

RECLAIMING KARONESE IDENTITY THROUGH *ERPANGIR KU LAU* RITUAL

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ABSTRACT

Dutch colonialism in Tanah Karo has long ended but not with the construction of the discourse. The unilateral evaluation of the Dutch towards the spirituality of the Karo people caused the Karo people to split into groups and live with social pathology. The colonial discourse is now experiencing challenges as the *erpangir ku lau* ritual was established as a national intangible cultural heritage and was made as one of the routine cultural tourism attractions in Karo District.

This research uses a descriptive qualitative research method because it uses theory as a platform. The data source of this research consists of primary data obtained through observation and in-depth interviews, and secondary data obtained through books, scientific papers, documents, and online sources.

The results of the study revealed that despite being rejected by one of the community groups, support for efforts to reclaim Karo's identity through the implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual was still activated. This is because the effort to reclaim identity is expected to bring back the Karo community following the identity of the ancestral heritage, namely *mehamat* (polite), *metami* (persuading), *melias* (loving), *perkuah* (generous), and *perkeleng* (merciful) towards fellow humans and ancestors, The Creator, and the universe.

Keywords: *Reclaiming Identity, Erpangir Ku Lau, Colonial Discourse, and Karo Society*

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism in Tanah Karo developed by no longer just trying to expand conquered territory but also changing the personality of its people following the understanding of its

rulers. It was colonialism that also formed the background of various interventions in the Karo community and its spirituality world. Dutch colonial discourse that was formed during the colonial era, is full of various interests that eliminate the personality of the Karo people. The creation of social classes in colonized society is also an impact of the practice of power-knowledge relations that occurred during the colonial period in Tanah Karo on all sides such as linguistics, economics, social and culture.

The characteristic personality of the Karo people is *mehamat* (polite), *metami* (persuading), *melias* (loving), *perkuah* (generous), and *perkeleng* (merciful) towards fellow humans and ancestors, the Creator, and the universe is weakening and gradually disappearing. Even new phenomena of social pathology appear, namely *anceng* (happy to see other people hard, hard to see other people happy), *cian* (jealousy/envy), and *cekurak* (happy talking about the ugliness of others) or known as *acc*. The Karo people are unwittingly forced to live with mutual suspicion, mutual hatred, and compartmentalization in their egos. Furthermore, as a discourse created by the Dutch colonialists, it was finally accepted by society as a result of hegemony. The social reality of the Karo community today is daily life knowledge that lives and develops as a general awareness, public discourse, and social construction.

The social reality of the Karo people created by the Dutch colonials, accepted as a result of hegemony, should be corrected by conducting counter-hegemony to review the *erpangir ku lau* ritual which is full of meaning for each Karo community. This study seeks to deconstruct the social reality of the Karo community according to Derrida's concept so that they can get back to knowing their noble nature and identity. As local wisdom that has been protected nationally, the *erpangir ku lau* ritual is in harmony with Lyotard's explanation (Lubis, 2004: 37) which is a local context in Karo District. The ancestors believed that *erpangir ku lau* ritual was closely related to the cycle of life of a human, which in turn had an impact on the cosmic system of the Karo people themselves.

Malesevic (2006: 13) concluded that the identity of a nation can be used as an ideological basis in the context of understanding ethnicity and strengthening nationalism. Moya (2009: 3-4) also explains that identity is the basis of socio-cultural relations in a society. Our concept of who we are as a social creature -identity- can then influence our understanding of how to structure a society. And who we understand as ourselves also naturally has an impact on how we experience and understand the world. Through this research, the reclaimed identity

of the Karo community is expected to be able to re-articulate the 'authenticity' and the noble values of the Karo community contained in *erpangir ku lau* ritual and be introduced to the younger generation.

Formulation Of The Problem

1. How is the construction of Dutch colonial discourse on the Karo people.
2. How is the reclaiming Karo identity through the implementation of *erpangir ku lau* ritual.
3. What is the meaning of reclaiming the identity of the Karo people through the implementation of *erpangir ku lau* ritual.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses descriptive-qualitative research methods. Primary data sources were obtained through observation and in-depth interviews, while secondary data were obtained through books, scientific papers, documents, and online sources. Observations were carried out on the implementation of *erpangir ku lau* ritual in Doulu Village, Karo District and Serba Jadi Village, Deli Serdang Regency. While the interviews were conducted involving Karo people from various educational backgrounds and ages, Karo traditional leaders, religious leaders, and Karo intellectuals. Secondary data in the form of Dutch documents were obtained from various sources, one of which was in collaboration with the Sumatran Heritage Agency as the license holder for the distribution of Dutch documents in Sumatra.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Construction of Colonial Discourse on the Karo Society

Zending took place in Tanah Karo starting in 1890 when the ship of the Dutch missionary union mission Nederlandsch Zendeling Genootschap (NZG) accompanied by several Minahasa priests anchored in East Sumatra (now North Sumatra). Led by Rev. Hendrik C. Kruyt and Nicolas Pontoh, the NZG delegates then began their mission marked by the construction of the First Protestant Church in Buluhawar, Sibolangit. The church is no longer actively used as a place of worship but rather as the GBKP Reading Garden as well as the Gospel Preaching Zending Museum which is managed by the Channel Blessing Foundation (interview with Eka, September 2018).

