

Neutral Monism: The Existence of Karo Human Beings and Inspiration for the Development of Religious Moderation in Indonesia's Plural Religious Society

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Abstract

This writing discusses the divine aspect within the traditional faith of the Karo people. The aim of the writing is to uncover the roots, structure, and conceptual model of the divine within the traditional Karo faith, and its influence on the Karo community's existence. It also explores its relevance and contribution to the development of religious moderation within Indonesia's pluralistic religious society. Data for this study was collected through interviews with traditional leaders, in-depth observations, and document analysis. The collected data was analyzed using Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle technique. The results of the data analysis reveal that the divine structure in the traditional Karo faith resembles a tripolar structure, rooted in natural revelation experiences, and bearing similarities to the pattern of neutral monism. This structure underpins the existence of the Karo people. These findings provide inspiration for the development of religious moderation within Indonesia's pluralistic religious society, particularly fostering interfaith dialogue, universal brotherhood, and cooperation to build a more civilized world.

Keywords: *Karo people, Neutral Monism, Religion.*

Introduction

Existence has always been a fundamental struggle for human beings (Ndona, Mustansyir, and Munir 2019). Since ancient times, humans have been striving to realize their existence. Nearly all human activities, whether in the secular or sacred realm, are closely related to the pursuit of actualizing existence. An activity gains deep significance when it leads to the manifestation of existence (Ndona, Habehaan, et al., 2022). History proves that various significant achievements and tragedies that have transformed the course of the world have been driven by motives of realizing existence from influential parties (Ndona, 2021). Existence can be said to determine human movement and history (Juhansar, 2022).

The use of the term existence stems from the English word existency, derived from the base word exist, which means "to be" (Kholidah, 2020). The root word exist has Latin origins, *existere*, formed from the syllable *ex*, meaning out, and the syllable *sistere*, meaning to stand. The term existence can be interpreted as standing by emerging from

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oneself (Kholidah, 2020). To achieve existence, humans must move beyond their original state or point of stagnation.

Karl Theodore Jaspers, a German existentialist, stated that human striving for existence must confront various boundary situations or *grenzsituationen* (Siswanto, 2017). This leads to humans not realizing their existence from within themselves. Jaspers emphasized that existence must be achieved in relation, particularly in relation to Transcendence (Siswanto, 2017). Religions name Transcendence as God, Allah, Yahweh, Deity, *Ngga'e*, *Mulajadi*, etc. (Ndona, 2019b). Boundary situations, as conveyed by Søren Kierkegaard, must serve as the foundation for leaping towards Transcendence (Obinyan, 2014). Transcendence possesses boundlessness, which, according to Jaspers, is inconceivable (Wahl and Lory, 2019). The boundlessness of Transcendence allows space for humans to overcome boundary situations. Therefore, existence can only be achieved in relation to Transcendence, the unlimited. This has led human societies, since ancient times, to establish connections with Transcendence. The term society itself, as Philipus Tule stated, refers to a human community that has a connection with the divine (Ndona, 2019b). Tule's viewpoint aligns with Mircea Eliade's findings. Eliade believed that primitive societies held a belief in the "divine" as the determinant of the significance of the "profane," including human existence (Eliade, 2020). According to Eliade, humans are religious animals, and thus human existence can only be achieved through a relationship with the "divine" (Habeahan and Ndona, 2021).

This writing discusses the concept of neutral monism in Karo human existence. The majority of the Karo population inhabits the highlands of the Bukit Barisan range in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The Karo community, from a cultural perspective, is one of the sub-ethnic groups within the Batak people. They are often referred to as Batak Karo. This research focuses on the Karo Gugun community, which is generally considered to be the original Karo group, distinct from Karo Deli and Karo Langkat, which have experienced more assimilation with Malay and Javanese influences (Bangun, 2019).

The Karo Gugun people adhere to a traditional belief system, evident in various artifacts, rituals, and moral behaviors. Generally, the traditional Karo belief system is called *pamena*, although there is ongoing debate about the homogeneity of this belief system (Tobing, 2020). Today, many Karo individuals have converted to Christianity or Islam. *Pamena* has become a small community in rural areas. Nevertheless, most Karo people still maintain their traditional beliefs, as passed down by *pamena*. This writing employs the term "traditional Karo belief" to avoid debates about the homogeneity of *pamena*. Many argue that the acceptance of monotheism (Christianity, Islam) is essentially rooted in traditional Karo beliefs, which revolve around the belief in *Debata Kaci-kaci* and various ancestral spirits. *Pamena* inherently carries monotheistic elements. It is highly likely that monotheism has merely provided a new framework for traditional Karo beliefs. This raises questions about the nature of *Debata Kaci-kaci* and various ancestral spirits, their origins or roots, belief structures, models of understanding, their connection to existence, and their relevance to contemporary society. These questions form the focus of this research conducted in the Karo Regency, from July 2022 to May 2023, with reflections on the development of religious moderation in Indonesia.

Method

The research employed a qualitative methodology. Data were collected through interviews with Karo traditional leaders, observations of daily practices, and document gathering. The collected data were analyzed using Dilthey's hermeneutic circle technique, which emphasizes that the truth lies in the meaning attributed by the author (Damanik and Ndona, 2022). The fundamental principle of this technique is that each element is part of the whole text, and the whole is part of the author; furthermore, the author is a part of the world and their time (James and Komnenich, 2021). Each data element, following this

pattern, must be interpreted within the context of the entire setting, the Karo society's mentality, culture, world, and the era that produced that element (Ndona, Siagian, and Ginting, 2021). The author, building upon this pattern, sought to unearth the truth of the text by investigating various documents, informant testimonies, and studying observation results, historical context, Karo cosmology, and sociology (Ndona and Gultom, 2019).

