

REINTERPRETATION OF THE CIRCLE OF LIFE OF KARO PEMENA SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses about the rites process undertaken by the Karo Pemena community in living the cycle of life from birth to death. Also examines the moral values that influence the cosmic order and the socio-cultural environment of a harmonious, pre-colonial society. This article uses the post-colonial perspective by Said. The study of postcolonialism was used to dismantle the dominance of Western thought in assessing the Eastern culture. The method used in this article is a method of hermeneutics to learn and find the meaning contained in the object of research in form of the phenomenon of human life, through understanding and interpretation. The purpose of this method is to open the essential and philosophical meaning derived from the symbols of the community of Karo Pemena. This article concludes the existence of the religion of Pemena began to decline in the political domination of the Dutch colonial government in Tanah Karo. The zending politics of Dutch has ruined the Karo Pemena until finally leaving the religion and affecting their socio-cultural system. Through the process of meaning, philosophical values in the cycle of life stages can be applied in Karo society according to the spirit of ethnic identity in post-colonial studies.

Keywords: Reinterpretation, Cycle of Life, Karo Society, Pemena Religion, Colonial, and Post-Colonial.

INTRODUCTION

The *Pemena* Karonese (past: *Perbegu*) are followers of Shaivism Hindu which is based on the Veda Smriti scripture. They paid reverence to the *Dibata*/The Almighty, ancestors, and universal power. Various rites are held as devotional media towards the Divine and the universe. Their worship of the Divine is interpreted as their adherence towards the cosmic order. This corresponds to values of Eastern philosophies that revere the irrational and established a relationship with the universe.

A civilization is a continuity of religious activities. The quality of a civilization also reflects the religious quality of the worshippers. The cycle of life is one part of the *Pemena* Karonese civilization. The *Pemena* Karonese interprets the cycle of life as the reality of life rooted in divinity. The core of their life is the belief and surrender to the Creator. They carry out a series of rites processions to indicate improvement at every stage of their life, from birth till death. Toynbee (in Ahmad: 2009) states that the cycle of life is similar to that of a civilization: geneses, growth, and death/breakdown. Toynbee's idea can be understood in a few ways, first as a guide for formulating the cycle of human life and second for that society's own civilization.

History shows that the religious life of the *Pemena* Karonese underwent a decline that culminated in their breakdown because of the Dutch colonization politics when they conquered the Land of Karo. The *Pemenas* suffered a variety of ideological and psychological siege that disrupted their society's socio-cultural order. The Karonese was uprooted from their own ethnic identities, and the social classifications formed by the Dutch colonialists' divided their society.

This research conducted a retrospection of the *Pemena* Karo society's cycle of life, an examination of the damage done to it, and proposed recommendations on how to restore its socio-cultural order for the future. Ontologically, the *Pemenas* had lost many of their past rites processions, but not the noble values tied to these rites. Through this research, the Karonese in today's postcolonial age are reminded to appreciate and apply these values in the rites processions of each of their life cycle. Its importance is in its potential to hold the Karonese community together and its values to return them to their dignified and noble ethnic identity.

DISCUSSIONS

The Cycle of Life of the *Pemena* Karonese

The *Pemena* Karonese believe that all their actions, from birth till death, produce two values within themselves; goodness brings *pahala* (reward) and wickedness brings *karma*. These are believed to directly impact a person when they entered the state that is believed to exist after death. Therefore, the rites processions conducted by the *Pemena* Karonese are highly valued because they are meant to harmonize noble values in each stages of their life. They open themselves to supernatural powers and ancestor spirits to help in every process of their life cycle because these are believed to be tied to the cosmic order.

