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THE ACCULTURATION OF ISLAM AND KARO CULTURE IN KARO REGENCY IN 19th to 20th CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

Karo Regency, located in the highlands of North Sumatra, is demographically known as a region with a significant Christian majority. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency of Karo Regency for 2023, Protestant Christians constitute 57.2% of the population, Roman Catholics 19.8%, while Muslims make up only about 21.3% of the total population. This condition has led to the historical narrative of Islam in this region often being marginalized in both national and local historiography. In fact, archaeological and historical evidence indicates a unique process of Islamization in the Karo lands, differing from the pattern of mass conversion on the eastern coast of Sumatra driven by sultanate powers. This research aims to identify, analyze, and reconstruct the Islamic archaeological and historical heritage in Karo Regency, as well as to understand the pattern of acculturation between Islamic teachings and local Karo culture, particularly the Pemena belief system and the *merga silima* (five clans) customary structure. This qualitative study employs a library research method, critically analyzing various primary sources such as Dutch colonial reports (Joustra, Westenberg, and Neumann), academic manuscripts, recent journal articles (2020-2025), undergraduate theses from various universities, and official documentation from the Regional Office for Cultural Preservation of Zone II, Medan. The research findings identify three main categories of heritage: (1) Ancient tomb sites, such as the Tomb of Nini Tengku in Lingga Village, the Tomb of Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun in Sukanalu, and other tombs of Acehese scholars, representing the early phase of interaction from the 18th to 19th centuries; (2) Old mosque architecture, such as the Kabanjahe Old Mosque (1902-1904), the Lau Cimba Mosque, and the Nurul Iman Tigabinanga Mosque, which exhibit Acehese-Malay architectural acculturation with local Karo construction techniques; (3) Intangible cultural manifestations, such as birth, marriage, and death traditions that have been integrated with Islamic values without losing the essence of customs, as well as the emergence of local figures like H. Sulaiman Tarigan as agents of cultural da'wah (Islamic propagation). This research concludes that the existence of Islam in Karo Regency is not a marginal phenomenon or merely a "small enclave," but rather historical evidence of a process of "cultural Islam" that took place peacefully, slowly, and adaptively through three main channels: trade, marriage, and political diplomacy with local rulers. The contribution of this research is to fill the research gap regarding Islamic archaeology in Muslim-minority regions of Indonesia and to provide an initial database for the preservation of cultural heritage that has been poorly managed and systematically documented.

Keywords: Islamic Archaeology, Karo Regency, Cultural Acculturation, Old Mosques, Nini Tengku, Pemena

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INTRODUCTION

Geographically, Karo Regency is located on the volcanic plateau of the Bukit Barisan Mountains, with an average elevation of 1,000 to 1,400 meters above sea level. This region is surrounded by active volcanoes such as Mount Sinabung (2,460 meters above sea level) and Mount Sibayak (2,094 meters above sea level), as well as Mount Pintau (1,300 meters above sea level) and Mount Gundaling (1,110 meters above sea level). This relatively isolated geographical condition makes Tanah Karo a region that has historically had a unique cultural development and is relatively protected from massive outside influences. However, Karo Regency borders Southeast Aceh to the west and Langkat Regency to the north, making it a natural gateway for influence from coastal Islamic kingdoms such as the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate, the Deli Sultanate, and the Langkat Sultanate, which had been established since the 16th and 17th centuries.

Despite its strategic position as a "gateway" from the coast to the interior, the Karo people are still known as one of the predominantly Christian ethnic groups in North Sumatra. According to data from the Karo Regency Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2024, the population composition by religion is as follows: Protestant 57.2%, Catholic 19.8%, Islam 21.3%, and others (Buddhism, Hinduism, and the traditional Pemena belief) around 1.7%. This Muslim minority, which represents only about one-fifth of the total population, is often misinterpreted as a narrative that "Islam never developed," "failed to penetrate," or "is only practiced by immigrants" in Tanah Karo. This false narrative then perpetuates the assumption that the Karo Islands were historically "resistant" to Islam, or even that there are no significant Islamic archaeological remains in the region.