Results and Discussion

1. Siwaluh Jabu – God's Footsteps in Karo Land

The exploration of Karo religiosity begins by delving into several artifacts within this community. As Karl Jaspers asserted, artifacts are a language of Transcendence (Siswanto, 2017). These artifacts stand as monuments that document the ancestral revelation experiences of the Karo people, translating their original revelatory experiences into physical forms.

The traditional Karo house, known as siwaluh jabu, is one of the remaining artifacts. These artifacts are still preserved within the Dokan community (Ginting, 2019). A decade ago, siwaluh jabu was prevalent in areas like Simacem, Bakerah, and Suka Meriah, but most were destroyed due to the eruption of Mount Sinabung in 2012 (Kartawisastra, Anda and Survey, 2015).

Siwaluh jabu, on one side, represents the Karo human soul, while on the other side, it portrays the divine aspect. The Karo human soul is symbolized by the begi (a buffalo head with horns but without sensory organs) and the low door height (Halim, 2020). Begi represents the Karo people's intention always oriented towards goodness, and it prioritizes mahamet (respect) as the path to harmony (Santa Rosa, 2017).

The divine dimension of siwaluh jabu is more pronounced in the tapak raja suleiman, para, batu perlanja sira and capah. First, the tapak raja suleiman. Many Karo houses, especially siwaluh jabu, feature the ornamentation of gerga raja suleimen (Karo-Karo, 2023). Others include the gerga tapak ndehara sulaiman. The gerga tapak raja suleimen is believed by many sources to originate from the figure of Solomon, who, in Karo folklore, is a powerful mubaliq from Aceh (Lubis, 2022). Suleman played a significant role in spreading Islam within the Karo region. The gerga tapak ndehara sulaiman, according to some testimonies, derives from the figure of Solomon's wife. Suleman, within the traditional beliefs of the Karo people, is not just known as the spreader of Islam but also as a protector of the community from enemies, diseases, poisons, theft, and threats from harmful forces (Karo-Karo, 2023).

These ornaments are characterized by geometric square motifs, with each side forming a knot. Anton Sitepu (in an interview on October 17, 2022) stated that these ornaments serve as coverings for each corner of the house, with four faces and two ears corresponding to the eight cardinal directions. Each end is connected by pengeret-eret (gecko-shaped ornaments with two heads pointing to the right and left, and four legs) and sikawiten (cloud motifs), which establish interconnectedness (Halim, 2020).

The gerga tapak raja suleimen embodies the Karo people's understanding of divinity that perpetually surrounds life. The realm of divine power, for the Karo community, not only provides a sense of security but also ensures existence. Genuine existence, or true being, for the Karo people, can only occur when encompassed by divine power. This argument is reinforced by the presence of pengeret-eret and sikawiten ornaments, which affirm the integrity of kinship; additionally, cimba lau directs their gaze towards the highest divinity, Dibata Kaci-kaci.

Secondly, the para. The traditional Karo community has a practice of placing para above their kitchen hearth. Most para consist of three tiers. Djenap Ginting (in an interview on August 15, 2022) stated that para function as a place for drying firewood, storing valuable

items, and maturing plant seeds. Inhabitants of the traditional siwaluh jabu houses believe that the para are inhabited by a goddess or spirit known as nini para (Silvana R R Ginting and Effendy, 2019). This figure is believed to protect the house from the danger of fire. This understanding often leads the Karo people to place offerings such as stews and other premium foods on top of the para as offerings to nini para. This act is accompanied by prayers, including the mantra *enda man bandu nini para i datas kam jaga ruamah kami enda ula meseng* (eat this nini, protect our house from fire, including that caused by children's play). Storing valuable items on top of the para is likely intended to gain protection from nini para. Similarly, placing maturing plant seeds on top of the para may signify entrusting them to the spirit to foster their growth.

Thirdly, the batu perlanja sira. Siwaluh jabu, as well as the houses of Karo royalty, have river stones shaped like mortars hanging beneath the roofs, supported by bamboo (Simbolon, 2021). At the end of the year, these batu perlanja sira are struck with specific types of wood, which according to local beliefs, brings forth saltwater. This ritual, in modern times, has mostly been abandoned, with only the Dokan community occasionally performing it (Simbolon, 2021).

According to Karo folklore, this ritual originated from the belief in perlanja sira. In ancient times, the Karo mountain communities valued salt as a precious commodity. Feri Tarigan (in an interview on March 30, 2023) mentioned that the perlanja sira figures, reportedly traveled hundreds of kilometers on foot from the Karo mountains to the Belawan coast to exchange agricultural produce for salt. The journey of the perlanja sira often stopped at Kesawan in Medan, a central trading area during that time. The salt obtained from this exchange was carried back to the Karo mountains by the perlanja sira. The long and arduous journey resulted in many perlanja sira not being able to return to their village, either due to death or getting lost along the way (Simbolon, 2021).

A question arises: what is the connection between perlanja sira and the hanging stone beneath the house's roof? The stone, according to Zjenap Ginting (in an interview on January 10, 2013), is synonymous with human bones. Bones represent the body's strength. The mortar-shaped stone hanging beneath the roof is not just an ordinary stone; it symbolizes the bones of the perlanja sira who did not return to the village (Simbolon, 2021). Perlanja sira are considered heroes for the family and relatives. Even though their physical bodies did not return due to death or being lost on their journey, their spirits return and become a blessing for the village community. This belief leads the Karo people to accompany the stone with *tongkeh-tongkeh* (sticks), symbolizing the resilience and endurance of the perlanja sira.