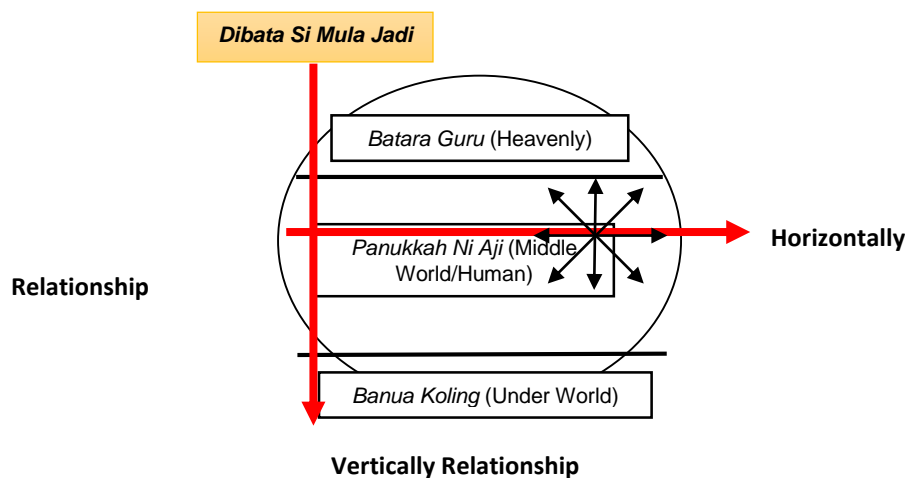


Diagram 1. The concept of cosmos according to the *Pemena* Karo

Durkheim (2017: 330) states that there are no society without religion, and this can be taken to mean that religions must also have the collective representations of the spirit of their society. This corresponds to the *Pemena* Karonese belief which holds high importance on reverence towards the spirits of their ancestor and the universe. The *Pemenas* believed that the cycle of life began from the placenta and the amniotic fluid. According to Putro (1979), the local knowledge of the *Pemenas* regard both as the *kaka-agi* which is the representation of the guardian that aids human to be born into the world. The next step is to burn both after the birth process because they are believed to have carried

out their purpose. The following section will elaborate the cycle of life of precolonial *Pemenas* from birth till death (Prinst, 2004).

The first cycle of life began at the prenatal stage. When entering the period of 7 month pregnancy, the rites process of *mesur-mesuri*/eating together is held. Objects required in this process are: *pinggan pasu*/plates for the meal, *uis teba*/traditional cloth, *belo cawir*/betel leaves, *amak cur*/woven mat, and chickens. In this process, the parents-to-be will be draped with the traditional cloths while sharing a plate of the main dish, chicken curry, together with members of their immediate family. The meaning of this rites is to repel misfortune and supplicate divine blessing to guard the safety and health of the expectant mother and her baby. During the birth process, both mother and father will be cleansed with *lancing*/turmeric leaves, and the umbilical cord will be cut with a sickle and pierced. The baby's hands and feet are then adorned with bracelets made of threads and turmeric slices. Once this is done, the process of *niktik wari* is then held to interpret the meaning of the baby's birth, attended by the *sangkep nggeluh* (immediate family), *penghulu* (head of the village), *sierjabaten kuta* (traditional musician), and *guru pertambar-tambar* (shaman). This process shows that the birth of a child is very important to the *Pemenas*. The character and future of the child are divined from their date and process of their birth.

When the baby is 4 or 7 days old, the rites *maba anak ku lau* (bringing the child to a flowing water) is carried out by the *sangkep nggeluh* by preparing various items such as *pundang*, cleaning ashes, *upih*/banana leaves (if male), *bulung sukat*/taro leaves (if female), *page penuhuren*, *belo*/betels, *uis arinteneng*, and *uis kapal*. This rites is meant to pay respect and inform the ancestor spirits guarding the water that a new human being has been born into the world and it is hoped that they will continue to protect the child.

The next stage is the naming of the child. The parties involved are *kalimbubu* (if male) and *anak beru* (if female). After the name is announced to all family in attendance, the child will be made to grab a pinch of rice with both hands. If the amount of rice in the right hand and left hand is even-numbered and odd-numbered respectively, then the announced name is considered to suit the child. Otherwise, the name is considered unsuitable for the child.

One week after the *maba ku lau* stage, the rites *juma tiga* is held. At this stage, the child will be brought to the market or farm/garden and placed on a cloth, where a bamboo, a *ser-ser* (a type of forest wood), soil, and various other items will be placed near him. The first item the child touches will be taken to reveal his talent or profession in the future. Bamboo means a person of position, soil means a farmer, and wood means a craftsman/person with rank.

