

Culture and traditions of Karo society as part of Indonesian cultural heritage

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Abstract

This study examines the customs and traditions of Karo society as an integral part of Indonesian cultural heritage by positioning them as an interconnected cultural system. Using a literature-based research approach, this study reviews scholarly works addressing kinship systems, customary rituals, cultural expressions, traditional arts, and ethnoculinary practices within Karo society. Data were analyzed through critical reading and conceptual synthesis to identify key thematic patterns. The findings indicate that Karo customs function not as isolated practices but as a cohesive social system in which kinship, life-cycle rituals, artistic expressions, and traditional cuisine collectively shape social order and cultural identity. Moreover, Karo traditions demonstrate adaptability to social change while maintaining core customary values. This study highlights the importance of situating Karo customs within the broader context of Indonesian culture, emphasizing their role in the dynamic landscape of the Indonesian archipelago's cultural diversity.

Abstrak

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk membahas adat dan tradisi masyarakat Karo sebagai bagian dari kebudayaan Nusantara dengan menempatkannya sebagai satu kesatuan sistem budaya yang saling terhubung. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi pustaka dengan menelaah berbagai literatur ilmiah yang membahas sistem kekerabatan, ritual adat, ekspresi budaya, kesenian, serta praktik kuliner tradisional masyarakat Karo. Analisis dilakukan melalui pembacaan kritis dan sintesis konseptual terhadap tema-tema utama yang muncul dalam literatur. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa adat Karo tidak berdiri sebagai praktik-praktik terpisah, melainkan membentuk sistem sosial yang terintegrasi, di mana kekerabatan, ritual siklus kehidupan, seni tradisional, dan kuliner adat saling menopang dalam membangun identitas kolektif masyarakat. Adat dan tradisi Karo juga menunjukkan kemampuan adaptasi terhadap perubahan sosial tanpa kehilangan nilai dasar yang menjadi fondasi kebudayaannya. Kajian ini menegaskan pentingnya memahami adat Karo dalam kerangka kebudayaan Indonesia yang lebih luas sebagai bagian dari dinamika budaya Nusantara.

Keywords

Karo customs, Indonesian cultural heritage, local traditions, cultural system.

1. Introduction

The Indonesian community is renowned due to their distinct multiculturalism that emerged due to a long and intricate historical development social system and ongoing relationships between human society and their surrounding environment (Hidayah, 2023; I. Nurhayati & Agustina, 2020). As for culture, it consists of a system of ideas, values, and practices that are handed down over several generations and provide a community with social cohesion while regulating their daily activities (Hosen et al., 2020; Ngalimun et al., 2022; Wero et al., 2021). Based on that, it can be seen that values and traditions have serious social applications and are not just for reproduction as symbolic history systems. Rather, they are a social framework of order and preserve the integration of a community.

Among the ethnic groups in Indonesia that continue to actively practice their customary systems is the Karo community of North Sumatra. Karo customs function as a social framework that regulates kinship relations, social roles, and behavioral norms across various customary activities and daily social interactions. The Rakut Sitelu kinship system, consisting of kalimbubu, senina, and anak beru, forms the primary foundation for organizing social relations and customary deliberation within Karo society (Siregar et al., 2023). Beyond structuring family ties, this system defines responsibilities and ethical conduct in a wide range of customary events.

Existing studies on Karo culture indicate that customs and traditions are often examined through specific cultural practices. Research on Karo traditional marriage, for instance, situates the ritual as a symbolic space that reflects social relations, kinship values, and the customary structure of the community (Adriansyah et al., 2022). Through such customary events, cultural values are transmitted and renegotiated across generations within an agreed social framework.

Scholarly attention has also been directed toward traditional arts as integral components of Karo customary practices. The Guro-guro Aron tradition is frequently discussed as a form of cultural expression that embodies social values, ethical norms, and communal solidarity, particularly within agrarian contexts and youth interactions (Laia et al., 2024; Latifah et al., 2021). These studies emphasize that traditional arts are not autonomous cultural forms but are closely embedded within the customary and value systems that govern them. In addition, several studies highlight efforts to preserve material cultural elements of Karo society, such as traditional houses and decorative motifs, which reflect underlying value systems, social structures, and belief frameworks (Ginting et al., 2021). Karo traditional houses are understood not merely as physical structures but as representations of communal life, solidarity, and socially regulated relationships. This perspective underscores that Karo customs and traditions encompass interconnected social, symbolic, and material dimensions.

Despite the valuable contributions of these studies, existing discussions tend to focus on particular practices or isolated customary events. Such a partial approach has limited the development of a more integrated conceptual understanding of Karo customs and traditions as a coherent cultural system. Consequently, the position of Karo customs within the broader cultural landscape of the Indonesian archipelago remains insufficiently examined in a comprehensive manner. Despite how recently emerged marketing traditions in contemporary studies seeks to view local customs as part of socio-cultural change, does exactly integrate social change with customs in Karo society situated in the Indonesian cultural heritage (Fahik et al., 2023; Fajrin, 2021; Hasibuan & Simatupang, 2021). It is a more understandable perspective that treats customs as social life that is not dead and remains as old cultural systems.” The dynamics of Karo customs and traditions on these points are neither local practices in Karo nor isolated, but integral to the interwoven system of

Indonesian local practices.

