

The Transformation of The Concept of God for The Karo Catholic Tribe Will Be *Dibata Sikaci-Kaci*

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Abstract

Karo people believe in the existence of *Dibata Kaci-kaci* (“God”). The understanding and belief about *Dibata* is obtained through life experiences, natural phenomena, and events experienced. The orientation of this research is to find the transformation of belief in *Dibata* as the concept of God for Karo Catholics. The research method used is qualitative, with interview techniques based on experiences derived from oral traditions, group discussion forums, and documentation. Research informants: five traditional leaders, two Karo culturalists, two priests, and five pastoral councils of parishes and stations. This research uses Rudolf Otto's (1917) theory of religious phenomenology to understand the experience and understanding of the sacred or numinous. This theory helps explain how Karo people experience and understand God's presence through natural phenomena and life events. The findings of this study are in line with previous research by Singarimbun (1975) and Ginting (2018), which also examined the concept of God in Karo beliefs. However, this study provides a new perspective by exploring the transformation of the concept in the context of Karo Catholics. The novelty of this research lies in finding the intersection between the experience and understanding of God in the beliefs of the Karo people and the concept of the Trinity in the teachings of the Catholic Church. The results show that the Karo people recognize, acknowledge, and believe in the existence of a God who is both transcendent and immanent, namely *Dibata Datas* (God Above), *Dibata Tengah* (God Middle), and *Dibata Teruh* (God Below). The experience and understanding of God in the Karo people's beliefs find common ground, thus becoming an opportunity for evangelization. The concept of the Karo God as a God with three persons (*Dibata si Telu Sada*) reveals the Karo belief that *Dibata* is present in all realities: the upper world, the middle world, and the lower world. For example, Karo: Mula jadi (creator, origin), *Dibata Kaci kaci* (loving God), Nini (grandfather). This finding is a new idea that can be used as catechetical material about the Trinity that the Catholic Church believes in.

Keywords: Beliefs, Karo Catholics, *Dibata Kaci-kaci*

Introduction

The concept of humans as religious beings has a relationality with the local cultural phenomena they live in, so that the human experience of the existence of a supreme being or a transcendental thing is a persona faith experience (Mali, 2022). The Karo people, like other human groups and individuals, have had a belief and understanding of the existence of *Dibata* (God) since the beginning of generations. The Karo people's concept of belief is part of the consequences of the I and Other relationality between humans, with the highest being believed to be *Dibata kaci-kaci* (God) (Riyanto, 2020). They gain this understanding of *Dibata* through natural events, phenomena, and daily life experiences. Facing an unusual disaster or natural phenomenon is believed to be a curse because it is suspected that there is a violation of *Dibata* (God). They believe that *Dibata* is a protector who is able to guard them from all dangers. In the end, the Karo people recognize that *Dibata* ("God") really exists. Karo people often call *Dibata nini* (grandmother) when begging or worshipping because of the sacredness of the name (Prinst, 2004). The Karo observe *Dibata* in certain locations, including haunted areas, caves, boulders, rivers, mountains, and under large wooden trees (Brahmana, 2003), (T. Bangun, 1990).

The traditional Karo people's concept of *Dibata* shows that there is a relationship and that it is said to be a community group that has had beliefs for generations since the beginning. Their awareness of *Dibata's* existence truly comes from their daily lives. They deeply encounter many supernatural forces in their daily lives that are considered capable of providing blessings, salvation, curses, and disasters (Sugiyarto, 2017). The Toba Batak people have the same belief as the Karo people about *Debata*, but the difference is the designation *Dibata* for the Karo people and *Debata* for the Toba Batak people. This similarity arises because Karo and Toba are members of the same Batak tribe. The Toba Batak people originally developed a belief system known as *Debata sitolu sada*, which entails the integration of cosmos and divinity in *Parmalim*, the traditional belief of the Toba Batak (Sugiyarto, 2017). "*Banua na tolu*" refers to the three realms that comprise the cosmos: *banua ginjang* (upper world), *banua tonga* (middle world), and *banua toru* (lower world). Every individual will inevitably develop through these three stages of nature. Then, to conceptualize the issue of divinity as "*Debata na tolu*" (God of Three) as a manifestation of the Supreme God (*Mulajadi na Bolon*), traditional thinking about the universe continues to undergo transformation (Sugiyarto, 2017). "Listening again to cultural integration in the Land of Toba Batak." Historically, the Karo tribe adheres to the belief that all visible creations in the world come from *Dibata*. This belief system is based on the mindset of the Karo people. This belief system, based on Karo's mindset, classifies *Dibata* (God) into two parts, namely "*Dibata si la idah*" (the invisible God) and "*Dibata si idah*" (the visible God). This "*Dibata si idah*" as a visible God is present in the figure of "*Kalimbubu*" and the existence of *kalimbubu* as a bearer of blessings (Abrar et al., 2021).