The next stage is *ngelegi bayang-bayang* (debt of the *kalimbubu*). This rites is held particularly for the first child in every family. The *kalimbubu* will bestow a gift such as bracelets or gold necklaces for the child, which symbolizes the form of responsibility held by the oldest child who is expected to continue the role of the parents for his younger siblings.

After the child was able to walk, the next step is *ergunting* (the cutting of hair). Before this is carried out, the *njujungi* is conducted where a bag of rice is placed repeatedly for 11 times on the child's head. This carries the message that the child should become a hardy individual, stronger than the bag of rice. The *ergunting* is then carried out and the cut hair gathered and weighed, then substituted with money of the same weight. This signifies that the goodness and wickedness the child have become the full responsibility of his parents.

The next cycle of life is when the child reached adolescence. For boys, adolescence is signified through the *kacip-kacipi* process, which is similar to the circumcision ceremony in Islam. This process signifies the child's maturity and therefore his responsibility for himself and his own future. For girls, adolescence is signified with the *erkiker* rites. In *erkiker*, the girl's cuspid teeth are filed with a *kiker*/tiny saw. The purpose is not merely aesthetic; it also symbolizes the suppression of animalistic desires in humans when undergoing maturity. The cuspid are regarded as the visual representation of the bestial nature inherent in humans from birth, and it is hoped that the individual will become a better person after this process.

Upon reaching adulthood, the child will enter the next stage of life cycle which is marriage. The *Pemenas* carry out their marriage ceremony through a long and complex rites. The start is the *nganting manuk* procession, which is a discussion on how the marriage and the necessary preparations will be carried out. The day after the discussion, the *nangketken osé*/the wearing of traditional dress for the bride and groom is held. After both were thoroughly dressed, the bride and groom were paraded around the village by their family. This is followed by the *runggu*/negotiation process. First the *rakut sitelu* will examine whether any of the wedded couple precedes their older siblings in wedlock. If found to be so, then the *nabei* special ceremony is held to obtain permission/blessings from the older siblings for their younger ones.

After the *nabei* has been carried out, then the *ertembé-tembé pedalan emas*/conference of the family is held to discuss the dowry or specific requests from family of the bride. Once these had been mutually agreed upon and given, then the next stage is *telah-telah*/dance party to signify the approval of the marriage by all involved family. During the dance, the *kalimbubu* will bestow various gifts to the bridegroom. The gifts symbolize prayers and blessings from the entire family, which are: (1) lit oil lamp, symbolizing the marriage as a source of illumination for the whole family and their surroundings; (2) *kudin perdakanen ras ukatna*/pot or cooker to cook rice, symbolizing the bridegroom working together for their livelihood; (3) *pinggan perpanganen*/plates, symbolizing the bridegroom continuously seeking blessing from the Almighty; (4) *beras meciho taré mangkok*/white rice placed in a white bowl, symbolizing harmony and nobility in marriage; (5) *manuk asuhen*/live chicken to be raised, as prayer for the new household to be blessed bounteously in life and achievement of life goals; and (6) *amak dabuhen*/sleeping mat and pillow, to wish happiness for the married couple.

After the marriage rites process is completed, the *mukul*/dinner gathering with the family is held in the evening. This rites can be held in the parents' home of either the bride or groom, depending

on the agreement reached in the *nganting manuk* meeting. Some items are required, such as *pinggan pasu*/large dinner plate, *uis arinteneng*/traditional cloth, *amak cur*/woven mat, and *tepung tawar*. This dinner is meant as a media of communication for the newly-joined families and to introduce the entire family to ancestor spirits, where it is further hoped that the *pertendiin* of the bridegroom and their whole family will be united, help each other, and protected from misfortunes.

Four days after the *mukul* rites, the last process is *ngulih bulang/ngulih tudung*. *Ngulih bulang* is held if the *mukul* rites was held at the groom parents' house, and *ngulih tudung* if it was at the bride parents'. *Ngulih bulang/tudung* is held to look for new locations for livelihood, house, and various life necessities for the newly-wed couple. This is also the end of the marriage rites processes. These long and complex processes are carried out with the utmost care and sincerity because they were meant to instill appreciation in the married couple to obtain *pasu-pasu Dibata*/blessings from the Almighty, *pasu-pasu bégu jabu*/ blessings from ancestors, and *pasu-pasu sangkep nggeluh*/ blessings from the family. Socio-culturally, these long and complex processes are meant to prevent divorce and domestic violence cases in the *Pemenas*' society.