But in its journey, the zending conducted by NZG by Dutch intervention was full of violence and coercion. Interventions for the noble beliefs of the Karo people include changing

the Hindu name *Pemena* to *Perbegu*, limiting the implementation of religious rituals, to changing the Karo people's concept of *Dibata* (God) and the universe. *Dibata* is described as something abstract and has a negative connotation. *Pemena* Hinduism was subsequently considered a religion of worshipping black magic and magic. The construction of the Dutch colonial discourse on the Karo traditional belief system according to Dirks (1992: 6) is part of the mandate of colonialism which embeds words such as *foreign*, *others*, and *colonizable* towards other nations to justify the practice of colonialism.

The Dutch colonial intervention which was quite harsh made the Karo people turn into private individuals. Some even changed their identities by removing the 'family name' and changing to another tribe. This was explained by Panikkar (1959) that during contact with Western society during the colonial era, ethnic groups in Asia went through the hardships of life by being physically and psychologically depressed at all times. Colonialism succeeded in stopping the familiarity of the colonies with their own culture (familiarity with the local culture) which then had an emotional impact (Dirks, 1992: 117).

Community adherence to its leaders made the movement of the people against the Dutch colonial government easy. On the Dutch side, on the other hand, this form of popular government made it difficult for them to occupy new territory. Because it was difficult to break the people's trust in their customary leaders, the Dutch slowly abolished the banking system. Some *perbapan/sibayak* (leaders) were even replaced to comply with the regulations implemented by the Dutch colonial. The Dutch action by replacing the people who occupied *perbapan/sibayak* positions following their wishes, made the Karo people scattered and no longer believed in the *perbapan*, making it easier for the Dutch to divide the Karo people. This is one form of Dutch colonial construction that has caused the Karo people to lose their cultural identity (interview with PPG, 12 August 2019).

The Dutch government as a colonial nation tried to display suspicion and mistrust between ordinary people and local/adat leaders to hamper their efforts against the colonial power. Fanon (in Putranto, 2004: 80) describes the condition as mistrust. The reason for the formation of the *mistrust* was that colonialism wanted to strengthen its influence and power by forming a condition that triggered the fear of the inhabitants of the colonies.

In addition to the form of government, the construction of the Dutch colonial discourse also divided Karo into small groups based on their residential areas. In the pre-colonial period, the Karo people did not only spread in the highlands around the mountains but also spread

widely in the lowlands. According to Putro (1979: 17), the following is the distribution area of the Karo community: (1) Karo Gugung or Tanah Karo Highlands (currently in Karo District); (2) East Karo Region (currently included in the Serdang Bedagai Regency); (3) Karo Baluren area along the Lau Renun river (currently in the Dairi Regency area); (4) Karo Jahe Region (currently included in Deli Serdang Regency); and (5) Karo Binge / Selisai area (currently included in Langkat Regency). It should be noted that pre-colonial Karo boundaries were not separated based on administrative boundaries such as today's modern cities but were only separated by watersheds and agreed by consensus.

However, after the Dutch colonial occupation in Tanah Karo, the areas which became the identity of the Karo people were narrowed down like the current Karo Regency. While other regions serve as other districts/cities such as Binjai, Medan, Deli Serdang, and Langkat which have pluralistic community characteristics. The determination of these territorial boundaries also affects the ethnic solidarity of the Karo people. The determination of this boundary is also one of the causes of the formation of the Karo community in small groups such as Karo gugung, Karo ginger, Karo baluren, and so forth.

The Dutch strictly prohibits all activities of the Karo people who require the use of traditional musical instruments. Dutch colonial reasoned that the use of musical instruments could invite the presence of evil spirits that were contrary to the teachings of the Church. The Dutch decree made the traditional Karo musical instrument something that was forbidden to accompany worship in the church and was replaced by organ instruments originating from Europe. After the meeting of Protestant Christian leaders in the 1960s, traditional musical instruments were allowed to accompany worship but still obeyed the applicable laws (interview with Matius Tarigan, January 14th 2019).

In addition to traditional musical instruments, the Dutch colonial also banned the Karo people from using *uis nipes* (traditional cloth). The Dutch colonial side considered that the cloth was not in accordance with the teachings of Christianity because one of the elements of the cloth dye used contained animal blood. Through the Dutch colonial church, institutions set the blood into something dirty and contrary to the teachings of Christianity. Same thing with the use of traditional musical instruments, weaving *uis nipes* is now allowed on condition that the fabric dye elements are replaced into synthetic dyes (interview with Matius Tarigan, January 14th 2019).

