

# *Migration and Karo Ethnic Identity in the Coastal of Serdang Bedagai, North Sumatra*

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**Abstract**-This paper discusses the migration of Karo people to the village of Kuala Lama which is located on the coast of Serdang Bedagai Regency, North Sumatra, and their efforts to shape their self-image as a separate ethnic group and different from the Malay tribe as the host community. This study concluded that the migration of Karo people to Kuala Lama was driven by political conflict in the form of arrests and massacres of inland communities involved in the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) in the late 1960s. Although it has long-lived in the middle of the Malay tribe, the Karo migrants still maintain their ethnic identity. The identity resilience can be seen from the use of the names of the Karo *merga* (clan) and the implementation of Karo customs as a source of norms in their daily lives. The survival of ethnic identity in Karo migrants can occur because the Malay tribe as the host does not have the power to force Karo migrants to blend in Malay culture. Malays are indeed the majority in Kuala Lama, but they are not a dominant cultural group because they do not have political superiority and their cultural practices are not seen as the prevailing norm in the village.

**Keywords**-Migration, Karo Ethnic Identity, Kuala Lama village

## I. INTRODUCTION

Karo people are one of the ethnic groups in North Sumatra. The Karo community area called Tanah Karo is located at coordinates 3<sup>o</sup> to 3<sup>o</sup> 30' North Latitude and 1<sup>o</sup> 30' to 2<sup>o</sup> 30' West Longitude [1]. Tanah Karo borders the Simalungun area to the east, Pakpak area to the south, Tanah Alas to the west, and to the north borders the east coast inhabited by Malay tribes [2]. The area of Tanah Karo reaches approximately 5,000 square kilometers which are divided into two main regions, namely the Karo highlands and the Karo lowland or Dusun [1].

Karo settlements in the highlands are at an altitude of 700 to 1,400 meters above sea level [1]. In the Karo highlands, there are a number of volcanoes, with the highest peak of Mount Sinabung reaching 2,417 meters [3]. The Karo highlands is the administrative area of Karo Regency. Meanwhile, the Dusun area is located at an altitude of 40 to 700 meters above sea level [1]. Dusun consists of two administrative regions. The northern Dusun

is the Langkat Regency area, while the southern Dusun is in the Deli Serdang Regency area.

Most Karo people in the highlands and Dusun work as farmers. Karo farmers who settled in the lower part of the Dusun carried out cultivation on land directly adjacent to the Malay community. Ethnic groups of Malays occupy the entire eastern coastline of North Sumatra which just about fifty kilometers inland. The east coast is the largest plantation area in Indonesia at the beginning of the 20th century [4]. At that time, almost all of the fertile land on the east coast had been used as tobacco, rubber and oil palm plantations by Western entrepreneurs [5]. Plantation business in this area employed large numbers of workers, reaching 266,234 in 1929. The workers came from China, India, and Java [6]. Planters recruit workers from outside the east coast because local residents do not want to work on plantations [7]. The large arrival of labor from outside was then followed by the migration of various ethnic groups from Sumatra. Their purpose is to migrate to the east coast not to work on plantations, but to seek economic benefits from the development of plantations. The presence of the migrants has made the east coast a multiethnic area [3].

One ethnic group of migrants on the east coast is Karo people who come from the island. They migrate to the coast to get a land of *jaluran*, which is tobacco land that has been harvested and may be used by residents for a certain period of time [6]. However, the Karo people who want to farm in the land of *jaluran* must be culturally Malay, because the land on the coast is considered to be Malay customary land and only Malays may use it. Malays as host populations consider themselves taller and have more power than Karo migrants, therefore Karo migrants are expected to assimilate to Malay culture if they want to enjoy the resources on the coast. The Karo people who assimilated themselves into Malay culture were characterized by adhering to Islam, following Malay customs, speaking Malay, abandoning the names of Karo *merga* and using Islamic names [4].