The last stage of life cycle of the *Pemenas* is death. When a person passed away, his body will first be washed, cleaned, and dressed with clean clothings. A line will be drawn with chalk at the forehead and cheeks, the lips will be colored with betels, and the big toe will be tied with a white rope. The *sangkep nggeluh*/immediate family of the deceased is then summoned to confer on the funeral and cremation rites. After this, the whole family put on a full dress (*i oséi*), the *gendang nangkih*/funeral music is played, and the *erkata gendang* rites/dancing in front of the deceased is held. The meal and dance symbolize sincerity and total acceptance of the deceased's return to his Creator. Another interpretation is to show that the remaining family are well to ease the deceased's passing to the next world.

In the evening, the body is laid in the mourning home and the *perumah begu*/ conjuring of spirit rites is conducted. After a dinner gathering, the *gendang perang-perang*/ritual music is played four times. At the sound of the fourth drum, the spirit of the newly-deceased is conjured through *guru si baso*/female shaman. One or two ancestor spirits usually answered before the spirit of the deceased would appear. This rites is a media of communication with the deceased, to help him understand that he has entered a different world from the family he left behind. He must not disturb them and always be around his family to help them. After communicating this through the *guru si baso* and the spirit departed, the cremation must be held immediately. If the mourning family was economically incapable to carry out the cremation, the body will be interred in the *pendonen*/cemetery until his family managed to gather the sufficient means to carry out the ceremony.

In the procession of the cremation on the rites of *Pemena* Karo's death, they used a stretcher/kind of place reside during the journey to the cremation location. During the way, *sierjabaten* will continue to play ritual music. There are 4 (four) types of stretcher depending on the economic capability and social class of the death's family, which are: (1) *pating-pating* (the simplest form of the

stretcher, the corpse is clad in a white cloth and then attached to a bamboo and carried on the shoulder during the journey); (2) *sapo-sapo* (the same stretched form as *pating-pating* only the corpse in dressing with woven mats to cover the whole body and paraded the whole family); (3) *ligé-ligé* (a form of stretchers for those from middle to upper family and resembling a small, multi-storey house); and (4) *kejerén* (a large and luxurious stretch of land reserved for the landlords, the elders of the village, and *Sibayak*/King). Upon arrival at the cremation site, the stretcher will be burned along with the corpse until it is completely flat to ash. The ash is partially sown in the desired location of the family and partly taken home and placed in the *geriten*/a place to put the bones and ashes of burning the family / ancestors who have died and also a sign of the end of the whole process of death rituals.

The sincerity of the intentions and the success or failure of family members at the time of preparing the death rituals will have an impact on the *bégu* after his death. There are some types of *bégu* for *Pemena* Karo which is a form of the sin interpretation and the reward of a human being during his life journey.

1. *Bégu Jabu*

This type of *Bégu* is a close relative who has passed away and during his lifetime performed various kinds of goodness. The process of his death was counted only one day and carried out with sincere family intentions. This type of *Bégu* will always be around his family and help protect them, whether from magical or physical disturbances. They will also always admit all the prayers that their family prayed to *Dibata*. *Bégu jabu* can be grouped into 4 (four) types:

- a. *Bégu Butara Guru* (The fetus who died while in the womb).
- b. *Bégu Bicara Guru* (The child who died before his/her teeth grew).
- c. *Bégu Si Mate Sada Wari* (Died suddenly in a single day and not caused by illness).
- d. *Bégu Tungkup* (Male or female who died before the marriage).

2. *Bégu Biasa*

This type of *Bégu* are those who died because of illness. During their lifetime performed various kinds of goodness they do not disturb human life. They will only be around their offspring while waiting for the time to come back to life (reincarnation) to fix a little mistake in his life.

3. *Bégu Mentas*

These types of *bégu* are those who die normally, have little reward but after death he is not respected or even forgotten by his descendants.

4. *Bégu Menggep*

This type of *bégu* are those who have died but during his life committed various crimes, so hated by family and people around. This type of *bégu* found to appear and disturb the human passing by.