The Karo people's idea of "*Dibata Kaci-kaci*" is usually used to refer to *Dibata si Idah*. *Dibata kaci-kaci* has power over three worlds, including the lower, middle, and upper worlds. The three worlds have their own *Dibata*, so they are referred to as *Dibata si telu sada* (the three gods) (Tarigan, 2017). Karo people believe that the human body consists of two natures, namely the soul ("*tendi*") and the spirit ("*begu*"); therefore, when humans die, the spirit "*begu*" will remain intact while the body "*tendi*" is destroyed. Therefore, pain will arise when the "*tendi*" is separated from the "human body." In practice, if someone experiences pain or is in a state of death, a request can be made to return *tendi*, but it will be fatal if *tendi* fails to return. "*Dibata*:" also interprets this belief as "*tendi*," or the soul that always resides in the human body. The belief is similar to the existence of "*tendi*," which always exists throughout the existing creation, so it is recognized that the unifying force of "*ula*" (body), "*tendi*" (soul), "*pusuh*"

peraten" (feeling), "*kesah*" (breath), and "*ukur*" (mind) is considered a "micro cosmos" or small universe (Abrar et al., 2021).

Based on the *Pamena* belief that *Dibata* is in charge of all creation in the universe and that within it there is a "*tendi*" (soul), *Pamena* belief describes *Dibata* as a disciple of *Guru Sibaso*, who is also believed to have the ability to communicate with God (Abrar et al., 2021). *Guru Sibaso* is considered to have certain privileges. As an illustration, consider a healer who has the ability to predict someone's death and recovery. Thus, a rational understanding of God or the transcendent requires human effort to understand the essence of the supernatural (Sarjani, 2018). The goal is to strengthen one's belief in the existence of the transcendent, which is believed to have an influence on the complexity of this world. This concept is also shared by the Karo people regarding the existence of *Dibata* (God); they have no doubt that belief in God does not contradict the human condition, considering that humans experience religious, mysterious, and transcendent experiences (Siswadi, 2021).

Since the time of the ancient Greeks until today, the existence of God is evident in every human experience of faith, although conceptualized differently by each religion. Daniel Dennett, an American philosopher, sees religion as a natural phenomenon (Télliez & Urrea, 2020). This means that religion will be born and develop naturally, supported by other disciplines that a person has. This belief is the basis that religion is a basic choice of a person when he has understanding, knowledge, and longing for what he believes. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized that the Catholic Church, in its mission, needs to signal hope, make this earth a home for all people, and build true brotherhood. Therefore, the mission must have a new way according to the times and modernization (Mali, 2022).

The Catholic Church sees the religious value of the community towards local culture as an opportunity to preach the gospel. The opportunity to evangelize is motivated by political secularism, which is very moderate but does not show a picture of political secularism, because this influence is very positive considering that everyone has religious freedom. Asia Leofreddi (2023), in her research on political secularism and religious freedom in Italy and Croatia, shows that social perceptions are very strong towards religious freedom (Leofreddi, 2023). Through the *missio ad intra* and *missio ad extra* movements, the Church is involved in efforts to rebuild a new culture and humanity. Furthermore, in accordance with its faith, the Church is obliged to help individuals and society in relation to culture (Mali, 2022). The Church, through its missionaries, strives to bring a different theology one that listens and not just talks. Thus, the theology of mission is not merely offering but accepting the faith experience of the local community (Bonilla & Mora, 2023). The Church's mission to make people called to the Catholic Church has a broad concept, so that in carrying out the mission in the pastoral context of the contemporary era, it does not force people to believe in God because the Church realizes that humans must have a previous religion or belief (Ihben-bahl & Roser, 2023).

James T. Duke and Barry L. Johnson (1989), researchers from Brigham Young University, state in their research on *The Stages of Religious Transformation: A Study of 200 Nations* that the process of secularization and reformation threatens the existence of previous religions even though they have been established by the presence of new religions. Competition between one religion and another is very clear because of the factors of power and majority (Duke & Johnson, 1989). Nevertheless, the presence of the Catholic Church mission is inseparable from the factors of power and dominance in mission work. Various strategies are carried out in order to encourage local people to be called and choose Catholicism as the religion they believe in. For example, the Karo Tribe has *pamena* beliefs that believe in *Dibata* as the Creator, the highest being, the invisible God, the almighty God, the great God, and the God who is close to humans. The earth and all its contents are believed to be God's creation, and the one God is

present in the form of three persons, similar to the Karo tribe's belief in *Dibata si telu sada*. The presence of Catholic missions in an area has an impact on religious transformation from indigenous or traditional religions into Catholicism. This experience of religious transformation has occurred since medieval times, especially the experience of the Catholic Church mission in Europe (Thomas et al., 2017). This transformation experience occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries in Indonesia, especially in Sumatra. Karo people generally began to recognize Christianity in 1890–1893. In 1911, when Padang became the apostolic prefecture of Sumatra, the mission of spreading Catholicism became easier, especially in the Batak area, including the land of Karo Tanah Karo and other areas where local religious beliefs were still strong, making it difficult for missionaries to spread their message (R. B. Ginting, 2017). Siahaan N. (1964) stated that communities with strong ties to their cultural traditions and rituals saw missionaries as a threat to their way of life. The traumatic experiences of the Karo people made it difficult for them to believe in the evangelizing missionaries, but the missionaries continued to provide understanding through preaching, teaching, and prayer life and tried to fit into the mindset of the Karo people who believed in *Dibata* (Joosten, 2006).