On one hand, the batu perlanja sira is meant to commemorate heroism, but on the other hand, it represents the real presence of the perlanja sira. This underlies the reverence and worship directed towards this object. Placing the batu perlanja sira beneath the house's roof further emphasizes the elevation of perlanja sira to a divine level. Perlanja sira is identical to *bulang* (grandfather) in the sky. The ritual of striking the stone to produce saltwater demonstrates the divine power of this object that brings blessings to life. This belief gives rise to the mystical understanding of *tongkeh-tongkeh*, which is often used as a weapon or tool for harm (Simbolon, 2021).

Fourthly, the *capah*. This object takes the form of a large plate. The traditional Karo community uses *capah* as a communal dining container or a vessel for feasts, especially during traditional ceremonies. One *capah* serves five to ten people. Similar practices can be observed in the Simalungun community (Ndona, Siagian, and Ginting, 2021) and the Pakpak community in North Sumatra (Ndona and Gultom, 2019). In modern times, most Karo people have abandoned the use of *capah*. Modern Karo society has shifted to using smaller plates for meals, rendering *capah* mostly a historical artifact. Karo academician Pulumun Ginting (in a discussion on May 2, 2023) mentioned that the Delf Museum in the Netherlands is one of the institutions that still preserves *capah*.

In Karo culture, *capah* serves not only as a communal dining vessel but also as a vessel for offerings. Karo people used to place a *capah* beneath the roof of their houses, supported by a bamboo pole, as a place to offer gifts to *Dibata Kaci-kaci* (Lubis, 2022). Rokky Tarigan (in an interview on October 21, 2022) mentioned that bananas and sugarcane were the two types of food most often placed in this vessel. Anton Sitepu (in an interview on December 11, 2022) stated that bananas and sugarcane are mountain foods that impart sweetness. The use of these two objects is intended to please *Sang Dibata* and thus bring forth a sweet life. A similar motif is seen in the hanging of bananas and sugarcane on the roof during roofing work. The habit of using sugarcane as an offering material often leads to a belief in the object's mystical power.

2. Traditional Karonese Rituals

Exploring the divine aspects within Karo tradition necessitates an examination of various related rituals. The author highlights several rituals that significantly manifest the divine nature within Karo's traditional beliefs. First, the rituals surrounding rice fields. The Karo people are deeply involved in rituals connected to rice cultivation. Post-nomadic Karo individuals largely engage in rice farming. However, this practice has shifted since the 1980s, as mentioned by Feri Tarigan (in an interview on December 10, 2022), with many Karo people transitioning to cultivating carrots, oranges, and vegetables.

The rice-farming community of Karo maintains various rituals related to rice cultivation. *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile* is a central figure in these rituals. According to Karo mythology, *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile* is a goddess and a messenger of *Dibata Kaci-kaci* (Lubis, Nasution, and Marsella, 2018). In compassion for the suffering of the Karo people due to famine, *Dibata Kaci-kaci* sends *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile* to bring rice seeds and teach the techniques of rice farming (*rengkep*). The rice plants yield abundant harvests. However, a problem arises when all the harvested rice is consumed. This situation prompts the return of *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile*. Rice is planted again and yields another bountiful harvest. The issue of rice seed depletion repeats. During *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile*'s third appearance, a different pattern emerges. Instead of directly giving rice seeds to each individual, they are distributed through *kalimbubu* (Ginting et al., 2022). Through *kalimbubu*, the Karo people receive rice seeds along with guidance to live wisely, frugally, and to save rice seeds. From then on, *kalimbubu* represents the divine aspect, *debata sini idah*.

This myth makes *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile* the focus of prayers in all rice-related rituals (Tarigan, 2022). A snippet of the prayer during rice planting ritual says, "*Beru dayang jile-jile enda I suan kami page ngarap kel kami maka page enda banci ngasuhi anak ras kempu-kempu kami emaka enda panganndu*" (.....). *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile* is also invoked during the time when the rice plants are *sandangen* (starting to bear grains). The prayer mantra in this ritual seeks a bountiful harvest. *Beru* is also summoned during the harvest festival (*kerja tahun*) for abundant harvests, protection from harm, and to enjoy *mang-mang* or offerings (Lubis, Nasution, and Marsella, 2018).

Beru Dayang Jile-Jile can be considered the goddess of rice. This figure is a divine being or heaven-sent messenger under the authority of the highest divinity, *Dibata Kaci-kaci*. *Beru Dayang Jile-Jile* is analogous to angels in monotheistic faiths or *nitu* in the beliefs of *Keo* (Ndona, 2019b), *Java* (Aciri, 2021), and *Toraja* (Buijs, 2009).

Second, the ritual of tree felling and planting. The Karo *Gugun* community practices rituals associated with tree felling and planting. When preparing to cut down a tree, the tree fellers often recite prayer mantras, seeking permission to fell the tree and to avoid its anger. This ritual is accompanied by planting new seedlings and placing a cigarette at the base of the tree as an offering to the *nini*. Most of these seedlings belong to the same tree species being felled. The new tree becomes the new inhabitant, replacing the felled tree, so as not to cause a sense of loss to the *nini* (Silvana R R Ginting and Effendy, 2019).

Tree felling without this ritual is believed to lead to “malapelataka” or bad luck. Djenap Ginting (in an interview on August 21, 2022) states that history proves many tree fellers have experienced accidents resulting in injuries and death due to the nini’s anger.

