

# The Karo Tribe: Exploring the Balance Between Islamic Faith and Indigenous Traditions

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**Abstract:** *The Karo tribe is one of the ethnic groups indigenous to North Sumatra, Indonesia. This tribe is very well known for its rich culture and traditions as well as rice and spice agriculture, especially in the hilly areas. However, within the Karo tribe, which is primarily characterised by its rich indigenous traditions, there exists a minority population of Muslims who face significant challenges in balancing their beliefs with the enduring customs of their ancestral culture. These people represent a rare combination of religion and culture as they try to address the needs of both communities. The purpose of this study is to examine the balance between Islam and Karo tribal traditions. The rationale had been that this study would offer numerous opportunities that enhance understanding of the cultural dynamics of this society. In conclusion, the analysis of the practice of the Islamic faith and the cultural practices of the Karo tribe demonstrates a complex and dynamic aspect that contributes towards both personal and social identities in society. As for the recommended directions, the authors should focus on examining in more detail which Islamic teachings affect rituals and practices of everyday life of the Karo people, especially concerning gender and family roles.*

**Keywords:** Karo tribe, Islam, Muslim, Indonesia

## 1. Introduction

The Karo tribe is one of the ethnic groups indigenous to North Sumatra, Indonesia. This tribe is very well known for its rich culture and traditions as well as rice and spice agriculture, especially in the hilly areas. Historically, the Karo people have been known to have intermingled with and even been assimilated by other ethnic cultures, such as Batak and Malay cultures, which heavily impacted how they live up to date (Sembiring, 2017). Their social fabric, ritual festivities and attire are easy to identify due to differences in social systems such as family, clan and community structures. Strong beliefs and practices of ancestor worship cross-cut their social behaviour, pointing to a high level of veneration of ancestors and a close affinity to nature. This connection is evident in how they farm and how they perform the various activities that are environmentally and cyclically correct (Peranginangin et al., 2021). For generations, however, the Karo tribe has maintained its cultural traditions through festivals, rituals, and speaking and teaching the Karo language, even in the face of modern challenges such as rapid urbanisation and an overwhelming tidal wave of globalisation. It is these efforts

that make them one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia with unique cultures in supporting the nation's diversity.

However, within the Karo tribe, which is primarily characterised by its rich indigenous traditions, there exists a minority population of Muslims who face significant challenges in balancing their beliefs with the enduring customs of their ancestral culture. These people represent a rare combination of religion and culture as they try to address the needs of both communities. Their strategies of embracing the Islamic way of life while maintaining ties with indigenous ways present some degrees of contradiction that are not simple to resolve (Spiegler et al., 2022). The struggles they face are sometimes due to ethnic or cultural pressures, which create a dissonance between ethnic identity and cultural practices and even religious practices. This, in turn, leads to the re-establishment of relations with largely dominant cultures and raises questions regarding minority acknowledgement of their cultural traditions, their interpretation of them, and their impact on society (Rico, 2019). Exploring the experiences of this Muslim group provides valuable insights into the broader context of cultural coexistence and adaptation within the Karo community, highlighting the diversity of thought and practice that exists even within a singular ethnic group.

The purpose of this study is to examine the balance between Islam and Karo tribal traditions. The rationale had been that this study would offer numerous opportunities that enhance understanding of the cultural dynamics of this society. This study also contributes to the discourse of multiculturalism and coexistence by promoting the understanding of self-identity and how it is treated in society. In a similar vein, it can be expected that this study will enhance the communication between the various communities, which appreciate and regard different views and approaches. Such communication is necessary in a world that is fast becoming globalised and where cultural clashes may develop. In the long run, such a review will be of local policies that promote and foster the preservation of cultural pluralism and social integration to recognise and celebrate the minority's ethnic identities within the majority's society. Society benefits from these narratives by having a broader perspective on the country's cultural diversity instead of just focusing on the centrality of Indonesian culture.