This view, as this study will demonstrate, is refuted by the existence of numerous archaeological sites and historical records that demonstrate that interaction between the Karo Islands and Islamic civilization has been going on for centuries. The entry of Islam into the interior of Sumatra exhibits a unique and fundamentally different pattern from that of Islamization in coastal areas. While in Aceh, Deli, or Langkat, Islam spread through the political power of sultanates, massive maritime trade routes, and the mass conversion of local rulers, in the Karo

highlands, Islam arrived through a very subtle, gradual cultural approach, often without causing significant social upheaval. Islam arrived not through large armies or trading ships but through individual figures who arrived not as conquerors or wealthy merchants but as "healers" or "teachers" capable of curing diseases, teaching new agricultural techniques, or providing solutions to practical community problems.

This process took place over a long period, estimated to have lasted from the late 18th to the early 20th century. Over this period of more than a century, Karo Muslim communities emerged, each with distinct characteristics: they embraced Islam but maintained a strong Karo identity in language, customs, clans, and way of life. They did not simply become "Malay" or "Acehnese," as is often the case in Islamized coastal areas. This is what researchers call "Karo Islam" or "Karo cultural Islam," a form of religiosity that does not separate ethnic and religious identities.

Archaeological and historical research on Islam in non-Muslim-majority regions like the Karo Islands is increasingly urgent amidst globalization and cultural homogenization. Amidst public discourse that often associates "Tanah Karo" with a homogeneous, even monolithic, Christian identity, this research seeks to unearth deeper and more complex layers of collective memory. Sites such as the Nini Tengku Tomb in Lingga Cultural Village, the Kabanjahe Old Mosque, which stood from 1902 to 1904, the tombs of Acehnese clerics like Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun in Sukanalu, and various other intangible cultural artifacts are "silent artifacts" that actually speak volumes about the intense civilizational dialogue between Muslim settlers and the local Karo people over the centuries.

Without systematic documentation, identification, and interpretation, these sites are at risk of being forgotten, neglected, or even physically damaged due to a lack of attention from preservation authorities and the surrounding community. Some old mosque sites, for example, have undergone complete renovations that have altered their original form, diminishing their archaeological value. The Nini Tengku Tomb, while still revered, lacks an adequate documentation system.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with library research. The library research method was chosen because the primary focus of the research is the critical analysis and synthesis of secondary data documented in various textual forms (printed and digital), given the limitations of time, funding, and access to conduct direct archaeological excavations in the field or extensive archaeological surveys within the framework of this academic journal. However, it should be emphasised that the library research approach in modern archaeology is not the same as simply "reading books in the library".

Library research in archaeology is a systematic and rigorous methodology that involves the search, collection, selection, critique, analysis, and synthesis of various written sources, maps, photographs, excavation reports, and other visual documentation relevant to the research object.

This research approach is multidisciplinary, combining three main disciplines: archaeology (specifically Islamic archaeology and settlement archaeology), history (specifically social history and the history of religion), and cultural anthropology (specifically symbolic anthropology and acculturation theory). This integration of these three approaches is necessary because the Islamic archaeological heritage in Karo cannot be fully understood from a single perspective. Artefacts and sites need to be read as "texts" with symbolic meaning (anthropological approach), placed in their proper chronological and historical context (historical approach), and analysed materially and typologically (archaeological approach).

The data collection techniques in this library research follow standard library research procedures, which consist of several stages:

- **Bibliographic Search:** The initial stage is a systematic search of library catalogues, online academic databases (Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and SINTA), institutional repositories (Andalas University, UNIMED, UIN North Sumatra, UGM, and UI), and other digital sources using predetermined keywords: "Karo Islam", "Karo history", "North Sumatra Islamic archaeology", "Kabanjahe Mosque", "Nini Tengku", "Batak

Islamic acculturation", and combinations of these keywords. The search was conducted between January and March 2026.