5. *Bégu Sidangbela*

This type of *bégu* are those women who died during in labor. If lack of management during the death ritual, this type of *bégu* usually inhabit the public shower and likes to disturb the people, especially our children and the pregnant women.

6. *Bégu Ganjang*

This type of *bégu* are those who have died but during his life committed crimes and shunned all the people around him. In contrast to *bégu menggep*, *bégu ganjang* found to appear as a ferocious animal and happy to strangle the neck of prey (they will disturb life humans easily confused and weak).

Types of The Cycle of Life

Reflecting on the cycle of life of the *Pemena* Karo community performs various religious rites as a form of interpretation of local values or local wisdom. Therefore, the whole series of rites are done and interpreted in accurate ways because they are related to cosmos order directly. Here are the types of life cycle of *Pemena* Karo community:

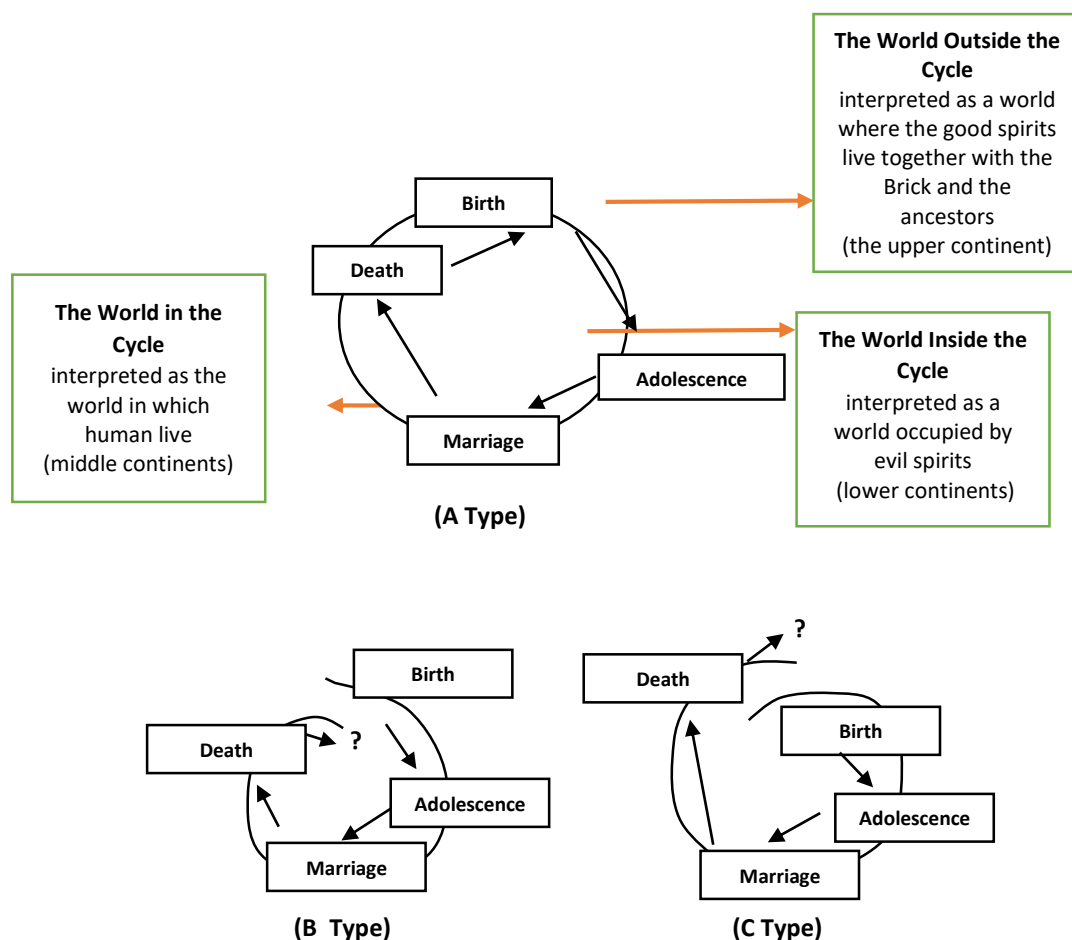


Diagram 2. Types of The Cycle of Life in Pemena Karo Society

The soul is considered to be attached to the body by a very strong bond. The soul can sometimes be separated from the body, but in such a difficult way and not in the form of one hundred percent separation. Therefore, what perceived the soul, also felt the body, everything that hurt and injure the body will hurt the soul also. The soul is closely related to the life of the body. The souls that come to each generation through the born babies do not emerge from a specific and original creation process (Durkheim, 2017). Furthermore Durkheim argues that human bodies turn into trees and rocks. But his souls still exist, because the soul lives eternally. They will continue to visit places where their bodies or beings are gone in the swallow of the earth. Thus every individual born is regarded as the re-realization of their ancestors. Of course not every ancestor would do something like this. There are two kinds of ancestors who can do the same thing, first, those who are sacred and have the divine ability to do magical things then the latter, those who have divined abilities for a mixture of like/animal-like.

In the pattern of **A type**, is interpreted that humans experience life cycle from birth to death repeatedly. This is understood by the *Pemena* Karo society, that the human being has enough merit goodness and obedience to *Dibata* but not followed by his descendants so that he still bear the karma to *Dibata* by his/her descendant and he must continue reborn after death until there is one of his descendants repent. Furthermore, **B type** is interpreted that humans experience the worst life cycle. From birth to the time before the death of human beings only abundant karma, disrespecting ancestors, committing disbelievers to Being renounced by customary rite so that the period after his death ends in a world occupied by evil spirits and is not given a chance to be reborn, like some kind of *bégu menggep* and *bégu ganjang*. The last is the **C type** which is the best life cycle of birth to death according to *Pemena* Karo community. This pattern is interpreted that man is doing good so abundant reward, respecting ancestors, submissive and obedient not to leave the customary rites of his life so that the period after his death ended in the upper world where the good spirits together *Dibata*.