## **2. Brief Overview of the Karo Tribe**

Firstly, it should be noted that the Karo tribe is a sub-ethnic group that belongs to the Batak Indigenous people and is located mainly on the highlands of North Sumatra, Indonesia and, more precisely, in Karo Regency, also called affection Taneh Karo or Karo Land. It's a very scenic area with a cool climate and a wide variety of vegetation, which the Karo people have creatively put to use by way of traditional medicine and other edible products, and hence they have been able to live together with nature (Purba & Silalahi, 2021; Aritonang et al., 2024). The Karo population is an important segment of the Batak People, an ethnocultural group that ranks among the most numerous minorities on the island of Sumatra northeast of Indonesia. Their lifestyles are relished with and extend appreciation to the environment in which they live, and over the years they have developed a unique culture as well as adapted to what they have gone through and the environment (Fazryn & Dora, 2024; Silalahi & Nisyawati, 2018).

Also, the Karo ethnic group takes great pride in performing such traditional activities and observances that form part of the culture for healing the sick by involving several traditional rites and the use of native herbs. These activities are indicators of their profound respect for nature and the importance of their culture (Aritonang et al., 2024; Silalahi & Nisyawati, 2018). The marriage of tradition and modernity evident in their population dynamics depicts a group

that has adapted to the enormous rises in public pressure to protect their cultural values while responding to the transformations in society experienced in recent decades (Situmorang et al., 2015; Pinem, 2019). The Karo Tribe's determination to conserve their culture is most probably best illustrated today through their social divisions and activities within the community where they still reside. Suppressing this as a group has not only strengthened their identity as a collective integrating different practices but also presents great opportunities for future descendants from current descendants (Ginting et al., 2021; Sinulingga & Tampubolon, 2020). Furthermore, the Karo Tribe has much to offer in terms of their culture, which is distinctive in its traditions and beliefs. In Karo culture, there is the belief system of Pemena that cuts across many activities. The Erpangir Ku Lau, one of the rituals that serve as cleansing and shielding from evil spirits as well as seeking protection and blessing, is one such activity that finds its origin in the Pemena belief system (Sebayang et al., 2022). This purification ceremony sands proof of the spiritual bond that the Karo people have with the spirits of the ancestors and the forces of nature and signifies the significance of relativity among members of the society in terms of spiritual impulse. At the same time, the Karo people also show strong affiliations to the land in agricultural practices, as seen in their use of native flora in folklore pharmacology (Aritonang et al., 2024). This attachment not only emphasises their precious knowledge of geographical practices but also aids them in appreciating their culture and agriculture as a preoccupation in their daily activities. The integration of agriculture and religion has further established them as people who belong to the land that they live in and the customs that they practice.

Aside from that, Karo's religion has been heavily influenced by the Protestant Church of Batak Karo (*Gereja Batak Karo Protestan*, GBKP), which was formed during the colonial era (Tarigan & Subekti, 2023). This institution is significant in strengthening the Karo community as well as their sense of belonging within the Karo people. The church, apart from providing instructions about the religion, also takes charge of many activities through which the people of the community come together for diverse purposes, thereby strengthening their relationship and unity as a tribe. In addition, the traditional value in Karo underneath the Rakut Sitelu helps achieve peace and toleration among different religions in its multi-religious community (Sazali et al., 2023). For instance, in this system, pluralism is upheld in such a manner that Islam and Christianity coexist with traditional Karo beliefs (Fitriani, 2018). For one thing, these attributes, both social and religious, shown by the Karo indicate how the Karo people have intended to maintain their culture in all its aspects while coping with the changes of the present day. Embracing the challenges of modernity, Karo people become flexible and divorced from the traditional ways and practices to secure and live their diverse lives in terms of culture and practices.

### 3. The Karo Tribe and Islam

The Karo tribe has a unique position regarding Islam as there are lots of factors, both historical and otherwise, that have played and continue to play. More interestingly, even though Karos are largely Christians, there are a notable number of Muslims, especially in areas of Tiga Beringin and Simpang Pergendangan where Christians and Muslims live together (Ginting et al. 2020). This living in harmony is not simply according to geographical directives; rather, it is a historical pattern of society over the years characterised by respect and understanding. In addition, the target population of the study comprises Muslims who have linked up with this community through the Karo. It is documented that other than the desire for religion, such systems are vital in making sure that any person who has decided to convert to Islam feels comfortable doing so with the assistance of the rest of the Karo society (Ramadhani & Tanjung,

2023). As a result, these conditions help reduce the friction experienced during conversion processes, so that adherents are still supportive of their traditional practices as they seek out their faith. Hence, the interaction of religion and ethnicity among the Karo people is equally remarkable for its flexibility.