The Karo people also have the practice of planting trees around the village ketun and flowers on graves. Both of these activities are accompanied by rituals involving offerings and prayers to Dibata Kaci-kaci (Andayani, Rumapea, and Ekomila, no date). One of the prayer mantras for bamboo planting goes as follows: *kerina enda o dibata kaci-kaci lalit beluh jelma* (none of these no human intelligence) *Kam nge kerina metehsa emaka ban enda mehuli enda me kari buluh perlanjangan*. Elderly community members often advise the younger generation to plant flowers around graves. This symbolizes that bamboo forests and graveyards are not profane territories. Both places are inhabited by nini kerangen. Planting flowers on graves signifies that those who have passed away continue to have a life and influence the succeeding generations. Death is not the end of life. The advice to plant flowers at graves aims to emphasize the dimension of life within death (Ginting et al., 2022). The practice of visiting graves and conveying prayers to ancestral spirits further reinforces the belief that deceased family members continue to exist in another form.

A question that arises is where the spirits of the deceased reside. Most sources state that the spirits of deceased family members become nini para or begu jabu. These spirits often communicate with the living through dreams, possession, shamans, and other means (Ginting et al., 2022). The spirits of deceased villagers become nini kerangen or kuta guardians of the village entrance, while the spirits of those who died under unusual circumstances such as accidents, sudden deaths, childbirth, or murder become nini in various locations (Br. Ginting, 2020).

Third, *erpanggir ku lau* is a ritual that is still maintained by many Karo communities, especially the Pamena community. The term *erpanggir ku lau* refers to the ritual of bathing in a river (Dadik, 2020). This ritual is not just about cleansing the body but also about releasing negative energy. *Erpanggir ku lau* is performed in flowing rivers to wash away all negative energy downstream while receiving positive energy from upstream. The ritual also includes offerings of kaffir lime, traditional drum music, and nowadays, various types of flowers are often included (Dadik, 2020). The guru sibaso acts as the ritual leader and recites prayer mantras to Dibata Kaci-kaci. The intention of the prayer is to cleanse the participants from various negative energies that cause illness, failures, obstacles to prosperity, prolonged conflicts, and more (Purba and Astuti, 2019), while also invoking positive energy that brings health, success, peace, and so on. *Erpanggir ku lau* is also often performed by traditional healers to release negative forces and restore depleted healing energy (Tobing, 2020).

Erpanggir ku lau likely originated from Hindu traditions in India, which entered the Sumatra region in the early Christian era (Suprayitno, no date). While modern Karo people have largely converted to Christianity and Islam, traces of Hindu beliefs are still found in the region, such as Karo genealogy stories (Nastiti, 2014), parallels with neighboring groups like the Pakpak (Soedewo, 2018), pure sites in Bintang Meriah, reliefs on gateways in the village of Pulo, Kuta Buluh, traces of cremation rituals, and more (Nastiti, 2014). The *erpanggir ku lau* ritual can be linked to the similarity with the “Melasti” ceremony in Balinese Hinduism and the Nagasankritan ritual in India (Utami, 2019).

Dibata Kaci-kaci is the central figure in the *erpanggir ku lau* ritual. All prayers are directed towards Dibata Kaci-kaci. This figure is often referred to as Dibata Simada Tinuang, signifying its position as the origin of all dibata. The term dibata in the Karo vocabulary is equivalent to the Indonesian word *dewa*, derived from the Sanskrit word *deva* (Ndona, Mustansyir, and Munir, 2019), referring to “divine objects, persons, or essences” (Prinst, 2002). The Karo people believe that the existence of Dibata Simada

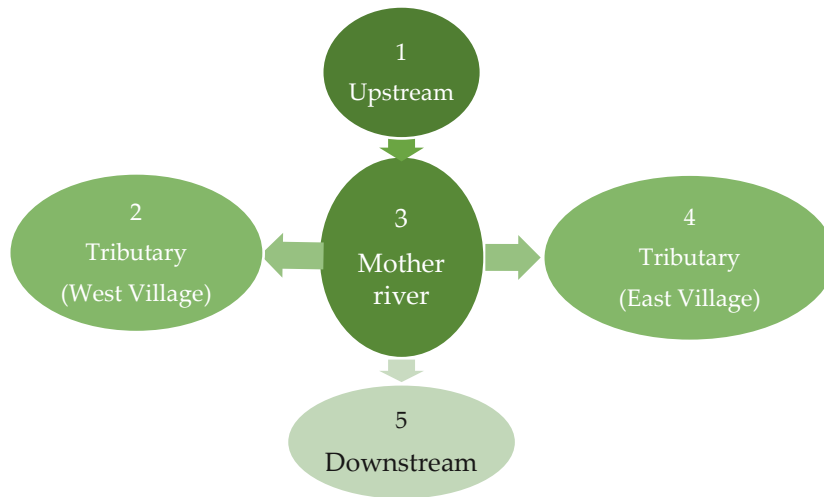
Tinuang is in the upper world, the sky. Its presence in the upper world renders Dibata inaccessible and beyond human reach (Ndona and Tibo, 2019).

The erpanggir ku lau ritual positions Dibata Kaci-kaci as the direct target of the participants' intentions. An exception occurs in the erpanggir ku lau ritual of the Karo Lau Sidebuk-debuk community, where Beru Ertak Ernala serves as an intermediary with Dibata Kaci-kaci. This likely stems from the performance of the ritual in hot spring pools. Dibata Kaci-kaci is not directly addressed in rituals such as tree felling, rituals around the rice fields, or at home. What causes this difference? Who is Dibata Kaci-kaci? What is the connection with rivers (water)?