Regarding the use of the term "*Dibata*," the Karo people have long believed that this term denotes a spirit. A belief that is indistinguishable from the Catholic faith: God is Spirit (Yoh 4:24; 2 Korintus 3:17) The strategy of enculturation became a powerful theory used by missionaries who came to Karo Land in the mission of evangelization. The word *Dibata* is God found in the Gospel. The experience of evangelizing to the Karo people introduced *Dibata* so that the Karo language Bible published by the Indonesian Bible Institute (LAI) translated the word God into *Dibata* (B. K. Ginting, 2022). Through preaching and teaching, the missionaries emphasized to the Karo people the importance of abandoning traditional beliefs, accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and obeying the 10 Commandments. In doing so, they sought to establish a life as true Christians. This significantly differentiated them from their previous way of life as people who believed in "*tendi* and *begu*" or pamena religious beliefs (P. H. Surbakti, 2021). The introduction of Catholicism through missionaries to Tanah Karo experienced a change in thinking about cultural pressures from outside, especially for the followers of the religion. The Karo people, who previously had local beliefs, especially animist beliefs, slowly abandoned them.

When the Japanese defeated the Dutch in 1942, there was a shift in power that affected the spread of Catholicism among the Karo people. The missionaries were arrested and imprisoned, and the people were obliged to submit to the Japanese emperor. In 1943, the Japanese government questioned and detained hundreds of catechists and conducted massive searches of church property in an attempt to hold them accountable for the spread of Christianity. Karo youths were encouraged to join the Japanese army, then called *Giyugun* or *Heiho*, and the population was threatened and ordered to worship the Sun every morning (Sinuraya, 2002).

Mgr. A. Soegijapranoto, SJ, sent Father Sutopanitro SJ, who was then known as the "Archbishop of Semarang," in 1947. Father Sutopanitro first arrived in North Sumatra in May 1947. Father Sutopanitro spent three months visiting each parish. Catholics in North Sumatra, including Karo, were deeply touched by the visit (R. B. Ginting, 2017). Historically, on August 3, 1948, Father Maximus Brans, OFM Cap, and Father Elpidius van Duynhoven, OFM Cap, laid the foundation of what later became Kabanjahe Parish. Mgr. Brans, OFM Cap, blessed the parish on December 19, 1948. Tanah Karo became one of the areas where the mission of the Catholic Church increased in 1950. The opening of additional new parishes and stations in Tanah Karo served as evidence of this. A religious leader by the name of Nimbasi Purba assisted the priests in carrying out their missionary duties (Joosten, 2006). Although the sipemena religion (the native religion of the Karo people) had not yet fully accepted

Catholicism, the development of missions in the Karo area showed promising results. However, in 1965, with the events of the G30S PKI, everything changed, and there was a dramatic increase in the number of Karo Catholics. Many people became Catholic and received baptism. The efforts of the missionaries multiplied as they paid attention to meeting their basic needs through the provision of health, education, and economic services (Joosten, 2008).

Method

Research on the transformation of the concept of God for Karo Catholics about *Dibata Kaci-kaci* certainly uses a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach (Moleong, 2012) by identifying theories and concepts about the transformation of the concept of God for Karo Catholics about *Dibata Kaci-kaci*, developing research questions for informants, and determining informants. The strategy for the development of this research is a descriptive method that aims to describe experiences, facts, systems of thought, and real conditions about the concept of Karo Catholics about *Dibata Kaci-kaci* (Nazir, 2014). This research was conducted in Tanah Karo, and the informants used in this study included 5 traditional leaders, 2 Karo cultural experts, 2 priests, and 5 pastoral councils of parishes and stations. Data collection methods using in-depth interview techniques, namely listening to the views or understanding of informants or participants, documentation in the form of documents in accordance with the needs of researchers, and observations about the practice of religious life of Catholic Karo people as an actualization of belief in God through church liturgy, prayer, and devotion (Wijaya, 2019), (Ihbenbahl & Roser, 2023).

The next step is data analysis. Data analysis activities in the form of transcription and analysis identify patterns and concepts obtained from interviews, documentation, and direct observation by observers involving thematic coding, category development, and the construction of descriptions of subjective experiences. The data was obtained through the data reduction stage in order to obtain the essential structure and phenomena under study. The final stage in this method is to interpret the main findings in order to produce a rich description of experiences related to phenomena surrounding the concept of God for Karo Catholics and *Dibata kaci-kaci* (Miles & Huberman, 2020).

Findings and Discussion

The Life of the Karo People

The Karo tribe is geographically located in the highlands in the eastern part of North Sumatra. The word "Karo" comes from the initial letter of the Karo script, *ha-roh*, which signifies "the first to arrive" (*ha*: first, *roh*: coming). *Ha-roh*, in the development of the local language, became Karo (Tamboen, 1955). The Karo cultural congress, held in Berastagi on December 1–3, 1995, stated that the term "Karo" comes from the word Kar'o, meaning round world (see Ginting, 1995, p.32): "*kar* = world, *o* = round." The Karo region is characterized by its undulating topography; around Liang Melas, dense forests can be found, while mountainous areas have deep and steep ravines (Tamboen, 1955). The Karo are culturally and artistically renowned, as evidenced by their involvement in dance, painting, fine arts, and other cultural symbols that inspire their existence. Karo culture embodies its own uniqueness and value, which gives color and quality to the Karo people, encompassing their behavior, way of life, social structure, and customs as an enduring tribe.