The Cycle of Life of Pemena Karo Society in a Postcolonial Perspective

The Dutch invasion and colonization politics to the land of Karo began with destroying the culture and order of life of the people as well. Unilateral policies are implemented and marginalized the *Pemena* Karo community. *Sibayaks* and elders were invited to negotiate about the reduction of religious activities. In the history of East Sumatra colonialism (now North Sumatra), the Dutch continues to intensify its zending policy according to its 3G mission ie Gold, Glory, and Gospel. As the first step in Glory's mission, a Christian priest named H. Guillasume was appointed to work as a Batak affairs consortium in Tanah Karo to launch a zending mission in 1882. Due to strong resistance from the society at that time, the Dutch colonial government then increased the form of invasion by forming assistant residency for Tanah Karo in 1908 and finally the Netherlands with its 3G mission made it into Tanah Karo (Sebayang, 2013). Said (in Lubis: 2006: 216) says that christianity is the beginning of the emergence of orientalism by missionaries as well as their control of 'the other' through the power of knowledge.

As same line as that opinion, Lubis (2006: 203-204) clarifies that the situation by saying that colonialism is not always the form of conquest or control of the land by Europeans on the nation of Asia, Africa, or Africa. Furthermore, Marx (in Lubis, 2006: 204) mentions that the model of European colonialism before the 16th century as a pre-capitalist period and the model of European colonialism after the 16th century as a movement of capitalism. The new form of colonialism aims to change the system/structure of each side of civilization and create a complex relationship with its colonial state. So that there is an outflow of natural resources and human resources from the colonial state to its colonial state. Loomba (in Lubis, 2006: 204) concludes that this form of colonialism has indirectly helped to give birth to European capitalism by making the colonial state a source of abundant capital known as 'midwife capitalism'.

Derrida and Foucault had previously mentioned the question of colonialism and equalized Western knowledge and rationality with the colonialist political hegemony. Derrida also suggested that Western thinkers re-analyze the results of their thoughts are full of Western domination of power. Due to the Westerners positioned Easterners as "the other," indirectly the West has crippled the East culturally (Lubis, 2006). Said (in Lubis, 2006: 204) says that since 1914 the Europeans have made 84% of the earth's territory as colonies in various forms such as protection, colonization, dominion, and commonwealth. The experiences and implications of imperialism and colonialism are applicable and global in that they occur throughout the world. Although the colonies have now escaped and gained independence from the former colonial country, but in socio-culturally and ideologically, the societies are still considered suffering from the colonialism effect until right now.