In addition, studies show that the individual's identity of the Karo is also formed by their ethnicity and religion, just as their acculturation corresponds to the diffusion of Islam (Yuswanto et al., 2023). Such a synthesis is not merely a mix of other practices; rather, it demonstrates the interpenetration of central concepts, ideas and behaviours concerning their own culture and Islam. In addition, it is the practice of Rakut Sitelu, which encapsulates the spirit of religious understanding, that is important in promoting peace among the Karo people (Sazali et al., 2023). The Karo and Muslim are two identities and tell the stories of the transformation of the Karo ethnic Society concerning modernisation. This is very important, as enhancing identity gives them a rich cultural environment, cohesion in society, and the possibility of an advanced society without detaching from their cultural practices. Hence the fact that each individual is active in all these spheres means that, in the first place, they are not only Karo people but Karo people living in the Karo people's context.

The influx of Islam within the Karo diaspora settlements resulted partly from the interrelation with merchants and Muslim society, especially at the time of the Aru Kingdom (Aini et al., 2021). As described above, these two systems of interaction created cultural contacts and contact with the two religions, which made several Karo people start embracing Islam, most of them intermarriage with the Malays and other Muslims. Such ties helped extend the influence of individuals as well as facilitate the exchange of culture and religion, which had a significant impact on the identity of the society (Aini et al., 2021). In addition, it has been important in such organisations as Al Jamiatul Wasliyah (Simamora & Andayani, 2015) to spread Islam and develop it according to the circumstances of colonial times and the attempts at Christianisation (Riza, 2021). These organisations have worked to enhance the understanding of Islam among Karo people and make them more accepting of Islamic and local practices in one cohesive society through education programs and activities. This multi-layered strategy in religious teaching as well as building the society has not only fortified the identity of the Karo but also improved the ability of the society to withstand outside forces even better.

Lastly, it has been noted that the acceptance of Islam in the Karo community is based on the integration of Islam and Karo local wisdom so that behaviours unique to Islam and also the native Karo emerge (Arifinsyah & Nasution, 2023). This blending can also be found in several aspects, such as rituals, celebrations, and day-to-day activities that borrow aspects of the two beliefs that enhance the Karo culture. The Karo are also said to have been able to retain their sense of self even as they operated under Islamic rules and more so the practice of family bonds (Rahmawati & Rubino, 2024). This interaction fosters the idea of cultural dynamism, where integration does not entail the loss of culture but the honouring of both faith and traditional practices. Such an approach helps in maintaining cohesiveness in the community and common objectives, with an appreciation of individual differences. As a result, the Karo people are paradigms of how community, inclusion and acceptance, including respect for the individuality of the people that make up society, can be achieved through faith, without compromising the core tenets of Islam.

#### **4. Islamic Beliefs and Practices Held by the Karo Tribe**

Over the years, the Karo people have adopted aspects of Islam and projected them into their culture for their benefit. The way of adapting is not embedded only into the learning of new ideas but extends to all the spheres of life, such as holy events, skilled works and attitudes, politics and so forth. For example, specific Karo customs have been adopted to fit in Islamic events, such as the religious holiday Eid al-Fitr which follows a significant fasting month but retains important aspects of the culture of the people (Maulana et al., 2024). Since its emergence, the Karo people have never shied away from celebrating Islam, even if it would require them to embrace practices or behaviours that to others appear contrary to their genuine and clear perceptions. This attitude helps to reflect the diversity of the Karo people as a people who are sophisticated, dynamic and active in harmonising Islamic principles and their customs and practices. The culture that is left is therefore unique, as it demonstrates how people come together to promote the respect of both cultural practices and the Islamic religion as preached by their forefathers. This is how the Karo tribe shows that there is such a thing as cultural evolution amongst people where change takes place in a manner that accommodates all aspects, in the end strengthening the identity of the community.