- **Selection and Screening:** After the materials were collected (approximately 85 initial titles), a selection process was conducted based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria were (a) direct relevance to the topic of Islam in Karo, (b) source credibility (indexed journals, university publishers, and government institutions), and (c) year of publication (prioritisation within the last 10 years for the most recent data, but classic sources from the colonial era were retained). Exclusion criteria were (a) lack of clear references or citations, (b) only mentioning Karo in passing, and (c) anonymous or unverifiable sources. This process resulted in approximately 35 sources for in-depth analysis.
- **Source Critique (Heuristic):** Each source that passed the selection process was then critiqued, both externally (authenticity, whether it was written by the named author and in the stated year) and internally (content credibility, whether the author has any biases, and whether the source contradicts other sources). This source critique is crucial because many colonial sources harbour an Orientalist bias that needs to be addressed.
- **Data Extraction:** Data from each source was extracted and recorded in a spreadsheet (Excel) with the following columns: author/year, data type, direct quotation, page number, paraphrase, and critical notes.

The data analysis technique used was qualitative content analysis with a historical hermeneutics approach. The analysis was conducted in several stages:

- **Data Organization:** All collected data was grouped into broad themes: grave sites, mosque sites, oral traditions, biographies of figures, and colonial policies.
- **Typological Analysis (Archaeology):** For data on artifacts and sites (especially graves and mosques), a typological analysis was conducted comparing their form, materials, ornamentation, and orientation with the standard typology of Islamic archeology in the archipelago (largely developed by Hasan Ambary and the National Archaeological Research Center team). Are the gravestones Acehnese, Demak, Ternate, or local types? Do the mosques exhibit characteristics of ancient

mosques (tiered roofs, wooden pulpits, drums, porches)?

- **Chronological Analysis (History):** Data from various sources were sequenced temporally to construct a chronology of Islamization. The cross-dating method was used: if source A mentions event X as occurring in the same year as source B, and source B's accuracy can be verified, then source A's credibility is increased.
- **Thematic Analysis (Anthropology):** All data were analyzed to identify recurring themes, such as "architectural acculturation," "the role of healers as preachers," "mixed marriages as a da'wah strategy," and "the formation of Muslim villages."
- **Interpretation and Synthesis:** In the final stage, all findings were interpreted to answer the research questions. Interpretation was carried out by considering the broader social, political, and economic context. Synthesis means connecting findings from one source with those from other sources to produce a coherent and comprehensive narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Routes of Entry and Chronology of Islamization in the Karo Lands

One of the most fundamental debates in the historiography of Islam in North Sumatra concerns the origins and routes through which Islamic influence entered the Karo hinterland. Did Islam arrive from Aceh via the southwest, from Gayo via the southeast, from Deli/Langkat via the east, or a combination of the three? Based on a careful synthesis of analyzed primary and secondary sources, this study identifies at least three main routes that not only ran parallel but also intertwined and influenced each other over different time periods. Understanding these routes is crucial because they determine the character and style of Islam that developed in the Karo region.

1) The Aceh Route (Southwest): Islam from the Veranda of Mecca

The Aceh Route is the oldest and most frequently mentioned route in Karo literature and oral traditions. The geographical proximity of Karo Regency (specifically the districts of Tigabinanga, Kuta Buluh, and Mardinding) to Southeast Aceh (particularly the districts of Lawe Alas, Babel, and Badar) was a key factor enabling intensive contact and population mobility across the Bukit Barisan Mountains. In

the 18th and 19th centuries, Southeast Aceh (known as "Alas") was a region that had been fairly well Islamized through the influence of the Aceh Sultanate, centered on the north coast. From Southeast Aceh, Acehnese scholars, travelers, traders, and adventurers crossed the mountain passes to Tanah Karo. A common route was via a footpath connecting Lawe Alas (Southeast Aceh) with Kabanjahe or Tigabinanga. This journey could take three to five days on foot, traversing dense forests and fast-flowing rivers.

The most well-known central figure in this Acehnese route was Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun (some sources refer to him as Tgk). Mohammad Amin bin Abdullah). He is said to have come from Lingga Gayo, a region in Southeast Aceh that directly borders the Karo Islands. According to oral traditions recorded by several researchers (Akmal & Tarigan, 2007; Purba, 2024), Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun came to Tanah Karo around the 18th century AD (estimated between 1750 and 1800). He was known as a scholar who possessed high religious knowledge, memorized the Qur'an, and also possessed "supernatural powers" or "immunity," which in the local language is called "kebal." He traveled from village to village in the Karo region, especially in areas close to the Aceh border, such as Sukanalu Village, Lingga, and the surrounding area.