The prayer mantras in this ritual, as explained by Djenap Ginting (in an interview on October 21, 2022), can provide insight into the essence of Dibata Kaci-kaci. The prayer mantras in this ritual address Dibata Kaci-kaci as the creator of water. The petitioner's prayer is based on the primordial principle, where Dibata is the creator of water and rivers. Why emphasize Dibata Kaci-kaci as the creator of water? Aren't other objects also created by Dibata? This statement should be understood in the sense that water is the earliest creation and possesses the power of purification and sustenance. Ancient myths in various cultures view water (rivers) as the primordial element that was directly created by the highest deity. Water even serves as the vessel for creating other beings (Ndona, 2019d). Some Keo myths suggest that the first humans emerged from springs (Ndona, 2018b). Ancient Jewish texts offer another reference to the presence of water in the primordial state. Water is described in the Book of Genesis as the initial substance that existed before all creation. "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). The statement about the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters not only portrays the synergy between water and God but also represents God's divine power in creation. Religious communities often view the primordial state as the true and powerful situation (Siswanto, 2017). This belief underlies various healing practices that involve the use of water. Water, as the first element, synergizes with God and possesses creative power.

Indeed, the use of river currents is inherently connected to the phenomenon of water, which has the dual power to sustain and destroy. However, the main motif lies in returning the subject to a primordial state for recovery, transforming it into a new creation with renewed energy (Ndona, Mustansyir, and Munir, 2019). This process of recovery extends not only to the subject but also encompasses all aspects of life, including plants, livestock, descendants, relationship restoration, and more (Purba and Astuti, 2019).

Further questions arise as to why the ritual takes place in river currents specifically, rather than in ponds, lakes, or seas. The use of rivers likely stems from the cosmological beliefs of agricultural communities (Ndona, 2019a). The cosmology of rice farming revolves around the river (Ndona and Gultom, 2019). The river is the center of life. Early settlements were always situated along riverbanks. However, the source of life isn't just the river itself; it's the upstream where the water originates. The upstream feeds water into the river, which then flows to the surrounding rice fields. Early communities also expanded and established new settlements to the east and west following the flow of water or tributaries. Most main rivers ultimately flow into estuaries or the sea.



The phenomenon of the river forms a picture of the cosmos, which Jacobs Sumardjo calls the pattern of five, with the river as the central point, the upstream as the base/source/upper, east and west as development areas, and the estuary or sea as the downstream being the end or bottom point. The cosmology of the five patterns forms the religiosity of the rice field community which is centered on the river and stems from the upstream. The rituals of the rice fields are mostly related to rivers and water. The river has a divine power that animates. The divinity or god of life resides in the river, and through the water also spreads east and west. But the river divinity is not autonomous. The strength of the river comes from upstream. The upper reaches of the river, are therefore believed to be the abode of the supreme divinity. The Karo people in the rice fields live upstream of the river as the abode of the highest divinity, Debata Kaci-kaci. Rivers and water which are the source of life from the Debata Kaci-kaci, therefore determine life. Rituals with a high level, especially when dealing with emergency situations, such as serious illness, danger of death, long dry spells, are always performed in rivers or upstream. The use of the river for the erpanggir ku lau ritual has a background in this appreciation.

3. Structure of Divinity in Karo Traditional Faith

The study of Karo artifacts and rituals reveals a structured depiction of divinity divided into two main aspects: visible divinity and invisible divinity. Visible divinity is depicted through the concept of kalimbubu. This figure emerges in the myth of the third arrival of Beru Dayang Jile-Jile. During her third arrival, Beru Dayang Jile-Jile introduced the concept of kalimbubu as a medium of connection between the Karo people and Dibata Kaci-kaci, the highest deity. Allegedly, since then, the Karo society has regarded kalimbubu as dibata idah (the visible God). Kalimbubu is synonymous with the kinship priest and serves as the representative of divinity in all customary rituals.

The Karo community uses the term kalimbubu to refer to the male side of the family from the wife's and mother's origins (Ginting et al., 2022). This position is further divided into several subgroups, as illustrated in the following table.

No	Sub	Meaning
1	<i>Kalimbubu bena – bena</i>	<i>Kalimbubu</i> from grandfather (<i>bolang</i>)
2	<i>Kalimbubu binuang</i>	<i>Kalimbubu</i> father
3	<i>Kalimbubu simada dareh</i>	Mother's brother (blood origin/genes);
4	<i>Kalimbubu siertimbang siperdemui</i>	Wife's parents
5	<i>Kalimbubu sipemeren</i>	<i>Kalimbubu</i> from siblings
6	<i>Puang kalimbubu</i>	<i>Kalimbubu</i> from <i>kalimbubu</i>
7	<i>Puang ni puang</i>	<i>Kalimbubu</i> from <i>puang kalimbubu</i>

Kalimbubu of the simada dareh lineage holds a primary position. Kalimbubu simada dareh, as the origin of the mother who gives birth, is considered the source of blood and genes. Therefore, it represents divinity, fundamental origins, and underlies life. Kalimbubu of the sierkimbang and siperdemui sub-lineages occupies the second position, as it is the origin of the wife and simada dareh for the children. Both of these sub-lineages consistently appear in every ritual, especially within the core family context. Other sub-lineages generally appear during significant rituals such as housewarming, weddings, and funerals. Kalimbubu, as the representation of divinity, holds the highest position within the kinship system. The act of adorning kalimbubu during each customary ritual is synonymous with wearing liturgical garments to mediate various intentions with the dibata and to bestow blessings upon beru (Ginting et al., 2022). This understanding results in a dual nature: on one side, the reverence embedded in relating to kalimbubu, and on the other, the nurturing and affectionate attitude of kalimbubu towards beru.