In addition to these events, there are highly pronounced spirits on the well-being of the community contained in the teachings of Islam, which augurs well with the Karo people, as they are naturally straightforward. Whereas such harmony between Islam and Karo ways is noticeable in these vertical family ties, one cannot help but note the integration of Islamic values with communication patterns in practical utilisation. These depict the Karo people adjusting their ways of life to fit in with Islam (Rahmawati & Rubino, 2024). However, this change is more than a physical cosmetic makeover; it shows the willingness of the people to explore an entirely new religion whilst not losing a grasp of their original culture. Also, it demonstrates how the Karo people incorporated the Islamic religion into their society without any break in a chain of cultural progression. Illustrating dynamics like this invokes the Karo tribe's concerns about maintaining the culture and community cohesion and blending it in well. By maintaining their original culture while also absorbing Islam, the Karo people can have diversity in culture.

In addition, Islamic leadership is also important and effective in the Karo tribe, particularly concerning culture and society and its integration. They do not simply provide religious education but influence what the religion teaches by acting as intermediaries to the Islamic scourge and local cultures. To give a concrete example, Islamic communication principles are applied not only in the religious practices but also in family relations of the Karo tribes, indicating integration of Islam and local practices (Rahmawati & Rubino, 2024). Most importantly, Islamic leaders are crucial in promoting a sense of community and in dealing with any social problems since they are ready to help both new and old members of the tribe with different spiritual needs (Ramadhani & Tanjung, 2023). Their leadership is rooted in understanding the needs of the community and their willingness to support relationship-building among members to reinforce the Karo tribe's social order.

Moreover, this Islamic leadership style applies the leader's conception, which is also transformational and servant leadership since it is necessary to develop a sense of community and ethical practice among the followers (Sulaeman, 2020; Safitri et al., 2021). Emphasis is placed on and tolerance of moral leadership, which includes participating in several socio-cultural practices evolving the identity of the Karo nation in Islam. These leaders create a climate for community development whereby people's values are preserved and enhanced, and



in so doing, not only do they advance the followers' spirituality suitable to all but also assist in dealing with the problems society is faced with. Thus, these leaders are important for the spirituality and community life of the Karo people, whose chief concerns are to lead the tribe amidst the growing complexities of today's life, yet within the cultural and religious beliefs that they hold dearly. Their impact creates the guarantee and protection that the culture of the people will be maintained, and so the people are united and ready to change but respect the cultures and traditions that are the roots of the people's very existence.

In conclusion, the practised Islamic values and principles by the Karo people bear evidence of historical instances of adaptability and dynamism. Carrying Islamic teachings as part of their daily routine helps the Karo people maintain their cultural individuality, enrich their community organisation, and demonstrate the importance of their old Islamic values. This reasoned accommodation shows the ability of the Karo tribe to adapt to various challenges of contemporary society without compromising their religious and traditional identities.

### **5. Influence of Islam on the Karo Tribe's Culture and Society**

Undeniably, the Karo beliefs have incorporated Islamic practices in various ways, and such has been the case in Indonesia. Karo tribe majorly Muslim adherents have conveniently translated Islamic doctrine into their day-to-day lives. It cuts across socio-economic, cultural and political spheres, demonstrating the diverseness of Islam in their lives (Agustina & Zainuddin, 2023). Importantly, practising Islam for the Karo is not simply about religion but is embedded in culture. This synthesis informs their practices and relations, which goes to the core of Karo society and shows how Islamic beliefs are the bedrock of their culture.

Also, the importance of Islamic education has to be taken into account. There are also methods of protecting the ethnicity through establishing Islamic comprehensives or boarding schools. These institutions are crucial in providing a sense of belonging religiously while promoting tolerance and understanding in the diverse population of Indonesia (Riza, 2023; Araniri et al., 2023). The Karo tribe incorporates local elements into their Islamic practices that illustrate the relationship between culture and religion is dynamic and not of a static characterisation. As a result, the Karo culture has also been embraced, combining Islamic teachings that assist in changing their society's organisation, methods of knowledge acquisition, and social relations as a community. Such interaction helps preserve their identity, religion and culture and enables them to practice Karo ways of life, where education becomes the tool for the dissemination of Islamic ways of living and practices.

