

## ISLAM AND LOCAL WISDOM: HARMONY IN THE LAND OF KARO

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the dynamics of interaction between Islam and the local wisdom of the Karo people in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Tanah Karo is known for its strong customary system and distinctive social structure, but in recent decades it has also experienced the growth of the Muslim community, both from native converts and immigrants. This research aims to examine how Islam adapts and forms harmony with local culture through the process of acculturation, cultural da'wah approaches, and collaboration between religious and traditional leaders. The methods used are literature studies and qualitative analysis of socio-religious practices in the Land of Karo. The results of the study show that the success of Islam in integrating with the Karo culture lies in a non-confrontational approach, respect for local values, and the use of traditional languages and symbols in religious activities. This study confirms that Islam and local culture are not opposing entities, but can synergize in building social cohesion and harmonious diversity.

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### INTRODUCTIONS

The Land of Karo, located in the North Sumatra region, is known for its rich culture and distinctive social structure. The majority of the people of Karo adhere to Christianity and local beliefs, but the existence of a growing Muslim community is an important indicator of the social changes that are taking place in the region. In the context of religious pluralism, the interaction between Islam and local culture shows a unique dynamic of adaptation and integration. Islam as a universal religion has undergone a long process of acculturation in various regions of Indonesia. The uniqueness of the process of spreading Islam in Indonesia lies in its ability to dialogue and integrate with local culture, including in the North Sumatra region, especially in the Land of Karo. The area is known as one of the regions with a strong cultural identity, where traditional structures and beliefs have taken root long before the entry of major religions, including Islam. (Arifinsyah & Nasution, 2023; Tricks, 2018)

The Karo people have a distinctive value system, such as the concept of rakut sitelu (the unity of three elements: family, custom, and religion), as well as social practices such as rungu (deliberation) and year's work (harvest ritual). When Islam began to enter the region, especially through trade routes and da'wah from the coast of Deli and Langkat, this religion did not necessarily replace the local culture, but rather sought to adapt and coexist. (São Paulo, 2024)

The characteristics of Islam in Indonesia develop through peaceful and cultural channels, not by confrontation, but by integration. This can also be seen in the spread of Islam in the Land of Karo, which took place

gradually and did not impose radical changes. Islam that entered brought the values of monotheism, but still appreciated the existence of local wisdom as part of the social context of society. (Azra, 2004)

The life of Muslims in the Land of Karo reflects the spirit of harmony between Islamic values and local customs. The Muslim community, both immigrants and Karo native converts, shows how religious identity and cultural identity can synergize. This process is inseparable from the role of religious and traditional leaders who prioritize dialogue, tolerance, and respect for local values. (Princess, 2023)

The classical study of religion in Java, the success of Islam in integrating with the local culture occurred because of the flexibility and ability of this religion to "ground" according to the socio-cultural context of the community. In Tanah Karo, similar flexibility is seen in religious practices that retain indigenous language, symbols, and social mechanisms, but are given a new Islamic meaning. Therefore, this paper aims to examine more deeply how the process of interaction between Islam and local wisdom in the Land of Karo takes place, as well as how this harmony is formed and maintained in the socio-religious life of the community. This research is important in the midst of the challenges of diversity and efforts to strengthen social cohesion based on local and religious values. (Geertz, 1960) (Ikhsan, 2023)

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with the library research method as the main technique in data collection. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the relationship between Islamic teachings and the local wisdom of the Karo people through the analysis of texts, documents, and various relevant written sources. The data sources studied include academic books, scientific journals, previous research results, local cultural documents, and historical writings describing the interaction of Islam and Karo culture in various social, religious, and customary contexts. (Moelong, 2018)

The data analysis process is carried out through content analysis techniques, with emphasis on identifying the main themes that emerge from the various literature studied. The researcher focuses on how Islamic values adapt to local cultural practices without losing the substance of religious teachings, as well as how the Karo community maintains social harmony through the integration of local wisdom and Islamic values. Using an interpretive approach, this research aims to explore a deep understanding of the socio-religious dynamics in Tanah Karo, as well as present a narrative that shows that Islam and local culture are not always in conflict, but can instead enrich each other in a multicultural context. (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019)

## RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

### Islam and Culture: A Brief History

Islam entered the Tanah Karo area not through violence or colonization, but through a long and peaceful social process, especially through trade interactions, migration, and the spread of cultural da'wah from coastal areas such as Deli Serdang, Langkat, and Aceh. The Karo people, who previously adhered to local and Christian beliefs, faced a gradual Islamization process. The difference in the social structure and the traditional value system of the Karo made the process of spreading Islam not as fast as in the Malay or Minangkabau areas. (Remuneration, 2020)

One of the factors for the slow Islamization in the Karo Land is the strong traditional ties based on the patrilineal kinship system (merga), as well as the still rooted local spiritual values. However, the entry of Islam is also not necessarily rejected, but is addressed selectively through customary social mechanisms, such as deliberation between clan groups and the influence of traditional leaders who are open to change. (Siregar, 2014)

The development of Islam in the Land of Karo experienced an important momentum during the Dutch colonial period, when Muslim migration from coastal areas to the interior increased due to economic and educational factors. Scholars from Deli and Aceh play a key role in spreading Islamic teachings through da'wah approaches that

respect local culture, such as the use of the Karo language in lectures and respect for traditional structures. This shows that there is a cultural dialogue between Islamic teachings and traditional Karo values.

One of the concrete forms of this acculturation is the continued implementation of traditional ceremonies such as year work and rebu, but with modifications in form and content to be in line with Islamic values. The process of adaptation of religion to local culture is part of a social transformation that allows religion to exist without eliminating the cultural identity of the existing community .(Geertz, 1960)

Thus, the history of the relationship between Islam and Karo culture is not a story of domination, but a story about the encounter of values that influence and adjust each other. Islam is present as a new spiritual force that is gradually received through the doors of local culture and wisdom.(Fitriani , 2020)

### **Harmony through Acculturation**

The process of acculturation between Islam and Karo culture shows how two different value systems can coexist and even form social harmony. Islam did not come to the Land of Karo as a dominant force that erased local culture, but through a cultural approach that conformed to the social structure, language, and customs of the local community. The result is the formation of a distinctive religious pattern, in which Islamic values are internalized without abandoning the Karo cultural identity.(Siregar et al., 2024)

One concrete example of this acculturation can be seen in the traditional practices that are still carried out by the Karo Muslim community, such as annual work ceremonies (harvest thanksgiving rituals) and rebu (temporary prohibition of communication between daughters-in-law and daughters-in-law), which are adapted to Islamic values. These ceremonies are not eliminated, but adapted by eliminating elements that are contrary to the sharia, such as offerings to ancestral spirits, and replacing them with joint prayers or dhikr. (Ancient et al., 2025)

Acculturation is a social process when a group of people with a particular culture confront a foreign culture and selectively adopt its elements into their lives, without losing their original identity . In the context of Karo, this is seen in the way the community accepts Islamic teachings while maintaining a merga-based social structure, as well as the tradition of deliberation (runggu) in decision-making, which is also in line with the principles of shura in Islam.(Koentjaraningrat , 2009) (Sanjaya & Kamal, 2023)

Traditional and religious leaders play an important role in bridging this acculturation process. They become mediators who ensure that Islamic values can be accepted without disturbing the existing social order. The success of Islam in various regions of Indonesia is due to its ability to "culture" and not be exclusive to local traditions. Thus, the harmony between Islam and Karo culture is proof of the success of the cultural da'wah model that prioritizes dialogue and openness. Acculturation not only enriches the expression of local Islam, but also becomes the foundation for social cohesion in the midst of a multicultural society like Tanah Karo.(Azra, 2004) (Salsabilla et al., 2023)

### **The Role of Religious and Traditional Leaders**

In the process of spreading and accepting Islam in the Land of Karo, the role of religious leaders and traditional leaders has a central position as a bridge between religious teachings and the local cultural system. They are not only spiritual leaders or traditional stakeholders, but also key figures in the social process that allows the creation of a harmonious acculturation between Islam and traditional Karo values.(Lubis, 2017)