A question frequently posed is why kalimbubu is positioned as a divine figure. The answer to this question can be linked to Karl Jaspers' notion of using humans as figures to depict deities. Humans are considered the most perfect creatures and possess various dimensions that can represent divine superiority (Damanik and Ndona, 2020). This usage, of course, doesn't depict an ordinary human, but rather a superhuman, often accompanied by elements that indicate mystery and superiority. In Hinduism, statues of deities often incorporate powerful animals like snakes, eagles, and horses, or specific objects like arrows and staffs, as well as natural elements such as the moon and clouds (Murdihastomo, 2021).

What about kalimbubu? Kalimbubu fulfills the most fundamental elements of divinity portrayal as the origin and source of the blessings of life. Kalimbubu is the origin of women (mothers/wives) who give birth and nurture. The usage of the term simada dareh for the maternal lineage indicates the Karo people's understanding of this element as the source of life. Individuals are born and raised by mothers, and mothers come from kalimbubu. Life is rooted in kalimbubu as simada dareh, making it the most representative of divinity as the source of fundamental origins and blessings of life (Ndona and Gultom, 2019). Kalimbubu is associated with the upstream source, in contrast to beru, which represents the downstream aspect of kinship (Ndona, 2019a). The term dibata ni idah and the worship behavior associated with kalimbubu are rooted in this context.

Kalimbubu is not an autonomous divinity. It is experienced as a symbol, representing the essence of divinity that extends beyond itself (Ndona et al., 2020). The essence of divinity is not located within kalimbubu itself but within the entity it represents. True divinity is the spirit. The Karo people believe in various types of spirits that demonstrate hierarchical relationships.

First, ancestral spirits. The term "ancestors" refers to deceased family members (grandparents, great-grandparents, ancestors) (Ndona, Mustansyir, and Munir, 2019). The Karo people believe that the spirits of those who have passed away transform into divine beings and influence the lives of future generations. Ancestral spirits continue to accompany and engage with the living family members (Ginting et al., 2021). At times, ancestral spirits communicate with family members through dreams, possession, and other means. Ancestral spirits are considered divine entities within the cosmic scope and are a part of life. This belief underpins the practice of pilgrimage in Karo society.

Second, nini. The second level is occupied by nini. Nini falls within the realm of divinity in the context of life. The Karo people recognize various figures as nini, including nini para, nini karangen, and ancestral spirits. Nini is a unique term for divinity in the context of life. The Karo people still recognize several nini figures, although they are rarely the focus of rituals, such as nini galuh (goddess of bananas), nini kuta (goddess of the village), nini jalin (goddess of roads), nini gugung (goddess of mountains), and others.

The Karo people believe that every place considered sacred or ominous is inhabited by a *nini* (S R R Ginting and Effendy, 2019). This belief signifies that no space is void of supernatural presence. The entire cosmic domain is enveloped by transcendental forces. Places believed to be inhabited by *nini* serve as coordinates of transcendental presence, possessing greater power and acting as centers that extend into the surrounding areas (Ndona, 2018a). The divinity of life encompasses the entire cosmic space.

Nini originates from the belief that they are the origin of life. *Nini* emerges from the spirits of deceased individuals. Death, for the Karo people, is a transformative moment from life to becoming *nini*. This belief is aligned with the perceptions of various Batak subgroups (Ndona, Siagian, et al., 2022) and other Indonesian ethnic groups regarding the origins of *begu* and *nitu* spirits (Ndona, 2018b).

The term *nini* referring to *Feri Tarigan's* opinion (in interview on May 20, 2022) is used to refer to older women or grandmothers, often depicted wearing a head covering (*tudung*). This is distinct from *bolang*, which refers to older men or grandfathers, often depicted with headgear called *bulang-bulang*. The term *nini* is also frequently used to refer to female ancestors (Silvana R R Ginting and Effendy, 2019). Why is the term *nini* used to describe the divinity of life figures? The ancestors of the Karo people are not exclusively female. The usage of *nini* is likely linked to the belief shared among many traditional societies about the female-associated divinity of the earth (Ndona, 2019c). The term *nini* is synonymous with goddesses as divine figures inhabiting the cosmos and participating in life.

The third level involves *dayang-dayang surga*. Figures such as *Beru Dayang Jile-jile* in agricultural rituals and *Beru Ertak Ernala* in the Lau Sidebuk-debuk community fall into this category. Apart from these two figures, various communities within the *pamena* group may have other figures.

Unlike *nini*, which is associated with life and inhabits the cosmic space, *dayang-dayang surga* are more celestial beings with specific tasks from the highest divinity to serve humanity. *Nini* originates from the spirits of humans transformed into divine beings, whereas *dayang-dayang surga* are heavenly beings who enter the cosmic space and partake in life and beyond. *Dayang-dayang surga* could be considered as divinity in an intermediary space, situated between *nini* and the highest divinity.

The third level is *Dibata Kaci-Kaci* – the Supreme Divinity. The highest level in the Karo society's divine structure is occupied by *Dibata Kaci-kaci*. This figure is often referred to as *simada tinuang*, meaning the God who extends to everything (Paravita and Faza, 2021). This concept is akin to the term *Allah* in Islam and *Elohim* in the Jewish faith (Ndona and Tibo, 2019). *Dibata Kaci-kaci* represents the highest, absolute, origin, and focal point of all spirits. Symbolizing the upstream source of the river as the abode of *Debata Kaci-kaci* reflects the understanding of this figure as the source of fundamental origins and determinant of life. For the Karo people, life is determined from the upstream source.