The process of swinging among Karo people has actually been going on since the 15th century when the

east coast of North Sumatra was undergoing a process of Islamization. The Islamization process was accompanied by a process of acculturation between the inland population and migrants from the Malay Peninsula, Aceh and Minangkabau, which was characterized by the taking of Malay identity. Thus, the Malay community on the east coast actually consisted mostly of people from the inland [3]. For example in the Deli, Serdang and Langkat areas, most Malays still have family ties with the Karo tribe [4]. In other words, most Malays in the three coastal regions are actually Karo people who consider themselves Malays. Taking Malay identity among Karo people contains at least three advantages. First, taking Malay identity means avoiding the possibility of being sold as slaves. Second, Malay identity can be used to cultivate land on the coast for personal gain. Third, Malay identity can be used by leaders from the inland to increase their rank. By moving to the coast and taking on Malay identity, leaders from the inland could gain support from the Malays and make the villages in the inland more or less dependent on them [3].

Malays consider themselves cultured and view Karo people who are not Muslims as knowledgeable, rude and even cannibals. The Karo people in the inland are included in the term Batak with derogatory connotations. The Batak label appeared together with the Malay label in the 16th century. The Batak label appears as a complement to the Malay label. The term Batak is a creation from outside the community concerned, because Batak designations are not found in traditional inland literature, but are found in traditional coastal literature. However, the identification pinned by the coastal people to the inland population was then taken by the inland populations themselves to differentiate themselves among themselves. Ethnic differences between Malays in the coast and Batak in the inland were increasingly reinforced by the Dutch colonial government through the division of administrative territories, the establishment of institutions related to the Batak community, and the prominence of a number of cultural features as a sign of identity. The assertion of ethnic identity was used by the colonial government as a tool to control the population [3].

After the war of Indonesian independence, when the power of the Malay sultanates on the east coast was eroded, the Karo people began to distance themselves from Malay culture and re-establish their ethnic identity [4]. They again used the names of Karo *merga*, carrying out Karo customs and Karo language in their daily lives. Awareness of a strong identity among the Karo people also encouraged the rejection of the Batak designation in the 1950s. The Karo people reject the Batak label because they feel they have cultural differences with the Toba, Mandailing, Simalungun and Pakpak people who are members of the Batak group [8].

In 1950, the migration flow of Karo people to the east coast began to increase because many of them wanted to take better education or just try their luck on the east coast [9]. The flow of Karo people to the east coast increased after the failure of the PKI rebellion in 1965. The political

unrest that occurred in the inland caused many Karo people to leave their hometowns to save themselves. Some of them moved to the village of Kuala Lama. Therefore, this study will discuss the migration process of Karo people to Kuala Lama and their efforts to shape their self-image as a separate ethnic group that is different from the Malay tribe as the host.

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted qualitatively with an ethnographic approach. This is done to find out in depth how the Karo migrants can maintain their ethnic identity in the overseas region. The process of data collection was carried out in February-June 2018. Data collection is done through interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis was carried out in three stages, namely: (1) data reduction in the form of summarizing field data, (2) presentation of data described by following the theme and displayed through written descriptions, (3) conclusions and verification [10].

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *From the Inland to the Coast*

During late 1965 to 1966, the anti-PKI movement was massive in all regions of Indonesia. This movement was triggered by the killing of seven Army officers in Jakarta on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965, which became known as G-30-S (September 30<sup>th</sup> Movement) [11]. Although the murder of the seven officers was carried out by the Cakrabirawa regiment, the president's security forces [12], the Army accused the PKI of being the mastermind of the G-30-S [13]. The accusation was then exaggerated by the Army which triggered mass violence against anyone associated with the PKI [14]. A source stated that as many as 300,000 people were killed by the Army and its affiliated militias from late 1965 to mid-1966, especially in Central Java, East Java, Bali and North Sumatra [15]. But other sources estimate that the death toll reached more than half a million people [16].

Especially in North Sumatra, the military recruited *preman's* (gangsters) who were members of the Pancasila Pancasila organization to commit killings of people associated with the PKI [17]. The *preman's* were trained by the army after the events of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965, and were guaranteed immunity from the law [18]. Tens of thousands of people living in rural and urban areas of North Sumatra were victims of their ferocity [19]. Although the dirty task was carried out by *preman's*, it was overall that the military played the dominant role in the PKI crackdown [20]. The army arrested everyone who was directly or indirectly involved with the PKI, then put them in jail without trial [19].

