



# Erpangir Ku Lau Ritual: Between Religion and Identity

Vanesia Amelia Sebayang<sup>1\*</sup>, Asmyta Surbakti<sup>2</sup>, Torang Naiborhu<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dept. of Ethnomusicology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara;

<sup>2</sup>DVE of Travel, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara; <sup>3</sup>Dept. of Ethnomusicology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara

\*<vanesia.amelia@usu.ac.id>

## Abstract

*Erpangir ku lau is a ritual of the Karo people based on old religion called Pemena, as a medium for self-cleaning to maintain the sanctity of the body and spirit of a human being. Humans who have been physically and spiritually clean are having been kept away from evil influences so that they are worthy of getting closer to their ancestors, the universe's spirit, and also God. However, while Christianity zending is carried out by the Dutch missionary union in Tanah Karo in 1890-1904, all of the traditional customary and cultural practices towards ancestor and God were prohibited to be done. The Dutch aiming to change the Karo people's perception of their own cultural identity. Nowadays, The Karo people divided into several groups, each with their understanding of the cultural customs of their ancestors, including the erpangir ku lau. This research uses a qualitative descriptive research method. The theories used are deconstruction and postcolonial theory. The results of this research were erpangir ku lau is a human ways to communicate with their God while maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans, the universe, and their ancestors. It has been proven that erpangir ku lau ritual is black magic worship was fully a colonial construction. Erpangir ku lau is a root that shapes the identity of the Karo people, known as metami, melias, mehamat, perkuaah, and perkeleng. Even though they were no longer adhere to ancestral beliefs, the Karo people should reinterpret the identity-forming moral values contained in the erpangir ku lau ritual and then attach them side by side with whatever beliefs they currently hold.*

*Keywords: Karo society, colonialism, Erpangir Ku Lau, identity*

## Introduction

After being designated as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2016, the *erpangir ku lau* ritual was carried out again as part of a tourist attraction in Doulu Village. The ritual

implementation is managed by the local government assisted by community-based organizations and institutions and is carried out once a year. However, this government policy received pro and contra from the Karo community itself,

because it involved the approval and disapproval of the post-colonial Karo society towards this ritual. According to Putro (1989), the *erpangir ku lau* ritual is one of the traditional Karo cultural activities whose implementation was prohibited by the Dutch government from using various constructions of colonial discourse. The results of Sebayang's research (2020: 259) found that the re-implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual as a typical Karo cultural tourism attraction had an impact on the division of the Karo community into several groups. In the end, people who still carry out this noble ritual must accept their position as a minority group.

Now, *erpangir ku lau* ritual in Karo society is a new battle between religion and cultural identity. So that a study of identity is needed to bridge between groups of people who are pro and contra towards the implementation of this ritual as a typical Karo cultural tourism attraction. The study of identity is a big concept that can be seen as individually or collectively. Furthermore, according to Jenkins (2004: 5) the issue of identity is not just 'it's there' but 'must always be determined'. The study of identity is divided into two groups of objectives, namely: the classification of objects or people, and the process of grouping oneself through the same ties (eg: the same team or ideology). Identity is the process of identifying oneself or others according to an intended

meaning and always involves agreement and disagreement, conventions and innovations, as well as communication and negotiation.

The *erpangir ku lau* ritual should be understood by the community as a Karo cultural identity that maintains harmonious relations between humans and humans, humans and the universe, and humans and their God, according to the *mejuah-juah* philosophy. The *erpangir ku lau* ritual forms a Karo personality who understands food taboos, behavior taboos, and speech act taboos by upholding social values such as *mehamat* (polite), *melias* (compassionate/loving), *metami* (persuading), *perkuah* (generous), and *perkeleng* (merciful). Regardless of what religion the post-colonial Karo community currently holds, the *erpangir ku lau* ritual will be acceptable, however, using a different understanding and perspective, namely the unity of cultural identity. Identity where we can explain who we are and also know how to prove it.

## **Method**

This research used a qualitative research method. The qualitative approach is carried out by following the phenomenological philosophy of thought in which phenomena and consciousness are dialectically interrelated (Bungin, 2007: 68). This article is also at the same time a research output that contains a

description of the conditions and phenomena of the social reality of the post-colonial Karo people.

## Discussion

Colonialism in Tanah Karo began in 1904 which was marked by the establishment of the first Protestant church in Buluhawar Village, Sibolangit. Since then, the Netherlands has continued to strengthen its influence over the Karo people through various colonial discourses, ranging from the abolition of residential boundaries, the abolition of the traditional government system, to the prohibition of the use of attributes and the implementation of the spiritual activity of the Pemena religion. *The Nederlandsche Zendeling Genootschap* (in Indonesian means the Dutch missionary union) stipulates that all spiritual activities based on the teachings of the *Pemena* religion are fully prohibited because they are part of the heretical teachings of black magic worshippers.

The construction of the Dutch colonial discourse gave birth to a second meaning that was inherent in the cognition of the Karo people and was finally accepted as a myth. Although the Karo people as part of the Indonesian nation have received independence from all colonialism, however, until now this myth is still held by most of the Karo people. Dirks (1992: 117) says that this is under the mandate of colonialism, namely to stop the colonial nation's

ownership of its own cultural identity. Furthermore, this is emphasized by Sharp (2009: 20) who says that colonialism is a medium in which discourse can work as much as possible and for a long time.