The Nature of the Karo Mind

Centuries of Karo life have significantly shaped the character, behavior, mentality, and culture that are unique to other Batak tribes. The circumstances and characteristics of the mountains affect the mentality, outlook on life, and interpersonal relationships of the Karo people, including their recognition of God as a religious element, so that any activity always begins with a prayer to *Dibata*, or in the Karo tradition, called *Merdang Merdem*, although it is now better known as the work year (Pasaribu et al., 2023). One of the customs that the Karo tribe has carried on for many years is *merdang merdem*. This practice is also done as a form of gratitude to *Dibata*. This is also in line with the opinion of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), who is very keen to see theological anthropology introduce supernatural gratitude for the supernatural, where God's love for his creation is unlimited. This expression of gratitude and love is love, the holiness of God in the soul, and the holiness of the soul by the Holy Spirit (Strobel, 2021). Their existence has been determined by nature, which causes them to get used to living together or living in a community in an area marked by the clans they have. The Karo people are famous for various arts such as traditional music, painting in the form of house architecture, regional clothing, traditional food, language, and lifestyle (Ariani et al., 2022).

The Karo people are very thick with culture, and culture shapes people's life patterns as norms. Adat is the basis of existence and plays the most fundamental role in interpersonal relationships so that people can coexist harmoniously with the supernatural, nature, and each other. Given that adat is based on the laws of nature and that nature is a manifestation of the supernatural, this is so. "As long as one still adheres to ancient customs and beliefs, then those rules will remain." According (T. Bangun, 1990). "Those who violate them will receive curses from their ancestors, signifying that they are accountable to those they honor or respect." The Indonesian Catholic Church has a new face after independence, especially after the Second Vatican Council. This development covers all Catholic mission areas in the archipelago, including Sumatra in general and Karo Land in particular (Aliano & Riyanto, 2022; Riyanto, 2020). The presence of the Church does not confine their intentions and motivations to abandon cultural traditions but becomes the foundation for serving faith in God through cultural inculturation into the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, one of which is liturgy inculturation (Martasujita, 2021). The form of cultural strength of the Karo people in expressing their beliefs in the form of cultural arts, building architecture, clothing motifs, songs, and local dances was adopted by the Church into local cultural distinctiveness (Joosten, 2008).

The character and personality of the Karo people are shaped by tradition and the natural elements that manifest in their minds. The manifestations of these traits and dispositions include being honest, polite, brave and assertive, reasoned, confident, logical and analytical, flexible, persistent in seeking knowledge, pragmatic, and not greedy (Revida et al., 2022). One of the mottos that often serves as a guideline for life is "*Pebelang juma maka mbelang man peranin, jemur pagendu sang las*" (cultivate the land as wide as possible so that the harvest is wide; dry your pad when the sun is hot) (R. Bangun, 1989). They consistently strive to fulfill their basic needs. In addition, they fiercely defend their rights if they consider them to be theirs. However, they are unwilling to deny what is due to others, as the saying goes: "*Adi ngalo la rido, nggalar la rutang*" (if you get something unnaturally, disaster or malapeta will come) (Prinst, 2004).

They consistently demonstrate "*rawin-jemba*" (tolerance and empathy) in their daily interactions by prioritizing, appreciating, and respecting others. This can be seen in the way they speak, which shows attention rather than dominance in discussions, despite the "hot-blooded" nature of the Karo people. The sensitivity of the Karo people is very delicate, especially when they receive unfair

treatment (S. Sitepu, 1995). They will take revenge in any way possible against those who treat them badly. However, they will reciprocate kindness and politeness with anyone who treats them politely. "*Keri gia isi polana, gelah mehuli penangketkenna kitangna*" is a proverb among the Karo that translates to "let the sap water be drunk, as long as the person who consumes it hangs the place (*kitangna*) back the way it was." Clearly, this proverb shows that the Karo people are used to utilizing nira water. However, this proverb has a very broad connotation, meaning that it is okay for wealth to be reduced in a reasonable manner for the sake of friendship and benevolence. In addition to the above proverb, there is another proverb often used by the Karo: "*labo dalih tandes kuran ku takal adi erban simehuli, but adi lang, banci nge macik pisang i rumah*" (it is not a problem to stick to the place where the water is held if it is for the sake of goodness, but if not, the bananas in the house may rot). This expression wants to show that it does not matter if everything that is owned is used up for the good of others, but if people act unkindly or unfairly, even if there is something, it will not be delivered (Tamboen, 1955).

The principles of life that the Karo people consider to be true and practical are their foundation: *Kiniteken* (belief) states that the result of one's hard work gives life and becomes one's strength. *Pregnaten* (politeness) states that in order to gain the trust of others, one must be polite, humble, and respectful of all people; *megenggeng* (tenacity and endurance of hardship); *metenget* (conscientiousness); *tek man Dibata* (belief in God); and the belief that *Dibata*, the creator of the entire universe, has existed among the Karo people since the time their ancestors were declared to have existed (R. Bangun, 1989), see also (T. Bangun, 1990).