The Dutch colonial construction rolled over time to form the social reality of the Karo people who did not dare to use the Cultural attributes of their ethnic identity markers. The ban that resulted in the fear of the Karo people starting from the colonial era continued even into the New Order era. President Abdul Rahman Wahid's administration was the beginning of the emergence of the courage of the Karo people in using the attributes of their cultural identity markers (interview with HRS, July 12th 2019). So hard and the depth of influence of Dutch colonial discourse works in silence amid Karo society. This is as said by Dirks (1992: 176) that colonial discourse has a very strong influence because the text and context work in the same region, space and time so that it cannot be distinguished. The anxiety that had been created in the subconscious understanding of the Karo community made the Dutch colonial discourse work effectively.

Changes in the form of government, changes in the boundaries of residential areas, restrictions on the use of attributes or objects of cultural identity markers have not been deemed sufficient to change the identity of the Karo people. The Dutch also prohibits the implementation of all forms of spiritual activities involving offerings in locations that are considered sacred. One of the affected is *erpangir ku lau* ritual. The Dutch Colonial monitored all activities of the Karo people who were still carrying out this sacred ritual. Its prohibition raises fears of the Karo people who are still running until now. Even though they have gained independence, the Karo people are still sensitive and are reluctant to talk further when discussing about *erpangir ku lau* rituals.

The noble values of the ancestors inherited in *erpangir ku lau* ritual in the past have formed the sublime identity of the Karo people namely 3M2P (*mehamat*, *metami*, *melias*, *perkuah*, and *perkeleng*) which means always polite (*mehamat*); persuasive, persistent (*metami*); full of affection (*melias*); generous (*perkuah*), and compassionate (*perkeleng*). As the ritual is forgotten, the ancestral heritage of the ancestors is also lost in the minds and understanding of the Karo people. The Karo community has changed from a polite person who respects the three layers of the world to a Karo community with a person who is rude, selfish, full of suspicion among people, and has no respect (interview with Basmi Tarigan, July 14th 2019). The construction of the Dutch colonial discourse and its impacts now shape the social reality of the Karo people which is far from the teachings of their ancestors.

Reclaiming Karo's Identity through the *Erpangir Ku Lau* Ritual

Erpangir ku lau ritual can be used as a media to claim identity for the people of Karo. Regardless of the technicalities or procedures for its implementation, this ritual is present to teach each person Karo to re-apply the taboo on code of conduct, speech taboo, and food taboo. In addition to forming a wise personality and manners, this ritual also helps restore the harmony of the cosmos system, namely the relationship between humans and humans, humans with nature, and humans with the Divine. This ritual is also a form of Karo's personal communication with *bègu jabu* (ancestral spirit) and the forces of nature. All beings in the world are interpreted to live everyday side by side and respect each other. As explained by Jenkins (2004: 215; 220) that ritual is related to inner depth and personal originality. The potential tension between beings in the world can be overcome by the power of symbols when rituals are presented.

The *Pemena* community upholds the norms of social life and respects the harmony of nature. Teaches to respect seniority or older people, and vice versa older ones become role models for the younger ones. This teaching also teaches humans not to be too arrogant and to respect each other with God's creations. Humans are also taught not to speak carelessly, hunt, fish, kill plant pests, cut down logs. The *Pemena* community believes that the motion of the living nature is caused by the souls behind the events and natural phenomena caused by spirits personified as good tendencies that inhabit the land, rocks, logs, water, and so forth.

The ingredients used during the purification ritual are water. Why water? Because water is meant as a media that not only remove dirt stains but also gives life back. Water is a means of awakening. Against the dead, it is often said that he purified himself on the day of his birth, and on the day of the resurrection. Through ritual purification with water and a mixture of several types of oranges, the Karo people have been cleansed and can interact again with God and the inhabitants of the universe. The ritual is carried out in flowing water with the aim, the excrement that has been discarded does not return again and humans return to being clean (Sebayang, 2013: 59). From this explanation, it can be concluded that the noble identity of the Karo people inherited from the ancestors who originally came from the Hindu teachings of *Pemena* as follows.

Mehamat

Mehamat is literally interpreted as an attitude of respect, not presumptuous, and not just any. *Mehamat* in the Karo community is an attitude of a person who is demanded to be polite in the code of conduct and polite in speech system.

Metami

Metami is literally interpreted as an attitude of a person who likes to spoil. For example, someone who is more mature or in a higher position treats people below him or younger than himself with kindness and attention.

Melias

Melias, when interpreted literally, is a person who is positive-minded, hard-working, intelligent, and brave. *Melias* was inherited by ancestors in the hope that the educated Karo community would become a person who could be relied on and mutually beneficial to one another.