The killing and arrest of anyone who is considered to be associated with the PKI have spread fear among the community. Even people who were not associated with the PKI were also gripped by fear, like most Karo people who adhered to the *Pamena* religion. *Pamena* is a cult that is not recognized as an official religion by the government, therefore Karo people who embrace *Pamena*

are considered as non-religious people [21]. That assumption made the adherents feared to be associated with atheist stigmatized communism. Therefore, many Karo people in the inland who adopted *Pamena* decided to move to the coastal areas, then turned to the official religion recognized by the government.

One of the destinations for migrating Karo people is the village of Kuala Lama, a coastal village inhabited by Malay tribes. Karo people who migrated to Kuala Lama came from three districts in the Dusun, namely Gunung Meriah, Tiga Juhar and Patumbak. They migrated to Kuala Lama in late 1966. Their decision to choose Kuala Lama as a migration area was influenced by the willingness of the Malay tribe as the host to accept the presence of migrants. When the Karo people arrived, the population of Kuala Lama was still very rare and there was still a lot of vacant lands. Therefore, Malay tribes easily accept the presence of Karo migrants and allow them to use the land for housing and farming. The Karo migrants do not have the expertise to become fishermen as did the Malay tribe, therefore the Karo migrants prefer farming as a source of income in Kuala Lama. With a farmer's background in the area of origin, Karo migrants are able to process unused land into rice and vegetable farms.

In the late 1960s, most Karo migrants in Kuala Lama switched to Catholicism. Their motivation to convert is not preceded by an interest in Catholic teaching, but rather to simply seek safety in the midst of a political situation that has heated up after the G-30-S. In 1967, the New Order government which succeeded in overthrowing the power of the Sukarno regime required every Indonesian citizen to embrace one of the five religions recognized by the government. The order was issued under the pretext of eliminating the influence of the PKI which was considered atheist [22]. In order not to be considered PKI sympathizer, many Karo migrants in Kuala Lama were forced to abandon *Pamena's* religion and convert to Catholicism. However, it cannot be denied that the decision of the Karo people to choose Catholicism was also influenced by the concern of the Catholic church for their living conditions. The Karo people received a lot of help from the Catholic Church while they were starting a new life in the village of Kuala Lama. In addition, the church's openness to local culture in church rituals made Catholicism increasingly an attractive choice for Karo people. Even so, there are some Karo people who converted to Islam because they married Malays.

At present, the number of Karo people in Kuala Lama reaches 950 people or 21% of the entire population of the village. All Karo people currently living in Kuala Lama are the second and third generation. Most of them depend on agricultural products. They grow rice and vegetables.

#### *Become Karo in Malay Land*

Although the Karo people who currently live in Kuala Lama are the second and third generation who grew up in the middle of the Malay community, they do not blend in with Malay culture. The Karo people try to shape their

self-image as a separate ethnic group and are different from the ethnic Malay group as the host community in Kuala Lama. The Karo people use certain cultural signs or characteristics as strict criteria to distinguish themselves from Malays. Signs that are used as criteria for Karo characteristics are *merga*, language, and custom as sources of norms in everyday life.

The Karo community adheres to a patrilineal kinship system with strong ribs. Every Karo has *merga* which is affixed behind his first name. There are five main *merga* in the Karo community called *merga si lima* (five clans); Karo-karo, Ginting, Perangin-angin, Sembiring, and Tarigan [1]. The five main *merga* are divided into 83 sub-*merga* with certain names [23]. However, the Karo community in Kuala Lama, which numbered 950 people, consisted of only 12 sub-*merga*, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE I. DESCENT GROUPS REPRESENTED IN KUALA LAMA

<i>Merga</i> and Sub- <i>merga</i>	Population		
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
1. Ginting			
- Manik	25	27	52
- Munte	13	14	27
2. Karo-karo			
- Barus	52	61	113
- Sitepu	47	55	102
- Surbakti	51	53	104
3. Sembiring			
- Milala	17	21	38
- Kembaren	13	16	29
4. Tarigan			
- Gersang	27	34	61
- Purba	94	102	196
- Selangit	43	47	90
- Sibero	29	31	60
- Tambun	37	41	78