The Karo People's Relationship between Man, Nature, and the Supernatural

The Karo way of life is embodied in *Merga si Lima* (five clans: Karo-Karo, Tarigan, Ginting, Sembiring, and Perangin-Angin), each *merga* with its own branches (Tarigan, 2017). *Rakut si Telu*, the kinship system used in the implementation of customs; the language used is Karo; while the area or place where they live is called *Taneh Karo si Malem* (happy Karo land or area). *Tutur si Waluh* (eight levels of interpersonal communication) serves as the Karo tribe's guide in the application of communication. All conversations based on the *merga si lima* kinship system will be carried out if *sangkep* has been fulfilled. Therefore, *sangkep nggeluh* is the identity of the Karo people, because it is *sangkep nggeluh* that plays an important role in Karo customary practices (Prinst, 2004). The Karo people foster their relationship with nature, fellow humans, and the *Adikodrati* through *sangkep nggeluh*. Examples of fundamental customs in *sangkep nggeluh* are *Mehamat er kalimbubu* (Karo people must respect *kalimbubu*); *Medes er senina* (Karo people must show solidarity and tolerance towards fellow brothers and sisters); and *Metami er anakberu* (Karo people must have patience and compassion towards *anakberu* as the executor of every traditional activity). Through this *sangkep nggeluh*, every aspect of tradition that must be carried out in everyday life has been fulfilled (Tarigan, 2017). This cultural practice of *Sangkep nggeluh* is a relational form that Karo people build with each other to love and support each other while receiving gifts and blessings from the Almighty (see Gintings, 2021).

According to traditional Karo beliefs, they submit to (*Dibata*/God) the Creator of the universe and everything in it, so that only the Creator do they call upon. The Karo people believe that they have an obligation to protect and preserve all of the Creator's creations and are prohibited from destroying them. They believe that humans come from nature, are part of nature, and, in time, will return to it (Rajamarpodang, 1992). The Karo mindset on this matter is seen in the slogan that "the place where the umbilical cord falls is the place of *kemulihenna* (return to nature)." The existence of nature and everything in it is a manifestation of God, or the Divine. Thus, the Karo people show deep respect for

the environment in which they live and exist (Rajamarpodang, 1992). They avoid irresponsible treatment of nature for their own benefit, as there is a deeply embedded awareness of their relationship with nature (S. E. Sitepu & Ardoni, 2019). Karo people believe that nature fulfills all their needs, so they are obliged to preserve nature to ensure their survival. Before entering the forest or cultivating new agricultural land, they recite *tabas-tabas* (incantations), which appease the spirits that govern, control, and inhabit nature so that they avoid anger and instead receive blessings (Parmono, 1985).

The Karo people view and believe that there are supernatural forces that control the universe. They have faith in a deity known as *Dibata*, who is described as the creator of everything on earth and the universe (T. Bangun, 1990). According to the Karo people, the universe consists of three distinct regions, and *Dibata* has the power to rule over each of these continents: the upper, middle, and lower continents. *Butara Guru*, the ruler of the upper continent, is responsible for regulating human life and death, providing what humans need, giving direction, and instilling courage in them. *Tuan Paduka Ni Aji*, the ruler of the middle continent, has authority over the generation and giving of human offspring, shaping or creating the human fetus in the womb, and the exercise of human leadership. In addition, *Tuan Banua Koling*, who is responsible for sending light, days, and human destiny, bestows fertility on humans (Tamboen, 1955).

This belief stems from their daily lives, where they surrender to the Divine for protection from threatening dangers, protecting against enemies, natural disasters, diseases, evil spirits, and evil fellow humans. Simply put, their understanding of the transcendent, supernatural, and invisible is limited to the occurrence of natural phenomena and life in this universe. Therefore, their thoughts, emotions, aspirations, and inclinations or images of the *Adikodrati*, or *Dibata*, significantly influence their perception of God (see Subagya, 1981). The Karo people strongly believe in and have an experience of *Dibiata* (God), even though they do not communicate directly. But the experience of the almighty God is made the ultimate goal of a human life. This realm of thought encourages them to always obey and carry out customary traditions seriously. This belief makes the Karo people not dare to violate the rules or norms set by their customary traditions, and it is considered that they have succeeded in building a harmonious relationship with God, the owner of everything (cf. (Suka, 2017).

Catholic Karo People's Understanding of Dibata

Traditional Karo people, in their life experiences, are often confronted with factual experiences of a spiritual nature. In these experiences, they believe they have experienced things that are related to the existence of a power that transcends human power. The Karo people's experience of the phenomena and events they experience every day has led them to a belief called *erkiniteken* (belief) in the existence of *Dibaita* (S. E. Sitepu & Ardoni, 2019). The Karo people's belief in the existence of *Dibata* as the Creator of the earth and everything in this universe is very clearly shown by their attitude toward life. He is the Almighty *Dibata*, who controls the universe and determines human destiny (Gintings, 2021). The beliefs of the Karo people are animistic, namely, "belief in spirits or subtle beings that are invisible to humans and all living things have" and sweetism, namely, worship of ancestral spirits (Subagya, 1981). In addition, the belief of the Karo people is also dynamism, which has a belief in supernatural things such as mountains, rivers, trees, and other objects made by human hands. This experience of faith in the power of nature shows that the Karo people have an ecological and spiritual dimension (B. K. Ginting, 2022).

The traditional Karo belief in *begu* is called *perbegu* belief (*per* = who has, believes in; *begu* = spirits, spirits of the dead). This *perbegu* belief system is considered to worship evil spirits so that it

returns to its original name, namely the pamena religion (Abrar et al., 2021). According to pamena beliefs, in addition to the greatness of God as the creator of all that exists, they believe that there are other forces that are feared and respected. They believe in the forces of nature supernatural forces that occupy large rocks, trees, rivers, mountains, and places that are considered haunted. They believe in the powers of the *begu* (spirits) of the dead. In the Karo people's view, humans have a *tendi* (soul). And after a Karo person dies, his *tenidi* (soul) turns into a *begu* (spirit). The relationship between humans and *begus* is very close. Even though their worlds are different, These *begu* have their own place that *Dibata* has provided (cf. Tamboen, 1955).