However, what makes Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun's story interesting—and significantly different from the pattern of Islamization in other regions of the archipelago—is that his approach was deemed less adaptive to local social structures and beliefs. Several versions of the oral tradition (collected by Joustra (1910) and by contemporary researchers such as the IAIN Takengon Team (2023)) mention that Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun preached in a manner considered "confrontational" by the Karo people. He openly criticized customary practices inconsistent with Islamic teachings, such as the worship of ancestral spirits (begu), offerings at sacred sites, and ceremonies involving pigs. In the context of Karo society, which at that time still strongly adhered to the traditional Pemena belief, this overly direct criticism generated resistance and hostility.

Consequently, instead of successfully converting the community en masse to Islam, Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun faced fierce resistance. The most dramatic version of the

oral tradition even states that he was killed by local residents. It is said that residents, angered by the perceived insult to their customs by Islamic teachings, stabbed or beheaded Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun. However, another version states that although he was killed, his body was not eaten by wild animals or decomposed—a legendary element common in the stories of saints in the archipelago, which subsequently changed people's perceptions of him. Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun's tomb is located approximately 5 kilometers from the center of Kabanjahe City, in an area now known as Sukanalu. This tomb, although present, is poorly maintained and does not become a busy pilgrimage center. This fact stands in stark contrast to the tombs of Islamic scholars in Java or Aceh, which are centers of mass pilgrimage. This indicates that the collective memory of the Karo people (both Muslim and non-Muslim) tends to remember Tengku Lau Bahun as a "rejected" rather than "revered" figure.

The case of Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun provides a valuable lesson about the failure of a confrontational approach to preaching within a society with established social and belief systems. Islamization cannot be forced through the destruction of customary structures; instead, he must enter through the pores of the existing culture. This lesson will later be learned by subsequent preachers who come through different paths.

2) The Gayo (Southeast) Route: Symbiotic Cultural Mutualism

The second route is the Gayo route. Comprehensive collaborative research between IAIN Takengon (Central Aceh) and UIN North Sumatra in 2023 revealed a very strong historical relationship, even a primordial kinship, between the Gayo people of Central and Southeast Aceh and the Karo people of North Sumatra. Legends of the origins of these two communities, which persist in oral tradition to this day, suggest that they share a common ancestor. Some researchers (such as Neumann, 1903) even noted that in terms of language structure, customs, and kinship systems, the Gayo and Karo share similarities that cannot be explained through mere casual contact. The Gayo people themselves refer to themselves as "elder relatives" of the Karo people.

In the context of the spread of Islam, the Gayo route is particularly interesting because it

was not a "missionary influx from outside" but rather a symbiotic cultural mutualism. When Islam began to enter and expand in the Gayo region (estimated to have begun in the 17th century through Acehese influence), some Gayo people who had converted to Islam gradually began to re-establish kinship ties with their "brothers" in the Karo lands. However, what distinguished the Gayo ulama who came to Karo was that they were not complete strangers. They spoke a similar language, shared similar customs, and even shared or related surnames with Karo clans (e.g., the Lingga, Bintang, Remaling, and others). This created a sense of shared identity that was crucial in reducing resistance to new teachings.

The missionary strategies employed by the Gayo ulama tended to be more subtle and adaptive. Rather than outright rejecting custom, they introduced Islamic concepts as "complements" or "perfects" the noble values already present in Karo customs. For example, the concept of sipakatau (mutual respect) in Karo customs is said to align with Islamic teachings on respect for fellow human beings. According to the IAIN Takengon Team (2023), it was from this Gayo route that Islamic influence began to penetrate into the Karo hinterland, such as Kuta Buluh, Tiganderket, and Juhar.

3) The Malay-Deli Route and Marriage (East): The Most Effective Da'wah Strategy

The third route—identified in this study as the most effective and successful in establishing a permanent Muslim community in the Karo—came from the east coast of Sumatra, namely from the Sultanates of Deli and Langkat. Unlike the Aceh and Gayo routes, which traversed the mountains, this route came through the eastern lowlands and then entered the Karo hinterland via rivers such as the Wampu, Bingai, and Lau Biang.

