members of the clan in their own house. Through this invitation respect and helpfulness is being expressed.

Sidabutar will cook a meal for this meeting, Sihombing will be present. During the meeting the elders of the clan (three representatives of the “marga”) will start

talking to Sihombing and Sidabutar after the meal. They will explain that they have heard about the situation of the family, they will mention the drunkenness of Sihombing and that he is not taking care properly for his wife and children. They will express their sorrows that Merdeka is not living at home and visiting school. They will urge to live a good family life and to stay together and they will offer help. They will say that the most important thing is to renew the contacts with the other families and members of the clan and to come to the regular meetings. There could be some financial help, but first they have to change their conduct.

After this speech of the elders the other women and men may talk too. They will confirm the words of the elders and relate to the difficult situation of the family. But they will say that they have already helped people in similar difficulties. After all these talking Sihombing and Sidabutar will thank them for these words and promise to change. At the end of the day they will sing and pray.

This visit in the house of Sidabutar is a new beginning of family relations. And the visits will be repeated again and again. The members of the clan will continue asking themselves how the family of Sidabutar is doing and what they can do for them. Sidabutar and Sihombing have to show again and again what they have done to change their situation and where they need help.

Help and counselling is not happening on an individual level but in the family with very clear presuppositions which are helpful since centuries. In the Batak tradition there are methods of a "family therapy" – or with other words: there is counsel for people in need which is conducted by rules and methods. But this help for families by families is no longer enough in a setting where the traditional rural structures have broken down and the people live without material and mental insecurity. This situation is violence in itself and is producing additional violence.

Merdeka who is living on the streets because he has left home needs help for himself and he needs help for going back to his family. And his fate is similar to thousands of other street children in Medan and millions around the world.

Organised attempts of counselling to street children in Medan

The YMCA of Medan has started to develop a programme for support of the street children which now will be realised step by step if personal and financial means are sufficient. A student of theology started to get into contact with the children. That is quite a time consuming endeavour and therefore he has to pause with his studies. But he is sure that the experiences with the kids will help him in his ministry. For him it is his calling to do the work with the children. He gets a little payment by YMCA. The student goes every day to "Olympia", the central market – in bad clothes as if he would live on the streets too. He spends there also many nights. He gets to know the attitudes of the people against these children and others who are completely 'down'. He experiences the violence of the businessmen, the dealers, the security men and police on his own body. After living this way for several weeks he got some contacts to the group of shoe polishers to which Merdeka is belonging to. First they watched him very suspiciously, several times he was beaten by these children, but then they realised that he did not want to harm them. He never uncovered his real identity to them and he never told that he wanted to help them. First he wants to be with them, talk to them and to get to know them in their daily life – and express to them that he comes as a fellow human and not as a person who want to use or to exploit them.

The workers and representatives of the YMCA plan further steps: They have started to look out for a room, where these kids can come and meet if they want. This room shall be a shelter for them. They might use it to rest, to relax and talk to others. From there the next step could be to offer some counselling in this room. The purpose is to rehabilitate them into society and that means into their family, to offer them some work for earning a little money to educate them for finding a job. Because for many jobs the English language is required they plan to offer a programme in learning English. But all these plans are not in work by now but they show the direction. The overall purpose is to convey to these boys that they have dignity and rights. They must not become objects again, even if objects of helping agencies or families. The YMCA therefore is engaged in congregations, administrations and in other institutions to ensure that street children are not rubbish, but a part of society and symptoms of an unjust social structure.

Final comments

Support for Merdeka and other youngsters like him can only be granted seeing the context of the Indonesian society and the urban setting with broken traditions and the unstable social and economical structures. All these problems bear a huge potential of violence very soon. After the presentation of this case in the summer of 1997 riots broke out in Indonesia. The first month of 1998 were full of rebelling students, burning stores, demolition of cars and killing of people. It is not hard to imagine that for youth like Merdeka it needs only a little cause to join in such violence. What do they lose if they are in a shouting and violent crowd? The President of Indonesia had to resign due to these riots. Do the politicians and the society build up new structures which help all the “Merdekas” do survive easier?