Traditional Karo people believe that the nature in which they live has power and spirit. Nature is considered to have supernatural forces that can bring disaster, danger, and destruction to human life, so the Karo people always perform a ritual called *Mesai Nini* (Pasaribu & Sitepu, 2015). The Karo people actually have a very strong mystical flow. This belief is evident when natural events occur, such as earthquakes, floods, landslides, continuous rain, the sound of thunder, heavy winds, and long droughts, which are believed to be the wrath of nature against humans because humans have treated nature unfairly; humans have committed acts that violate the laws of nature, which result in natural disharmony, so that the spirits that guard nature are angry with humans and bring disaster and havoc (Wulandari & Laksono, 2022).

The belief in the spirit of Mount Sibayak is one example of the Karo people's belief in the power of nature. Mount Sibayak is one of the sacred places for the Karo people. According to their belief that many spirits dwell in Mount Sibayak, one of them is the spirit of *Si Beru Kertah Ernala*. The spirit that occupies this universe is the spirit sent by *Dibata* to maintain and protect the earth (cf. (Dew, n.d.).

Karo people traditionally perform various types of belief rites. The first rite is a communal ceremony that the entire kampong (urung) participates in. An example is *muncang*, a form of ritual dance accompanied by traditional Karo *gondang* music, singing, and offerings to *begu* (spirits) and *dibata*. This ritual is intended to drive away evil spirits or harm that befalls them both communally and individually (Prinst, 2004). An event similar to *muncang* is the *Mere Buah Uta-Uta* ritual, which is addressed to the *begu*, or spirits of fertility and health. This ritual is performed by the Karo tribe by giving offerings to *begu*, or the spirit of fertility and health. The *Mere Buah Uta-uta* ceremony is an expression of gratitude to *Dibata* and *begu* (spirits) for the abundant harvest and good health, and it is hoped that the same situation will continue in the future. Another Karo belief ritual is *Ndilo Wari Udan*, which translates as "calling for rain." It is a ceremonial practice that adheres to the traditional Karo belief that social disorder leading to natural strife can cause drought. Therefore, to restore ecological balance, the performance of the *Ndilo Wari Udan* ritual becomes very important (Nalinta Ginting, 1984).

Rituals based on the beliefs of the Karo tribe that are quite famous are calling spirits or spirits of the deceased called *Perumah Begu*. This ritual is guided by a leader called *Guru Si Baso* (a female shaman). This ritual aims to create a ritual atmosphere conducive to realizing the imagination influenced by the character and behavior of the spirits of the deceased (Revida et al., 2022). Another ritual is *Raleng Tendi*, restoring or bringing back the *tendi* or soul of someone who is sick from shock; thus, the *tendi* or soul leaves one's body and wanders to another realm. Therefore, it is very important to perform a ritual to call back the *tendi* or soul (Abrar et al., 2021). Rituals to purify or cleanse a person or family member from the anger of the danger of illness that will be suffered are called *Erpangir ku lau* (N. Ginting, 1990). *Petelayoken* (childbirth) begins a few days after the birth of the baby with a ritual bathing ceremony in the river. The aim is to familiarize the baby with the "spirits" that rule the village where it was born, as well as to perform personal rituals, such as *encibalken belo* or *isap* (offerings of betel nuts

or cigarettes), at specific locations to ensure the baby's safety or protection. This practice is usually done during travel or when one has a specific personal purpose (Ginting, 1984).

The Karo people recognize *Dibata* as the creator of the universe and everything in it. They also put great faith in *begu* (spirits), which exert a much greater influence on real life (Revida et al., 2022). *Begu* are more decisive in daily life because they are closer to human life. Although very close to human life, *begu* is not accessible to the five senses. This is because the *begu's* world and existence are different from the world and existence of humans. Traditional Karo people honor the *begu*, or spirits, of their ancestors and relatives. They do this because these *begus*, or spirits, although their world, existence, and essence are different from humans, still have a direct relationship with human life. The *begu-begu*, or spirits, can bring calamity and disaster if their wishes are not fulfilled; they can also provide safety, prosperity, or fortune if they are respected and offerings are made (Abrar et al., 2021).

Karo Catholics believe that the Almighty is referred to as *Dibata* or, in traditional beliefs, as a god. The term *dibata* is an honorific title given to the Almighty God. This is because in the Karo people's belief or understanding of *pamena*, *Dibata kaci-kaci* has no world power, so they believe in *Dibata si Telu sada* (God the Three in One) (Gintings, 2021). The Karo people do not emphasize the divisibility of God but rather the omnipotence and omnipresence of *Dibata Kaci-Kaci* in every place in the concept of the universe. *Dibata Kaci-Kaci* presents Himself to rule over all the existences of the universe in the upper, middle, and lower worlds (Tamboen, 1955). There are three divine principles of *Dibata Kaci-kaci*. The first is called *Dibata Datas* (God above); his name is *Guru Butara*. *Dibata Datas*, or *Guru Butara*, rules over the vast upper world, the great ocean of space, and all its senses. *Guru Butara* is responsible for maintaining the natural order, the source of all blessings and goodness. Second, *Dibata Tengah* (Central God) rules the middle world, called *Tuan Padukah Ni Aji*; *padukah* means mighty, *maharaja*, and *Aji* means great. Third, *Dibata Teruh* (Lower God) is the ruler of the lower world and is called *Tuan Banua Koling*. *Dibata Teruh*, or *Tuan Benua Koling* (*Banua* means world and *Koling* means subtle spirits, holder of the book of death), rules the world of subtle beings (A. Surbakti & Sebayang, 2018). These three gods constitute a complete totality and a unity that is inseparable from one another.