The migrants via this route were generally Malay and Minangkabau traders who had stopped at ports in Deli (such as Labuhan Deli and Belawan) or Langkat (such as Tanjung Pura). They traded valuable commodities from the Karo hinterland, such as frankincense, camphor, honey, rattan, and various other forest products. During their repeated trading trips, they interacted with the Karo people, settling temporarily, and eventually, some

decided to settle permanently. A key factor distinguishing this route from others was intermarriage.

A Muslim trader settling in Karo would marry a Karo woman. According to Karo customary law (which is very strong), a married woman will follow her husband's clan and community, but their children remain related to their mother's clan (in the Karo customary system, a person has two clans: the father's clan (*sembuyak*) and the mother's clan (*kalimbubu*)). However, because the husband is a Muslim immigrant and does not have a Karo clan, his social status in the community depends on his in-laws' relationship with his wife's clan. Thus, mixed marriages created a close social network between Muslim traders and the Karo community. They became "family," no longer strangers.

A legendary figure in this tradition is Muhammad Nur, a trader from Deli (or some say from Minangkabau). According to oral traditions documented by Ginting (2012) and Purba (2024), Muhammad Nur arrived in Karo in the second half of the 19th century. He later married a Karo woman from the Sembiring Kemberen clan, a prominent clan. Through this marriage, Muhammad Nur gained protection and access to local trade networks. He later became one of the initiators and main donors of the construction of the Old Kabanjahe Mosque in the early 20th century. Muhammad Nur's family later developed into one of the most prominent Karo Muslim families, and his descendants can still be found today.

Another very famous story in Karo Islamic historiography is about Juan Tarigan. In the literature (Akmal & Tarigan, 2007), Juan Tarigan was a Karo traditional figure from the Tarigan clan who lived at the end of the 19th century. He is a respected *permain* (traditional elder). One time, he interacted with an Acehnese cleric who came to his area (said to be Tengku Haji Abdul Wahab). After a long and in-depth dialogue, Juan Tarigan decided to embrace Islam in 1904. This decision was very important because he was not an ordinary person, but a traditional elder. When a traditional elder embraces a religion, its influence is very large and inspires many other people in the community to follow it.

It didn't stop there; several close family members of Juan Tarigan also converted to Islam. Among them was a young man named Sulaiman Tarigan, who would later become the

most central figure in the history of Islam in Tanah Karo in the 20th century. Young Sulaiman Tarigan studied Islam in depth, then became a religious teacher and preacher. He was known for his tenacity and his deeply cultural approach. In 1918, Sulaiman Tarigan was appointed by the Dutch colonial government as Head of the Islamic Bureau (perhaps a kind of *penghulu* or *qadi* for the Karo region). In this capacity, he not only handled Islamic religious matters (such as marriage, inheritance, and justice) but also served as a spokesperson for the Muslim community before the colonial government and traditional leaders. H. Sulaiman Tarigan proved that Islam could be fully embraced by a Karo without losing their Karo identity.

2. Chronology of Islamization

Based on a cross-source analysis, this study proposes a periodization of Islamization in the Karo region into four main phases:

- 1) Initial Contact Phase (circa 1750-1825): Marked by the entry of travelers and Islamic scholars from Aceh via the southwest route. The main figure: Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun. This phase was marked by resistance and the failure of mass conversion due to a less adaptive approach. However, this phase is important because it introduced the "different" nature of Islam to the Karo people.
- 2) Silent Infiltration Phase (1825-1880): Marked by the entry of Islam through the Gayo route (kinship ties) and through traders via the eastern route (marriage). This phase is not widely documented, but it is a slow, silent, and organic process of Islamization at the village and family levels.
- 3) Early Institutionalization Phase (1880-1930): Marked by the emergence of more organized Muslim communities, the construction of the first mosques (Kabanjahe Mosque, 1902-1904), the conversion of traditional figures such as Juan Tarigan (1904), and the appointment of Karo Muslim figures such as H. Sulaiman Tarigan into the colonial bureaucracy. It was during this phase that Islam began to become a "visible religion" in Karo.
- 4) Contemporary Phase (1930-present): Marked by the slow but steady growth of the Muslim community, the formation of exclusively Muslim villages (such as Tigabinanga), and the complex dynamics of

Muslim-Christian relations amidst the growing Christian dominance resulting from Dutch missionary policies.