In this framework, the objective of the current study is to examine the customs and traditions of Karo society as part of the Indonesian cultural heritage through literature and a conceptual approach. The objectives are centered on exploring the relationships between cultural systems, social values, and social actions traditions, within Karo society. The purpose of this study is to synthesize the existing literature on the subject to adequately situate the Karo traditions within the Indonesian framework and, more significantly, to provide a conceptual perspective to the practice of customs and traditions that integrate them more cohesively.

2. Research Method

The exploration of traditions of the Karo people and their place within the context of Indonesian culture will utilize a literature-based approach. A literature-based approach will facilitate the organized study of the customs and traditions of Karo society. A literature-based approach will allow the research to systematically study, analyze, and combine the work of other scholars and the results they have obtained along with their conclusions regarding the specific topic of research. This approach is highly appropriate when the research is aimed at the conceptual and theoretical understanding of the cultural phenomena, especially when the cultural phenomena to be analyzed the values, customs, and traditions of the society have been researched extensively (Lianto et al., 2023; Mida Safitriani et al., 2023; Saxena & Sharma, 2024).

Data collection was conducted by using Karo customs and traditions literature review. In this case, data sources include journals, national and international Karo culture, scholarly documents on Karo customary systems, practices, and cultural studies. Literature was chosen through a selective review process based on pertinence, trustworthiness, and alignment with the objectives of the research. In this study, the literature reviewed serves a dual function as data and as a conceptual reference for making sense of the interrelatedness of customs, cultural values, and social practices within Karo society.

The technique employed on data analysis was qualitative content analysis, which consists of critical reading, thematic categorization, and interpretation of data within the chosen works (Juniadi & Heriyanto, 2021; N. Nurhayati et al., 2023). In the preliminary stage, the primary topics that were brought to the fore by the literature were identified: they included, and were not limited to, kinsfolk and clan systems, customary and traditional ceremonies, and the preservation of culture and the arts. These patterns were then subjected to further scrutiny within the context of the authors through which they were possible so that they could extract the basic elements, differences, and patterns of the dominating concepts. Through this means, the findings do not aim to make statistical generalizations, but to achieve greater contextual comprehension, with the aid of relevant literature. Consequently, the literature-based approach used in this study provides the analytical framework for understanding Karo customs and traditions in the broader perspective of Indonesian culture.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Kinship System and Social Structure in Karo Customary Law

Based on the information from the literature review, the Karo people's kinship system is the primary system within Karo Society on which the entirety of the social system is built, with social relations administered through distinctly defined

customary positions of kalimbubu, senina, and anak beru which are the structural units of society (Siregar et al., 2023). The system allocates individuals into a plethora of different social positions which dictate what individuals are permitted, what they are expected to do, and even what they are morally obliged to do in the context of a given custom.

The social system of Karo customary life is also, through the primary of kinship, social custom structure, and its legal framework, which, within defined geographical boundaries, prescribe and structure the social roles and social problem solving arrangements (Sabila et al., 2025). These frameworks serve to protect the social order and ensure that the social order is actively maintained within the community. Moreover, within multiethnic contexts, the Karo kinship system is also flexible as a primary form of social cohesion system and in the primary values that it is based on (Siregar et al., 2023). This affirms the position that Karo customary law is one of the social systems that is flexible and dynamic, and is primarily functional, on the social customs of the society in which it is found.

3.2. Customary Rituals and Life-Cycle Practices in Karo Tradition

In Karo society, customary practices have an important place for managing the life cycle of participants, particularly for death, which is seen as a joint social activity for re-affirming networks of kinship and relational equilibrium among families (Nathasia et al., 2023). These practices help illustrate, and for the participants, help create a perception of death as part of the larger whole of the social order, and primary social events, as they certainly involve all members of the community, social order is of primary importance.

With respect to marriage, Karo custom views ritual as a social form that joins together two sets of kin, and is implemented over a series of prescribed formal custom stages (Hutabarat & Rumapea, 2025). This custom has a bearing on the social character of marriage and is illustrative of the emphasis on the social event of marriage as a mechanism for the construction and reorganization of kin relations.

An example of socially interdependent values of respect for ancestors and the social order of families (social closed custom unit) construction, and the custom symbol reinforcing of values, is the cabur bulung ritual in Karo marriage ceremonies (Marini, 2022). Each stage completed in the ritual sequence contains a meaning attached to the integration of the social world and the custom values. The scheduling of events such as Mbaba Belo Selambar demonstrates that Karo traditions are predicated on an organized distribution of functions and activities that reflect social order (Sitompul et al., 2025). This demonstrates that customary social practices and rituals are not the result of social anarchy; rather, they emanate from social order. The Karo marriage ritual has also been seen as a conduit for cultural creativity, with the implications that the representation and articulation of custom, value, symbol, and social order are depicted visually and artistically. This suggests that the ritual has cultural significance on a larger scale (Adriansyah et al., 2022). Hence, these findings confirm that ceremonial practices have cross-disciplinary existence within Karo customs.