Perkuah

Perkuah if interpreted literally is the nature of mutual love and generous.

Perkeleng

Perkeleng is literally a merciful nature. This trait requires each Karo person to love all creatures on earth and its creator for the sake of harmonizing the three worlds (the upper world, the middle world, and the underworld).

These five characteristics can be seen in the Karo *pedah* (messages) that are often spoken by elders and community leaders in traditional ceremonies as follows:

Mehamatlah er kalimbubu
(Respect for *kalimbubu*)
Erkekelengen er *sembuyak / senina*
(Loves *sembuyak / senina*)
Metami, ku anak beru
(Loving and protecting *anak beru*)
Rendi-Renta
(Give first and then receive)

The development of the 3M2P traits subsequently resulted in the philosophy of life of the Karo people as follows:

"*Ula sipereh keriahen ukur ta manusia alu kinisuin sinjaga alam enda*".

(Don't seek human happiness above the plight of other creatures in this world)

"*Ukuri ukur si ngukuri ukur ndu*"

(Think about the feelings of others who also think about our feelings)

Knowledge of the natural sciences only teaches humans about the emphasis on the value of objectivation, based on logic, factual, creation, to the power of predictive quality and applications for the technology. But the values of indigenous knowledge from the ancestors of Karo teach each Karo person about aesthetic values, interrelated and interrelated human relationships, caring, to the mystical side of this world. The values of local wisdom knowledge are also present to teach humans to respect older people. These values are also closely related to the beauty of water; how water connects all beings in the world to how humans are an important part of nature.

Efforts to reclaim identity are in line with what was said by (Lyotard in Sarup, 2008: 210; 213) about great narratives. Great narratives are no longer functioning in contemporary society. Great narratives have lost credibility, be they speculative or emancipatory. Instead, we are advised to return to the understanding of traditional societies where they emphasize the importance of small narratives such as myths, supernatural powers, people's wisdom, and other forms of explanation

Karonese cannot be released from his transcendental side, because that is part of his identity. For the Karo people who uphold their customs, identity encompasses their entire body from physical, mental, emotional, to spiritual. This concept is not understood by the Dutch. Based on Dutch understanding derived from Modern European rational culture, body and mind are separate and separate things. Modern Europeans will not be able to see the connection between the physical body, mind, and spiritual world of their colonies.

The Karo people will not be able to live their daily lives in harmony without any re-identification or re-understanding of who are called ethnic Karos. As long as they do not have the treasure of identity identification, the Karo people will not be able to establish relationships with fellow humans in a consistent and meaningful way. In essence, without identity there is no human world. Stuart Hall (1996) in his book *Questions of Cultural Identity* explains that by giving meaning to others, it means that we give existence to that person and acknowledge their existence, and by doing this process means we give and determine the identity of that person. By giving meaning and identity to ourselves, we participate in the stability and clarity of who we are, as well as its relationship with others in a social relationship.

The meaning of reclaiming Karonese identity through *erpangir ku lau* ritual is: (1) the unity of perspective and thinking about the noble identity of Karo to the enhancement of local wisdom values so that it can be used as a filter to filter the negative impacts of foreign cultures;

(2) increasing the love of the Karo people for their cultural assets, especially the younger generation; (3) development of the quality of life of the community and at the same time be an antidote for various types of social pathology and conflict between groups; (4) supports the performance of the government of the Republic of Indonesia in improving the quality of protection of ethnic cultural assets in Indonesia; and (5) relevance to culture-based education and local wisdom values.

While the meaning of reclaiming Karonese identity in the national sphere are: (1) the transformation of the noble values of local culture as a media to build the nation's character; (2) the values of local wisdom can be used as signs or norms that serve as guidelines in living everyday life in society; and (3) the values of local wisdom can shape social people into people who are more religious, aesthetic, economic, adaptive to their environment, and humble.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this research is *first*, the construction of Dutch colonial discourse starting from the arrival of NZG in 1890 and being inherited until the reform era has obscured the noble identity of the Karo people. There was a break in harmony between humans and their fellow humans, the forces of nature, and the Divine. In addition to the breakup of the cosmos system, the Karo people are also divided into groups based on their region, religion, and social environment. *Secondly*, even though they were initially refused, *erpangir ku lau* ritual as a media for reclaiming the identity of the Karo people was still supported and continued to be activated. *Third*, the meaning of the implementation of Karo identity claim research is considered capable of helping change people's understanding of their own cultural identity. *Erpangir ku lau* ritual should be the basis which emphasizes the important role of the nature of *mehamat* (polite), *metami* (persuaders), *melias* (loving), *perkuah* (generous), and *perkeleng* (merciful) in creating hamonization between humans and other humans, humans with the universe, and humans with the Creator following the greeting of the Prosecutors.

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