Debata Kaci-kaci is rarely depicted in various rituals. In daily life, the Karo people more frequently interact with ancestral spirits, *nini* and *dayang-dayang surga*. Prayers are directed towards *Debata Kaci-kaci* only in situations of serious crisis, such as severe illness, crop failure, famine, and prolonged drought (Paravita and Faza, 2021). The Karo people believe that such critical situations cannot be addressed by the spirits beneath *Debata Kaci-kaci* (Eliade, 2022). Critical situations compel the Karo people to directly appeal to *dibata si mata tinuang* or the highest divinity that determines the fate of life.

Debata Kaci-kaci as *si mada tinuang* indeed remains distant and unattainable (Ndlovu and Nicolaidis, 2023). The depiction of the upstream as the abode of *Debata Kaci-kaci* signifies distance. Connection with *Debata Kaci-kaci* must occur through the spirits at lower levels as intermediaries. Prayers directed towards *Debata Kaci-kaci* in critical

situations still utilize various mediums such as rivers, cabah, guru sibaso and others (Ndona, Habehaan, et al., 2022).

The profound perception of the upstream source of the river as the abode of Debata Kaci-kaci indeed contrasts with the presence of the capah under the roof of the house and various rituals associated with this object. This practice illustrates that the Karo society is not homogeneous in their understanding of divinity. The belief in nini kerangen and nini kuta also indicates that the perception of the divinity of life among the Karo people is not solely centered around the river. The belief in nini kerangen, the tradition of the capah, and the various rituals related to this object appear to be more dominant among the Karo people involved in farming (Ndona, 2019c). The assimilation between these two traditions, rice cultivation and farming, forms an understanding of divinity that somewhat resembles the quantum paradox or the wave-particle paradox (Del Medico, 2023). The Karo people view the river as the center of divine power, while simultaneously believing that the surrounding world – fields, villages, forests – is enveloped by divine forces. On one hand, the Karo people perceive the sky as the abode of the highest divinity, but on other occasions, they direct their gaze towards the hula, the water source, as the dwelling of Debata Kaci-kaci. The assimilation of the rice cultivation and farming traditions leads the Karo people to not exclusively perceive the upstream or the sky as the dwelling of Debata Kaci-kaci. This assimilation prompts the Karo people's imagination towards the fundamental principle of the limitless nature of the highest divinity, surpassing the grandeur of the upstream source and the heights of the sky. The upstream source of the river and the sky both signify the phenomena of magnificence, mystery, grandeur, and life's determinant, thereby invoking a sense of grandeur, height, depth, expansiveness, distance, and limitlessness of Dibata Kaci-kaci.

Such a perception is also found in various ethnic groups around the world. Mircea Eliade's research into archaic societies discovered similar perceptions of certain locations, including the highest mountain peaks as the abode of the highest divinity (Eliade, 2021). These locations become paradigmatic spaces that connect humans with the highest divinity (Eliade, 2022).

4. Neutral Monism Karo

The structure of divinity in the traditional beliefs of the Karo people demonstrates a model that approaches neutral monism. This model portrays divinity as encompassing the entirety and being centered around a single, unified power (Ndona, 2018b). This model is deeply felt among almost all Batak sub-ethnic groups, such as the Toba (Ndona, Siagian, et al., 2022), Simalungun (Ndona, Siagian and Ginting, 2021), and Pakpak (Ndona, Habehaan, et al., 2022), as well as among various other Indonesian ethnic groups like the Javanese, Keo (Ndona, Mustansyir and Munir, no date), Toraja, Bali, and more. The Keo people believe that the entire cosmos is enveloped by divine power centered around Ngga'e Mbapo (Ndona, 2019b).

The Karo society believes that the entire cosmos is permeated by divine forces, and all these divine forces originate from or are centered around the divinity of Debata Kaci-kaci. The title *si mada tinuang* attributed to Debata Kaci-kaci symbolizes the highest divinity while encompassing all divine powers. The spirits of ancestors, *nitu*, and *dayang-dayang surga* are considered divine beings, but not autonomous divinities. The divine power within these entities derives from and revolves around *si mada tinuang*, Debata Kaci-kaci. The presence of ancestral spirits and *nini* signifies divine forces that envelop the entire cosmic realm. Divine power isn't limited solely to the specific locations believed to be the abodes of ancestors and *nini*; rather, it encompasses the entire cosmos. The locations considered to be the abodes of ancestors and *nini* serve as points of concentration or coordinates, each with a divine power that extends beyond its immediate vicinity (Ndona and Tibo, 2019). This belief forms a kind of cosmic ethos, similar to the politeness in speech, the necessity to seek permission, and the *sentabi* of showing respect

at locations believed to be inhabited by nini. The Karo people believe that violating this cosmic ethos can lead to negative consequences for the individuals involved.

5. Underlying the Existence of Karo Man

The depiction of divinity in the Karo people's understanding is essentially a portrait of the Karo individuals themselves. The Karo people do not speak of God as an abstract concept or the essence of God. Instead, they discuss God in the context of existential struggles. Dibata Kaci-kaci and all elements of divinity are, for the Karo people, the foundation of life's existence. In this context, God is relational. Dibata Kaci-kaci and all elements of divinity are a God found in the struggle of existence, manifested in natural phenomena and fundamental life issues, which give rise to experiences of *tremendum et facinosum*. The God inferred from this existential experience becomes an answer to one's limitations and a support to stand firm. Referring to the pre-painted image of God and various ritual practices, including the archetype of a person achieving selfhood by relying on transcendent power, the limitless, the absolute, underlying the cosmos and orchestrating life. For the Karo people, existence cannot be achieved from within oneself but through relation or contact with the mystery. This nourishes ritual practices, the use of symbols, the development of religious sentiment and morals, and places religious order and leadership as the most influential institutions and entities. They constantly serve as a reference point in the struggles and resolutions of life's problems. Existence, therefore, also requires coming to terms with the cosmic order and submitting to religious authority.