In the perspective of postcolonialism, the Orientalists believed that the whole process of cycle of life are unreasonable and irrational culture. However, according to the spirit of capitalism they try to master anything encountered in the colonies even against something that is considered alien or even unknown before. Said (1979) says that orientalism not only master, manipulate, and even annex a real world different from the capitalist world itself. They can even changed the socio-cultural order of the colonies according to their interests.

As a proof, the Karo people abandoned the religion of *Pemena* and turned to other religions and began to forget the series of rites process that should be implemented as a unity and series of stages in its life cycle based on Hindu *Perbegu* philosophy. Some rites processes are no longer could be seen and some still survive and thus undermine the cycle of life stages that have stood sturdy and firmly established. As Sibeth said in his book *The Bataks*, the last process of burning bodies using *ligé-ligé* in Tanah Karo was done in September 1902. Meanwhile, according to Prinst (2004) the process of burning *ligé-ligé* done in 1937 on the ceremony of the *kuta* elders's death as well as landowners. Leonard (2005) adds when changing their status from majority into minority, a community group is only considered a line in the air that exists and then disappears such as *Pemena* Karo. As a minority, they are perceived as nothing or never existed.

Related to Toynbee's opinion, *Pemena* Karo civilization is one of which is reflected in the process of ritual marker of the cycle of life has been broken (breakdown). The Karo postcolonial society experienced disintegration and damage to its socio-cultural order. They began to forget the ritual processes that should be implemented as a unity and series of stages in the cycle of life based on *Perbegu* Hinduism philosophy. This has an impact on the emergence of the term ACC (*anceng, cian, cekurak*) in the daily life of Karo postcolonial society. *Anceng* means happy to see people having difficulties. *Cian* means envy with the success and acquisition of other people. *Cekurak* were Karo society's most common behavior which means being happy to talk about one's condition (especially badness) to others and sometimes exaggerated.

The noble civilization of the *Pemena* Karo people that grew (geneses) and developed (growth) in pre-colonial times, began to decline in colonial times, and experienced a breakdown in the postcolonial period. But at least, a ritual procession that can still be guarded and guaranteed its existence should be done revitalization process, although physically already in different forms and manners. It is expected that the noble values contained behind the ritual procession of the cycle of life stages can still be applied as well as binding back the ethnic identity of Karo society today. As Rahardjo (in Ahmad, 2009) says that the process of rotation of a civilization does not always end with total annihilation. There is the possibility that the process is repetitive, albeit with a new pattern and new interpretation that is not entirely the same as the civilization that preceded it.

CONCLUSION

The whole process of ritual performances from birth to death occur with sincerity expect blessing and divine blessing. The *Pemena* Karo society assume that the soul is bound to the body by a very strong bond. The souls that come to each generation through the new-born babies, do not emerge from a specific and original creation process. Thus every individual born is regarded as the re-realization of their ancestors.

In the Dutch colonial period, the life cycle of the *Pemena* Karo people began to be damaged. Unilateral policies are implemented and marginalized the *Pemena* Karo community. As a post-colonial impact, the continuity of the noble rites that has been done in every stage of the cycle of life by their ancestors has been forgotten and some have disappeared. As the result, the civilization of the society turn declined. Civilization will be destroyed if the culture of the people are not functioning optimally or forgotten and their social unity is split. On the contrary, although not in the same form, the remainder of civilization will survive if its social society returns to its dignity and rises to re-creation.

The various ritual processes in the cycle of life should be revitalized and the noble values and meaning inherent in each process must be reinterpreted and then applied to the life of the Karo community today. It is recommended that Karo people will recall and appreciate their ancestors who have created an extraordinarily large and complex civilization in the past. By remembering the great ethnicity and civilization that has ever been possessed, the Karo community is now expected to

understand its ethnic identity (according to the spirit of postcolonialism). By opening relations with others without the influence of class subjectivity, to avoid unkindness and bad deeds, and to appreciate the universe, micro and macro cosmos as well, and its creator. Developing this rites into postcolonial tourism attraction would be a very interesting topic related to Toba Geopark.

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