Lubis (2016: 129) explains that colonialism works in three methods, such as: (1) an entry of one dominant group which then subordinates another group; (2) a destruction of the factors forming the cultural identity of the colonized nation, and (3) structuring of the economic and social system based on the perspective of the colonialists or the colonizing nation. Ironically, Dutch colonialism applied these three work methods to the Karo people. The Dutch tried to form a new socio-cultural construction as part of their efforts to strengthen their power. Lubis (2006: 210) explains that in this case the Netherlands as a part of a European nation plays a role in expanding narcissism and epistemological violence of the West against the East (Karo society). Decisions directed at

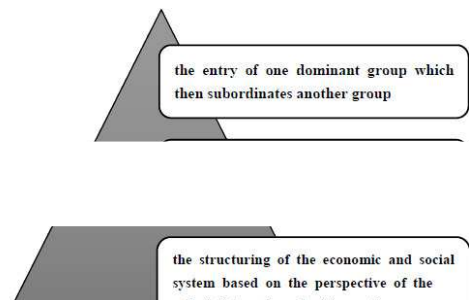


Fig. 1. The forms of colonization according to Robert Blauner (Lubis, 2016: 129)

the colonized people showed a bias that was full of interests and power. The Dutch despised the identity of the traditional Karo people as part of an Eastern culture that upholds the world of spirituality.

The change of meaning towards traditional spirituality values resulted a chaos in the Karo's understanding of their own identity. One of them is the confusion of 'signifier' and 'signified' of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual which presents a second meaning, namely the heretical ritual of worshipping black magic. The confusion of the 'signifier' and 'signified' towards the *erpangir ku lau* ritual resulted in a break in the harmonization of the traditional Karo cosmos system. Gradually, the disconnection of the harmonization between human and a cosmos system has an impact on the birth of the culture shock or dynamical identity as part of the post-colonial Karo community. The dynamical identity is marked by the birth of groups in the post-colonial Karo society social system (Sebayang, 2020).

The Karo's are divided into groups that support the re-implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual as an effort to reclaim Karo cultural identity, and on the other hand, there are community groups that oppose the effort to reclaim Karo identity. The refusal is motivated by the assumption that the religion adopted today is the right one, and the spirituality of the ancestors contradicts

it. As said by Faruk (in Sebayang, 2020: 203) in the process of its, colonialism presented dualism in the colonized society, one of them was a dualism of cultural identity, one group wanted to return to its original identity, however, other groups were already comfortable with the identity given by a colonial.

The re-implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual is not to be confronted with any religion currently embraced by the Karo people but rather aims to remind them of their own identity which was interrupted by colonialism. The re-implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual must be interpreted as an effort to reclaim Karo identity that has to strengthen the quality of the social system of the Karo people today, which has developed far away from its original cultural identity which is civilized and noble. Giddens (2014: 49) asserts that in traditional culture, the past must be respected because they consist of the responsibilities and experiences of the former. Traditional culture and all past heritage activities are suggestions for dealing with space and time to maintain the continuity of the past, present, and future.

The re-implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual is expected to be able to invite the Karo people to re-understand that the important role of *sangkep nggeluh* (family), respect for ancestors and the universe, to

worship of the Creator is a unity that forms the Karo cultural identity of *mehamat, melias, metami, perkuah, and perkeleng*. As Giddens (2014: 134) said that the pattern of kinship inherited from the pre-colonial era is a device that regulates the stability of social ties related to space and time.

The *erpangir ku lau* is reinterpreted as part of a cultural identity marker that can coexist with any religion adopted by the Karo people today. The *erpangir ku lau* ritual is a basic in determining the standard attitude of a Karo person in acting, speaking and behaving well and is known as the value system. As it is known that the cultural circle is classified into four layers of structure consisting of symbols, characterizations/customary figures, ritual processes, and value systems, all of which will be integrated when practiced in the daily life of the people (Li & Karakowsky in Sebayang, 2020: 221). The re-implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual aims to restore the harmonization of human relations with fellow humans, the universe, and the Creator. Following the opinion of Giddens (2014: 134) which says that religious cosmology is a form of creation's obedience to its creator as well as people's interpretation of the relationship between humans and nature.

The value system is the core of a culture. For the owner community, the configuration of values contained in a cultural product is a marker of identity

and basic characteristics of a culture (Alisyahbana, 1985). The *erpangir ku lau ritual* is an entity that shows how the Karo's ancestors were trying to interpret God, nature, and science. Through the *erpangir ku lau* ritual, noble values can be applied to stimulate the awareness of collective community identity, public space, and the public duty.

## Conclusion

The effort to reclaim Karo identity through the re-implementation of the *erpangir ku lau* ritual is interpreted as the initial form of a new social movement for the Karo people. A movement to change the understanding of the post-colonial Karo community to re-understand their cultural identity, to know how they came from, and how to interpret and live life as a Karo person. Following the Government Law no. 5 of 2017 concerning the Advancement of Culture which mandates the implementation of a ritual, as well as internalizing the value system it contains to the socio-cultural life of the community that owns it, is one form of preserving the nation's culture.

The role of traditional leaders, religious leaders, intellectuals, and the general public is needed in unifying understandings and perspectives related to the *erpangir ku lau* ritual and Karo cultural identity. The ritual of *erpangir ku lau* must be interpreted as a bridge that connects humans with their

fellow, the universe, and the Creator for the sake of harmonization of Karo cosmology. The Karo people as a whole are expected to be able to apply osmosis budaya, namely flexibility in absorbing positive values from the layers of local ethnic culture. The noble values

contained in the erpangir ku lau ritual should be applied alongside any religion currently adopted by the community to produce a better social ecosystem for the Karo people.[]

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