Along with educational factors, the effect of Islam on the Karo tribe as a social group and social relations is also diverse. It affects each element, such as sexual division of labour, familial structure, and even the social relationships within a community. Some of the tenets of Islam, such as the equity one, challenge the idea of male dominance, which is practised by the Karo people. This change is monumental because it encourages both men and women to view their roles in the family setting in a more equal manner, promoting respect for each other as well as working together as a family (Wulandari, 2022). The influence of such changes is not only conceptual but also observable in the changing interpersonal relationships of the Karo families. At this point, the Karo families apply the Islamic norms to social relations, creating more and 'stronger' ties, benefiting the entire family (Rahmawati & Rubino, 2024). Therefore, Islamisation has a notable significance in the transformation of socio-relations and enhancement of life standards in the Karo society.

In addition, the Karo people have undergone defining cultural disruptions due to their shift towards the Islamic faith. In so doing, the Karo people exhibit their flexibility and strength in striving to incorporate Islam within their traditional culture (Yuswanto et al., 2023). This process of assimilation has also provided opportunities to form social support systems that enhance collective well-being through community building. Such constructs are crucial to the Karo tribe by advancing their social structure by promoting oneness and common ideals against the occasionally changing cultural landscape (Ramadhani & Tanjung, 2023). Hence, it can be deduced that due to the impacts of the change in religion, not only the structure of individual families has changed but also conditions that render people closer to society irrespective of the societal changes that have been put in place.

In addition, the Karo tribe is greatly influenced by Islam with more regard to the imposition of laws and administration, which is quite applicable in the matter of cultural integration and legal reform. Reports show that Islamic law has found its way into many spheres of the Karo community, for instance, family relations. For example, the processes related to the adoption of Islamic communication styles within the family structures also speak of this offshoot (Rahmawati & Rubino, 2024). Moreover, the Karo legal systems have also borrowed some elements from the religion-orientated system of Islam, which is an example of how submerged individual cultures are practised in the religious framework that bears impractical conflicts between the Karo ways of life and Islam (Iskandar et al., 2022). With this development, it means that two or several internal diversity, customary practices and Islamic practices are attempting to be fused as far as their legal identity is concerned.

Finally, it is noticeable how the Karo people's identity has been influenced by their embracing of Islam, but alongside this development comes the alteration of their culture and legal system. It illustrates how there are barriers and structures in the thought of locality and Islamic law as practised by the Karo tribe in the present world. The Karo were able to develop a legal system that incorporated the cultural elements of the people to prevent legalism. The major decisions about the governance of the Karo tribe rest very interestingly on these tendencies of Islam-centredness. Islam is both appeasement and change in thinking within the domain of law and cultural observances. That is why it notes that although some reflected on such relationships may very well lie latent in lower caste or class groups and minority ethnic, regional, religious or other social groups, the Karo civilisation overwhelms many of those marvels where intricacies of looking down caste, class or ethnicity do not exist to the extent which is observed in many other societies around the globe as the role of Islam has retained and permeated pockets of the Karo civilisation.

## **6. Challenges and Efforts to Preserve Islamic Practices within the Karo Tribe**

First and foremost, the contemporary Karo tribe offers an intriguing blend of traditional customs and Islamic religious practices, which makes clear the conflicts and steps taken to safeguard these practices. The Karo community has successfully assimilated Islamic tenets into the existing aspects of their culture, marriage being one of the most pronounced. These not only serve as a union between two parties but also provide Islamic lessons and prayers for din, health, and family (Barus et al., 2023). While these trends are not peculiar to the Karo tribe or the Indonesian nation in general, they also describe how their culture accommodates changes by incorporating Islam. Dressing in such garments is not simply fashionable; it is also religious, as religious affiliation and ethnic origin are often intertwined within those communities (Yuswanto et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the principles of Islamic communication are practised among Karo families, serving as an example of family interaction and unity in the light of Islamic teachings. These ideals influence communication patterns between relationship members, promoting ideals of communication such as respect and understanding. Consequently, there is an increased tendency of the Karo people to adopt Islamic ideals, which is a reflection of the growing religiosity among the Karo people. They are accommodating the features of modernity without throwing away the essence of their civilisation. This relationship depicts the dynamic coexistence of Islam and Karo culture, where Karo people express Islam as well as Karo traditions. This incorporation thus creates an environment in which the Karo people can develop in the face of both external changes and internal changes, thereby enhancing the two-pronged approach of faithfulness and cultural loyalty.