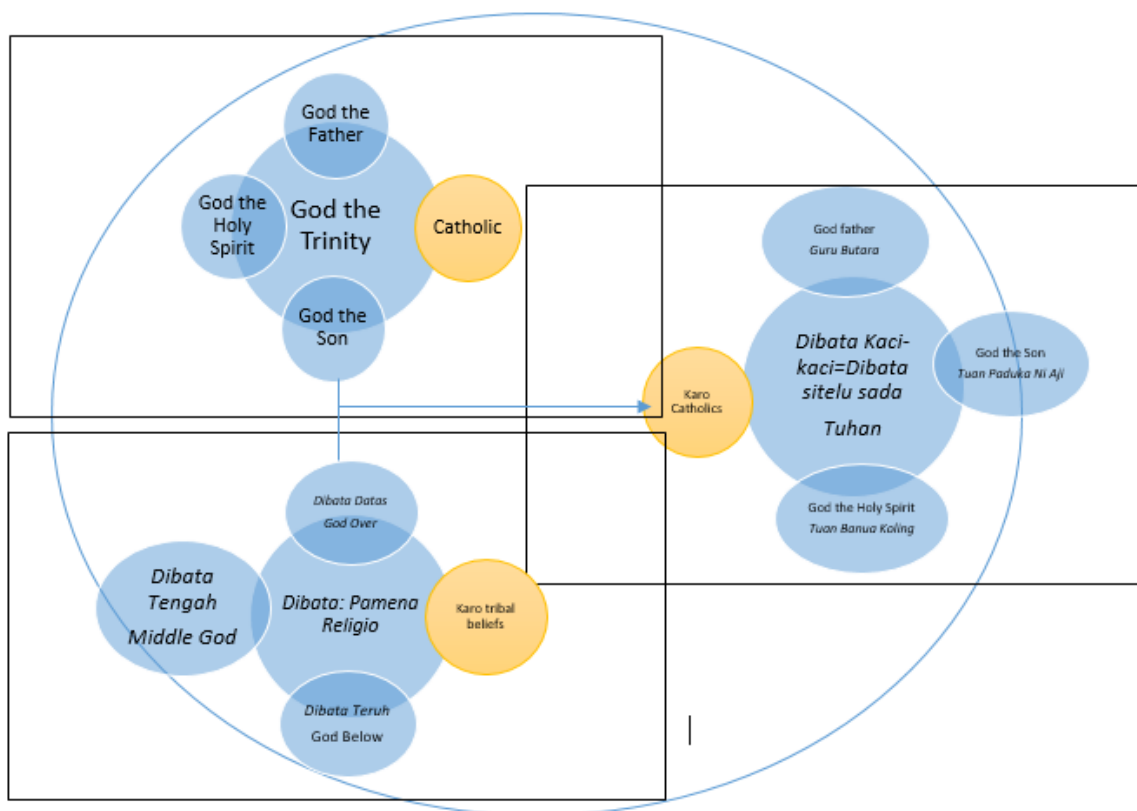
The transcendence dimension of *Dibata* recognizes God as the Divine, the Supreme, and above all things. God's transcendence is expressed in His eternity. The transcendence of creation depends on Him, because He is the Creator, the all-powerful God, the source of all life and energy. God is "the Other," though manifested in and through the world. God is also essentially ambivalent, enchanting, and terrifying, the cause of life and death, useful and harmful, approachable and unapproachable (cf. Susanto, 1987). In addition, the relationship between creation and God is a concept of *Dibata's* omnipotence for His personal character, which has attributes that must be obeyed. *Dibaita's* personal titles show that his existence is not the same as that of an ordinary human being. He is truly omnipotent, unreachable by the ordinary human mind, far away yet present among men. This is because God's transcendence, if not accompanied by immanence, will make him distant from life. The form of God's immanence is reflected in and through the deep experience of faith and through all of creation. Creation is a symbol of God's presence, and symbols are a way to arrive at the knowledge of a transcendent God. God's presence is expressed in the form of symbols and is believed to bring grace and salvation (Susanto, 1987).

The Karo people's concept of a personal God shows God's immanence, as evidenced by the tradition of *encibalken pangan* (giving offerings) to the spirits of the ancestors and *Dibata*. Usually, they offer food to the grave or at home, which is placed on top of a cupboard. This shows that God is present among them as a person. Even the *Kalimbubu* (the family of the mother's brother or surname of the

mother's clan, the giver of the virgin child) is seen as *Dibata Ni Idah* (the Visible God). This means that *Kalimbubu* is highly respected in the community because each person is born by the mother of the *Kalimbubu*. All the blessings, sustenance, and safety that God bestows on humans come through the intercession of *Kalimbubu* as *Dibata Ni Idah* (the visible God) (Tamboen, 1955).