*Merga* is the main knot of interpersonal relations in the Karo community in Kuala Lama. Everyone who has the same *merga* feels that they are from the same ancestor. Therefore, they forbid the marriage of one *merga*. Marriage can only be done between men and women from different *merga* [1]. Most Karo people in Kuala Lama are married to fellow Karo people from outside the village. Very rarely do those who marry fellow villagers. However, there are a small number of Karo men who are married to Malay women. Karo Men who married Malay women did not renounce their *merga* names. Even their children also use their *merga* names from their father.

The kinship between the Karo people in Kuala Lama is no different than in their hometown. Kinship in the Karo community consists of three social classifications, namely *anakberu*, *kalimbubu*, and *senina*. *Anakberu* is the family of the recipient of the wife, while *kalimbubu* is the family of the wife of the wife. *Anakberu* and *kalimbubu* have different *merga*. Meanwhile, *senina* is a family that has the same *merga*. *Senina* occupies the lowest position in the kinship structure. *Anakberu* occupies the second level and

*kalimbubu* is in the first level. This social grouping is often called the *sangkep si telu* (three ties) [23].

*Kalimbubu*, *anakberu*, and *senina* have different functions and roles in traditional ceremonies, but all three still work in one unit. In a wedding ceremony, for example, *senina* is the main actor responsible for the success of the event. *Kalimbubu* acts as a bodyguard, giving advice and instructions for the event to proceed well. Although *kalimbubu* does not play an active role in the implementation of the event, its presence is very important to maintain the dignity of the event. Meanwhile, *anakberu* act as executors or field officers in the event.

Customary activities in the daily life of the Karo people in Kuala Lama are only limited to the main life-cycle ceremonies, such as marriage and death. Marriage and death ceremonies are usually held in *jambur* (meeting hall). Apart from functioning as a place for traditional ceremonies, the *jambur* architecture that resembles a Karo traditional house is also a symbol of identity for the Karo people in Kuala Lama.

The Karo people in Kuala Lama always use the Karo language when communicating with their neighbors. The Karo language they use is the *jahe-jahe* dialect. This dialect is commonly used by Karo people who live in the Dusun area. The dialect of *jahe-jahe* is different from the *gunung-gunung* dialect, the dialect used by Karo people who live in the highlands. The difference between the two dialects is in the mention of vowels. *Gunung-gunung* dialects tend to shorten vocal sounds, while the *jahe-jahe* dialect tends to extend vocal sounds. For example, the word *ise* (who) and *rimo* (orange) in the *gunung-gunung* dialect turn into *isey* and *rimoe* in the *jahe-jahe* dialect [24].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The migration of the Karo people to Kuala Lama was driven by political conflicts which occurred after the failure of the PKI rebellion in 1965. The killings and arrests of PKI sympathizers driven by the Army were rampant in North Sumatra. This action made the Karo people who embraced *Pamena's* religion gripped by fear because the belief was not recognized as an official religion by the government and its followers were considered as non-religious people. The Karo people who are religious *Pamena* fear that they are considered PKI sympathizers who are stigmatized by atheists. Therefore, many Karo people who live in Mount Meriah, Tiga Juhar and Patumbak are trying to save themselves by moving to coastal areas, especially to the village of Kuala Lama. The decision of the Karo people to choose Kuala Lama as a migration area was influenced by the willingness of the Malays as the host to accept the presence of Karo migrants and to allow them to use vacant land to build dwellings and grow crops. After living in Kuala Lama, many Karo migrants converted to Catholicism.

The Karo community currently living in Kuala Lama is the second and third generation. Although they grew up in the middle of the Malay tribe, they did not blend in with

Malay culture. The Karo people in Kuala Lama still maintain their ethnic identity. The identity's survival can be seen from the use of *merga* names, the use of the Karo language and carrying out Karo customs in daily life. The Karo people can maintain their ethnic identity because the Malay people as the host did not have the power to force the Karo people to blend into Malay culture.

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