3.3. Cultural Expression, Arts, and the Preservation of Karo Tradition

As forms of informal communication, oral performances like perkolong-kolong serve as a conduit for the tradition's moral teaching, social ethics, and cultural appreciation within the customary setting (Panggabean et al., 2024). This exemplifies the importance of oral artistry for the community's value system and cultural value appreciation. As part of the Karo folklore tradition, nampeken tulan-tulan also helps in the intergenerational transmission of stories which, within social life, serve to pass down customary knowledge and cultural identity (Dinanta et al., 2021). The tradition exemplifies the educational value of storytelling in cultures, which goes beyond formal systems. The Merdang Merdem tradition demonstrates the intertwining of cultural performance and customary ritual with the agrarian cycle of life. It focuses on the ceremonial aspect which promotes social cohesion and collective identity in the community (Sibero, 2017). All these

exemplify the harmonious integration of art and ritual.

The digitalization of traditions adapted to new technology encourages the documentation and dissemination of Karo customs to a broader audience, more so, to a digital audience without disconnecting from their cultural context (Simanungkalit, 2024). This exemplifies the potential of cultural practices to adapt to contemporary frameworks while still retaining their traditions.

While still keeping the fundamental traditional values, the use in performances of Gendang Guro-guro Aron of modernisation like keyboard instruments exemplifies a change in artistic presentation influenced by practicality and modernity (Soedarsoni, 2011). This change illustrates cultural fluidity in keeping a tradition relevant. On the other hand, the typical accompaniment in performances of Gendang Morah-morah of Gendang Sarune shows that traditional music is still greater in importance in preserving the aesthetic and the social function of the Karo customary arts (Purba, 2023). This research illustrates the important role of traditional music in society.

3.4. Traditional Cuisine and Ethnoculinary Practices in Karo Culture

Traditional Karo cuisine constitutes an integral component of the cultural system, functioning as a marker of identity, social relations, and the expression of customary values. An inventory of Karo traditional foods reveals that food types, preparation techniques, and serving contexts are closely linked to customary events, kinship structures, and social role distribution within the community. Traditional foods are generally presented within ritual and ceremonial contexts, serving symbolic functions as social connectors and as representations of Karo culture in public spaces, including efforts to document and develop regional culinary identity (Zaitun, Enny Hasriyani, 2021).

Trites is a traditional Karo dish prepared from bovine rumen contents consisting of partially digested fodder, which are cooked with local spices to produce a distinctive bitter-flavored soup. In ethnoculinary studies, trites is understood not as an everyday food but as a dish served selectively during specific customary events such as annual festivals, traditional marriages, and thanksgiving rituals. Its primary ingredients, characteristic bitterness, and lengthy collective preparation process position trites as a marker of Karo culinary identity and a cultural boundary within traditional food consumption practices (Isnainy Fazryn & Nuriza Dora, 2024).

As a form of local wisdom, trites carries symbolic meanings that extend beyond its nutritional function. Studies on the local wisdom associated with trites indicate that this dish is positioned as a symbol of respect for ancestors and as a marker of sacredness within customary ceremonies. Its preparation and presentation are governed by unwritten customary norms and involve collective family and community participation, enabling trites to function as a medium for transmitting cultural values, strengthening social solidarity, and sustaining traditional knowledge. Despite shifts in meaning resulting from modernization and changing consumption patterns, trites continues to be maintained within ritual contexts as a significant element of Karo cultural identity (Tarigan & Sandiah, 2025).

The diversity of Karo traditional cuisine indicates that each type of dish is associated with specific contexts of use corresponding to the customary events in which it is served. Foods such as *cipera*, *lomok-lomok*, and *cimpa matah* are commonly linked to traditional marriage ceremonies, while *cimpa unung-unung*, Karo-style roasted pork, and *pagit-pagit* are typically prepared for annual communal festivals. In post-harvest contexts, dishes such as *cincang bohan*, *cimpa tuang*, and *gule cih* form part of collective celebrations, whereas *kidu-kidu* and *tasak telu* are served during housewarming ceremonies. In funeral rites, *umbut* is presented as a simple dish that reflects the atmosphere of mourning and the value of restraint within Karo customary practice. This pattern demonstrates that Karo cuisine constitutes a system of cultural

classification that is closely integrated with the life cycle and the customary structure of Karo society (Sembiring & Setia, 2020).

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the customs and traditions of Karo society constitute an integrated cultural system encompassing kinship structures, life-cycle rituals, artistic expressions, and traditional culinary practices that collectively shape social order and collective identity. Karo customs function as a social regulatory framework that organizes relationships, values, and cultural practices in a manner that is not static but continuously adapts to social change while maintaining its foundational principles. By situating Karo customs within the broader context of Indonesian culture, this study demonstrates that local traditions hold a strategic position in developing a more comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's cultural diversity. These findings provide a conceptual basis for future research to further examine the relationship between customary practices, modernization, and cultural preservation within local communities in Indonesia.

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