The Concept of God Will Be Burned with Nuts for the Karo Catholic Tribe

Schematic of God's Concept for Karo Catholics to be Girdled



The beliefs of the traditional Karo are a confluence of *Pamena* religion with the influence of Hinduism and the Toba *parmalim*. Before the influx of Islam and Christianity into the Karo region, the ceremony of burning corpses was very common among the traditional Karo people. They believed in the power of *tabas* (incantations) uttered by the *sibas* teacher (female shaman) in the religious ceremony, and even today, there are still Karo people who consider themselves direct descendants of India, such as those surnamed Sembiring: *Brahmin, Pelawi, Pandia, Colia, and Teikang* (Tamboen, 1955). The Karo people themselves are traditionally still in the habit of *Pamena* belief rituals, and Hinduism is still very strong among them. The understanding of *Dibata sitelu sada* is believed to be related to the Hindu belief of *trimurti*. This understanding is similar to *Pamena*, who believes that *Dibata Teruh* (God below), *Dibata Datas* (God above), and *Dibata Tengah* (God in the middle, or earth) are a triad, according to the traditional beliefs of the Karo people. *Dibata* (God), who rules above the earth or space, within the earth, and below the earth, is referred to as *Dibata si Telu Sada* (Threefold God). Except for the underworld, which symbolises hell, there is no correlation between the three worlds and heaven and hell in this understanding. This is because their conception of the universe does not include

heaven and hell. Cooperation between the three worlds contributes to the harmony and order of the universe (see Tamboen, 1955).

Dibata Kaci-Kaci refers to the integration of *Dibata si Telu Sada* (the threefold God). Invisible to the naked eye, this debate is the source of goodness and justice. The Karo proverb "*Ketuahen man kalak si bujur, ketulohen man kalak si latlat*" means that fortune and blessings are abundant for the righteous and the wicked will be punished. According to (P. Tamboen (1952), people who obey God's will will receive abundant blessings (*tuah*), while those who violate the truth or custom and engage in evil will face punishment (*tulah*) (cf. (Tamboen, 1955). God, according to Karo beliefs, is called *Dibata Datas* or *Guru Butara*, who rules the earth. He is the ruler of the vast world of space. He regulates the circulation of all celestial bodies and controls them. He oversees human life and death. He gives and determines everything that humans need. In other words, the fate of man is in the hands of *Guru Butara* (Sinaga, 1981). Therefore, the Karo people are very obedient to *adat* because they believe that God's will has mystified Himself into culture, and those who carry out *adat* traditions have worshipped and respected *Dibata Kaci-Kaci* in all its manifestations (Gintings, 2021). *Dibata*, as the ruler of the earth, is called *Dibata Tengah* (Middle God) or *Tuan Paduka Ni Aji*. He is God, who rules over all creation on earth. The human soul, sent by *Guru Butara*, is delivered to humans through the medium of *Tuan Paduka Ni Aji*. He is the executor and organiser of the tasks that humans must carry out in *adat*. In *adat*, the laws and regulations of life are implemented. He is present among humans to bring joy because He delivers and gives what humans need. He gives wealth and health to men. He is the source of honour and holiness (Sinaga, 1981). *Tuan Paduka Ni Aji* is the source of strength and the protector of the world. He protects all human endeavours, looks after people, and nurtures them. He is described as a mighty king, on whom are the insignia of kingship. He is wisdom, so that man feels happiness and prosperity under His protection (Gintings, 2021); cf. (Sinaga, 1981).

The God who rules the lower world is called *Dibata Teruh* (Lower God) or *Tuan Banua Koling*. *Dibata Teruh* has a different personality from the other two gods. If for *Dibata Guru Butara* and *Tuan Paduka Ni Aji* people pray only for blessings and protection, then *Tuan Banua Koling* is worshipped because he is good and evil. This means that while people pray for blessings, health, a good life, and longevity, He is also the cause of calamity for humans. He has the power to judge people if they disobey the commands, rules, and laws of *Adat*. His main task is to control creation; if something goes wrong, he himself straightens it out, if necessary with the death penalty (cf. Rev. Gintings, 2021), cf. (Sinaga, 1981). He is a just and wise judge. Those who are punished are only those who violate God's laws enshrined in *Adat*, but those who obey and carry them out well will be pitied. God is experienced as the source of salvation, happiness, comfort, and protection, and he gives everything good to man.

Conclusion

The concept of *Dibata Kaci-kaci* among the Karo people seems to be unique to the concept of the Trinity in the Catholic faith. The Trinity has opportunities for the proclamation of the Triune God to Karo Catholics. God is revealed as God is love. Christian tradition has always taught the eternal co-existence of the divine persons and their receptivity, which is the relation between them and each other. Therefore, in proclaiming God according to the Christian faith among the Karo people, evangelists must emphasise that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, because this faith is the foundation of the Church.

Dibata si Telu Sada (the One Three Gods) as 'aspects' of the 'one' *Dibata* seems to be associated with *Dibata's* different 'functions' and jurisdictions: the dimensions or spheres that comprise its

presence. They seem to indicate 'spheres or aspects of reality and life created, controlled, and sustained by (the one and supreme) *Dibata*'. It can be assumed, then, that the distinction between the 'three gods' is functional and not 'essential'. In other words, there are not three different gods, as that would be polytheistic. The beliefs of the Karo people are indigenous, but not polytheistic. *Dibata* as God of the upper, middle, and lower worlds reveals that He is present in all realities of life. Both the Old and New Testaments have the same belief: God is the Lord of heaven and earth.

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