Nonetheless, it is not easy for the Karo tribe to observe Islam since it is complicated by cultural assimilation and traditional practices. Embracing the practices of the Karo people often stands in opposition to Islamic beliefs, hence making it difficult to harmonise the two aspects of identity and religion. For example, certain rituals like chewing betel nuts, as one of the ceremonial rites, are culturally sensual and to some extent offend Islamic practices, which has to be managed (Pane et al., 2022). In addition, Karo people experience patriarchal versions of Islamic teachings, which is problematic concerning women's status and rights in Wulan, 2022. Undoubtedly, such conflict affects one's ability to observe Islam in the Karo community as they find themselves conforming to pressures from both culture and Islamic expectations. This is done in an active pursuit of a Muslim identity while trying to not erase their Karo heritage. It is thus concluded that the Karo people's practice of Islam comes into conflict due to the factors of culture, gender roles and religion themselves, which would require considerable adjustment for Islam to coexist with the Karo culture, which is not easy.

From every possible angle, it is apparent that activities directed towards compliance and advancement of the Islamic culture among the Karo tribe exist in the form of cooperation and borrowing. In the case of transitions, Karos practised Islamic religious rites, including the holiday of Eid al-Fitr, while preserving their ethnicity. Such demonstrates a healthy integration of the indigenous ways with the Islamic norms, an approach that also enhances not only religious practices but also relations among people (Maulana et al., 2024). In this regard, learning situations that incorporate or occur during the Karo tribe's wedding ceremonies show the influence of Islam for the betterment of the family unit, with an emphasis on prayer. This further emphasises the place of religion in the culture of the people and demonstrates the need for common practices that build relationships and dependability in society (Barus et al., 2023). Furthermore, communication strategies are essential in consolidating Islamic principles in Karo, especially for converts. Such strategies see to it that the concerns revolving around the education of the religious instruction and mental and social health of the converts are provided appropriately, enhancing their spirituality and accommodation in that society (Ramadhani & Tanjung, 2023). Moreover, preserving some cultural elements, including the Mbesur-measure tradition, presents how the society respects its roots and culture even when associated with Islamic values (Ikhsan, 2023). In this regard, it is broader in defining faith and understanding that development is precious as well as tradition. All in all, this explains the unique balance between the Karo tribe's values and the values of Islam. The integration of cultures strengthens society's sense of belonging and makes them adaptable to changing times, improving Indonesian culture.



## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the practice of the Islamic faith and the cultural practices of the Karo tribe demonstrates a complex and dynamic aspect that contributes towards both personal and social identities in society. There is not only a change in the Islamic followers in day-to-day activities and educational institutions of the Karo community but also a change in the family structure and interaction of the members of the community. Despite the progress that brings about a sense of Western culture to the Karo people, their interaction between Islamic practices and indigenous actions shows their gradual evolution. This research contributes to the view of the Karo Tribe not as a community of people stuck in the past but as a light and active society where belief and culture fuse readily, creating peace and culture at once, enriched with unifying overlapping systems in the heart of change.

As for the recommended directions, the authors should focus on examining in more detail which Islamic teachings affect rituals and practices of everyday life of the Karo people, especially concerning gender and family roles. Second, a cross-cultural comparison between the Karo Tribe and other indigenous Indonesian groups that adopted Islam but subjugated it would be helpful. In addition, the role of contemporary changes brought about by urbanisation and globalisation in the maintenance of Karo traditions while promoting Islam would be an area worth investigating. These are, however, indirect research on how society and culture and orientated spirituality and faith are. Finally, there is a lot that may be gained from the interdisciplinary aspects of sociology, anthropology, as well as archaeology in Karo communities among the people interested in faith and culture. Exploring the role of youth towards such cultural fusion may also present some intriguing avenues regarding the future of the Karo tradition and Islamic faith of the tribe.

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