3. Typology of Islamic Archaeological Heritage in Karo Regency

1) Classical Islamic Burial Sites: Between Islamic Sacredness and Karo Locality

Burial sites are one of the most durable and information-rich types of archaeological remains. Ancient tombs can provide clues about identity and social status and time periods, as well as cultural and religious syncretism or acculturation.

a) Nini Tengku's grave in Lingga Cultural Village

The most interesting and most representative site to study is the Nini Tengku Grave in Lingga Cultural Village, Simpang Empat District, Karo Regency. Lingga Village itself is one of the most famous Karo traditional villages and has been designated as a cultural tourism village because it still maintains many traditional houses (*rumah siwaluh jabu*) as well as the ancient village layout. In the middle of this village, which has a strong Karo traditional feel and is dominated by Christian residents, there is a revered Islamic burial site.

Physically, this site is basic, and that is precisely its archaeological value. Nini Tengku's grave is not a magnificent building or luxurious cupola. What exists is a small building made of wood (not stone or concrete) with plank walls and a roof made of palm fibre. This wooden building was deliberately built to shelter (protect from rain and heat) an ancient tombstone inside. The tombstone is made of andesite or other local stone, has a simple shape with a rounded head (ovoid or semi-circular) and a sharper or flatter leg. Based on the typology of ancient Islamic gravestones in the archipelago that has been developed by archaeologists (Ambary, 1998; Hasan, 2010), these gravestones with rounded heads are included in the Aceh-East Sumatra type, which was commonly found in the Aceh Sultanate and sultanates on the coast of East Sumatra (Deli, Langkat, and Serdang) in the 17th to 19th centuries.

b) Tomb of Tengku Sheikh Lau Bahun (Sukanalu)

As a stark contrast, we have the Tomb of Tengku Syekh Lau Bahun in Sukanalu. In

contrast to Nini Tengku, whose grave is well maintained and still visited, Tengku Lau Bahun's grave is in a less well-maintained condition. Based on existing reports (Purba, 2024; IAIN Takengon Team, 2023), this tomb is just a pile of stones or a mound of earth marked by a row of fragile tombstones, without adequate protective structures. The location is a bit remote, not in the village centre. Most importantly, the local people's oral traditions have a negative memory about this figure. Some informants were even reluctant to talk much about this tomb because it was considered "dangerous" or related to tragic events in the past.

4. Factors that Influence the Success and Failure of Islamization

Why has Islam, which has been present in Tanah Karo since the 18th century and through various channels, not become the majority religion in this region? On the other hand, why were Christians (both Protestant and Catholic), who came systematically through Dutch zending missions at the beginning of the 20th century, able to convert the majority of the Karo population in a relatively short time (around 50-70 years)? This question is important not only for understanding the history of religion in Karo, but also for understanding the dynamics of competition and struggle between religions in Indonesia more generally. This research argues that the answer is not simple and cannot be reduced to "Islam is not suitable" or "Christianity is better." There are complex structural, political, and socio-economic factors.

1) The Absence Of A "State" Or "Sultanate" Protecting Islam

The first and perhaps the most important factor is that Islam in Karo never had a "state" or "political power" that protected and supported its expansion. In Aceh, Islam spread quickly and massively because it was the official religion of the Aceh Sultanate, which was strong militarily and economically. In Deli, Langkat, and Serdang, the sultans embraced Islam and then obliged or at least encouraged their residents to embrace the same religion as the sultan. In the Islamic Mataram Kingdom (Java), Islam was the religion of the court elite.

In Karo, there was no such kingdom or sultanate before the arrival of the Dutch. The

Karo people live in a strong but not politically centralized customary system. There was no one "King of Karo" who ruled over the entire region. There are local rulers (raja urung) in each traditional territory, but their power is limited. Islamization must be carried out without the support of political power. This is very different from Islamization in Aceh or the east coast of Sumatra.