Religious leaders among the Karo Muslim community have a da'wah strategy that is not confrontational, but dialogical and cultural. They use an approach that relies on an understanding of the Karo customs and language, so that the message of Islam can be accepted more easily. This approach is in line with the concept of cultural brokerage, which is the role of a leader or group who can mediate between two different cultures so that a process of mutual understanding occurs.(Primary & Ha, 2024) (Barth, 1969)

Meanwhile, traditional leaders such as representatives of kalimbubu, anak beru, and sembuyak have authority in the social structure of the Karo community. They are often the determinants of the direction of social and cultural

change. In the context of the spread of Islam, some indigenous leaders who are open to change facilitate dialogue and give legitimacy to the influence of Islam, as long as the basic values of the indigenous people are not eliminated. This shows a constructive and cooperative cultural compromise.

The success of the spread of Islam in various regions of the archipelago depends heavily on the ability of local figures to adapt Islamic values into an established cultural framework. In Tanah Karo, this model proved effective because both parties both religious and traditional leaders agreed to put social harmony as the top priority, not the dominance of one value system over another. (Azra, 2004) (Wake up & Split, 2024)

In practice, collaboration between religious and traditional leaders is reflected in the implementation of religious activities that still consider the traditional structure, as well as in the involvement of religious leaders in traditional forums such as *runggu* or *sangkep ni marga* meetings. It reinforces the legitimacy of Islam as part of the social order of the Karo people, without uprooting the cultural roots that have long lived in their midst. (Daulay et al., 2023)

### Challenges and Opportunities

The encounter between Islam and the local culture of Karo is not without challenges, but behind it also holds many opportunities to strengthen social harmony. One of the main challenges is the resistance of some people who think that the presence of Islam can erode traditional values and traditions. This often arises due to the stereotype that religion carries universal values that are contrary to locality. In some cases, there are concerns that the strengthening of religious identity will shift customary social structures, such as the *merga* system or customary rituals of the year. (Rahmawati & Rubino, 2023)

In addition, challenges also come from some Islamic groups who reject acculturation and encourage the textual purification of religious teachings. This attitude often creates tension with local communities who still hold fast to traditions. Islam in Indonesia develops through dialogue and negotiation with local cultures, but there is always a risk of conflict when conservative currents emerge that are exclusive to traditional culture. (Hefner, 1997)

On the other hand, the opportunity to create harmony remains wide open. The existence of religious and traditional leaders who are inclusive and an approach to *da'wah* that respects local wisdom has paved the way for the formation of a moderate and contextual form of local Islam in Karo. Islam in the context of Karo is not only a spiritual belief system, but also serves as a tool to strengthen social solidarity and human values. (São Paulo et al., 2024)

Another opportunity lies in the young generation of Karo Muslims who are now starting to be active in intercultural and educational spaces. They become agents of change who understand two identities: as Muslims and as part of an indigenous community. Their involvement in youth forums, religious organizations, and cultural activities creates new space for synergy between Islam and customs. The greatest opportunity in the relationship between religion and culture is when the two do not affirm each other, but enrich each other for the realization of a tolerant and inclusive society. Therefore, it is important to continue to develop dialogical approaches in building a peaceful coexistence in the Land of Karo. (Hasim & Faruk, 2020) (Chan et al., 2024)

### CONCLUSION

Studies on the interaction between Islam and local culture in Tanah Karo show that harmony can be realized through an acculturative approach that is mutually respectful. Islam, as a religion that comes from outside, does not necessarily get rid of local traditions, but instead grows and develops with the values of local wisdom of the Karo people. This process is possible thanks to the important role of religious and traditional leaders who are inclusive, dialogical, and contextual.

The Karo Muslim community has formed a unique expression of religiosity, where Islamic teachings are practiced within a customary framework and social structure that is still maintained. Traditions such as *year work*,



runngu, and merga system are not abandoned, but are reinterpreted according to Islamic principles. This proves that religion and culture do not have to be two opposing poles, but can be two forces that enrich each other.

However, challenges remain, especially from groups that are intolerant of the plurality and complexity of local identities. However, the opportunity to strengthen social harmony is wide open through cultural approaches, intercultural education, and strengthening the role of community. Islam in the Land of Karo proves that diversity is not a barrier, but an important foundation for a peaceful, inclusive, and civilized society.

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