6. The Universal Dimension of Karo's Monism - Inspiration for the Development of Religious Moderation

6.1. Universal Dimension Root Structure of Divinity

An analysis of the depiction of divinity in Karo beliefs reveals several aspects that parallel various beliefs within other religious communities. These aspects align in terms of structure and roots.

Firstly, the structural alignment is evident. The structure of divinity as understood by the Karo people bears similarities to the depiction of divinity in various religious communities. Similar structures are found in the indigenous beliefs of Keo, Java, Toraja, and others. The tri-polar structure is also present in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism (Ackerman, 2022), Christianity, and Islam (Fahimah, 2019). These three Abrahamic religions believe in God, Elohim, as a singular, absolute, and limitless divinity (Ndona, 2021). While existing as a singular entity, Allah frequently uses mediums like angels and seraphim to interact with the world (Upal, 2021). These figures serve as messengers of the highest divinity moving in the world. Abrahamic religions also acknowledge divine figures within their religious realm, such as saints and holy figures, and this belief system leads to practices like pilgrimage to holy sites (Ndona, 2019b). Mircea Eliade also discovered similar structures across various ethnic groups (Eliade, 2021). This reality legitimizes the depiction of divinity within Karo beliefs as a universal phenomenon.

Secondly, there is a similarity in the roots of these beliefs. Divinity in Karo beliefs shares common roots with objects of faith in various religious communities, namely the experience of revelation within reality. Karl Jaspers argued that the divine experience within reality constitutes genuine revelation (Ndlovu and Nicolaidis, 2023). The belief in Dibata Kaci-kaci likely stems from transcendent experiences in natural phenomena and life struggles. The Karo people, when facing the enchantment of the forest, the majesty of mountains, the continuous presence of clouds, the soothing breeze, refreshing rain, warming sun, life-sustaining land, and ever-flowing rivers, also encounter the harsh realities behind this beauty. The gentle breeze can transform into a storm, river ripples into deadly floods, and picturesque mountains can trigger landslides that disrupt order.

The Karo mountain community grapples with the fascinating and awe-inspiring but simultaneously fearsome and unsettling phenomena of nature, known as *tremendum et*

fascinatum. Natural phenomena bring forth mystery and evoke experiences of wonder, leading them to a conviction about the unseen forces behind the beauty and wrath of nature, its harmony and fury. The belief in *nini kerangen* likely originates from the phenomena of the forest—lush trees that exhibit beauty on one side and an eerie presence on the other, providing life while simultaneously posing threats. The belief in *nini para* might be rooted in the fear of encountering destructive house fires that obliterate all possessions. The Karo people, in surrendering to the force of fire, place their hopes in a divine power constructed as *nini para*. Beliefs in other *nini* figures likely stem from natural phenomena and life experiences as well. These convictions regarding the existence of divine figures and the accompanying rituals can be seen as a way to conform to various natural forces and the bitter experiences of life.

6.2. Implications for the Development of Religious Moderation in Indonesia

The alignment of structure and the similarity of roots serve as an inspiration for the development of religious moderation in the present day. Pluralistic societies, including Indonesia, often face various doctrinal differences. History shows that these differences have given rise to negative stigmas, social tensions, discriminatory treatment, and even social conflicts (Damanik and Ndona, 2022). The New Order era was the darkest period for traditional belief communities. These communities were regarded not as religions, but as animism, dynamism, and even superstition (Afni, Supratno, and Nugraha, 2020). Negative stigmas later evolved into discriminatory treatment and social violence. History indicates that these differences have triggered fundamentalism and acts of terrorism (Damanik and Ndona, 2022). The alignment of divine structure and the similarity of roots show that religions share the same foundation – faith in the transcendent, absolute, and limitless, which in perfect love and goodness serves as an answer to mysteries, limitations, and fundamental life issues. The transcendent, therefore, becomes the goal for humans to leap beyond the constraints (Casewell, 2023). Awareness of this transcendent power is undoubtedly derived from moments of wonder when facing the mysteries of nature and the wonders of life, giving birth to the experience of *tramendum et facinosum* (Ndona, 2021).

Various doctrinal and cultural differences stem from grappling with different realities, resulting in unique encounters and the construction of different languages and symbols. Diversity of experiences fosters an understanding of different dimensions of the transcendent, which then serves as a foundation for formulating various doctrines and creating symbols. Therefore, diversity should be seen as a wealth and a driving force for interfaith dialogue, leading religious communities to penetrate each other's languages and symbols. This process of penetration naturally brings religious communities to encounter the substance at the depth of languages and symbols from other communities. This movement will naturally lead religious communities to delve deeper into the mysteries and limitless divine, working together to build a more just and cultured world.

Conclusion

The revelation of the divine essence in traditional Karo beliefs demonstrates a structure of neutral monism, sharing structural alignment and root similarity with various religious communities. This, on one hand, legitimizes the truth of traditional Karo faith, and on the other hand, underscores that all forms of religiosity share a common foundation – the experience of revelation within reality. Faith in the transcendent draws from existential struggles to establish a firm sense of self. Essentially, all forms of religiosity find their existence in transcendence. Doctrinal differences and religious symbols, therefore, serve as illuminations that should serve as a foundation for building deep-seated faith dialogues, enabling a deeper exploration of the mysteries of the vastness and absoluteness of the divine. This process fosters universal brotherhood and collaboration in building a more cultured world.

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