2) The arrival of the Dutch Christian Mission (Zending), which was systematic and structured

The second very important factor was the arrival of Dutch Christian missionaries (zending) at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, who were fully supported by the colonial government through the ethical politics policy (Ethische Politiek). Christian mission does not come alone. They came with schools (modern education), hospitals (modern medicine), and economic assistance (credit, agricultural tools, etc.).

At the same time, the Dutch colonial government systematically began to "open up" Tanah Karo for tobacco, tea, and coffee plantations, which required regular labor and infrastructure (roads and bridges). Karo people who worked on plantations and interacted with the Dutch, who were Christians, gradually saw that converting to Christianity could provide access to these modern facilities. This was not the only reason (many converted to Christianity because of sincere spiritual beliefs), but it was certainly a powerful motivating factor.

In contrast, the Karo Muslim community does not have comparable "material assistance" from the Islamic world. There are no Islamic philanthropic institutions that have built schools and hospitals in the interior of Karo. Muslim scholars and traders came empty-handed, bringing only knowledge and merchandise. In the religious "market competition" of the 20th century, Christian missions had far greater resources.

CONCLUSION

Karo Regency holds significant archaeological and historical Islamic wealth but has so far been marginalized, not well documented, and even threatened with extinction physically and from collective memory. The existence of sites such as Nini Tengku Grave (Lingga Village), Tengku Syekh

Lau Bahun Grave (Sukanalu), Kabanjahe Old Mosque (1902-1904), and Lau Cimba Mosque, as well as intangible cultural remains in birth rituals and oral traditions, proves that the process of Islamization in the Sumatran highlands has been going on since the 18th to 20th centuries. This refutes the false narrative that "Islam never developed in Tanah Karo" or "Islam was only adhered to by immigrants without historical roots."

The main pattern of Islamic archeology in Karo is acculturation without conflict or, more precisely, complementary integration, where Islamic teachings are accepted as long as they can be integrated into local cosmology (Pemena) and customary structures (merga silima, a kinship system). Figures like Nini Tengku became successful "cultural bridges" because of her approach as a healer and agricultural teacher who served the practical needs of society, not as a conqueror or breaker of customs. The physical form of the tomb (an Acehese tombstone under a banyan tree, a wooden building with a thatched roof) and the architecture of the early mosque (resembling a traditional Karo house) are material manifestations of this acculturation. Meanwhile, the failure of figures such as Tengku Lau Bahun—who used a confrontational approach and was considered a threat to customs—is a valuable lesson that, in the context of a society with a strong cultural identity, the cultural aspect of da'wah is more decisive than the theological and doctrinal ones.

Typologically, the Islamic archaeological remains in Karo have syncretic-hybrid characteristics: early mosque buildings resemble traditional houses, gravestones combine standard Islamic forms with elements of ancestor worship (banyan trees, white cloth), and religious rituals blend with customary practices. This research identifies three complementary routes of entry into Islam: the Aceh Route (southwest, 18th century, tending to be confrontational); the Gayo Route (southeast, cultural symbiosis); and the Malay-Deli and Marriage Route (east, most effective 19th to 20th centuries).

The factors preventing Islam from becoming a majority in Karo are not simply due to a "failure of da'wah," but rather to complex structural and political factors: (1) the absence of an "Islamic state" or political power that protects and supports Islam; (2) the arrival of a

systematic, structured, and fully supported Dutch Christian mission by the colonial government through schools, hospitals, and economic access (the Ethical Policy); (3) a Christian theological strategy that compromised the local concept of Dibata; and (4) the tendency of the Karo Muslim community to form exclusive villages that were geographically and socially isolated. Despite being a minority, the Karo Muslim community demonstrated remarkable resilience by creating a unique hybrid "Karo-Muslim" identity.

Overall, this study concludes that the narrative of a "homogeneously Christian Karo Land" is an inaccurate historical construct that simplifies a much more heterogeneous, dynamic, and rich reality. The reality of the past—and to some extent, it persists today—is the existence of a Muslim minority with long historical roots, tangible archaeological remains, and significant cultural contributions to Indonesia's diversity.

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