



Transformation of Kulcapi Use in Karo Society Traditions in Medan: A Study on Style, Genre, and Social Function

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ABSTRACT

The *kulcapi* is a traditional musical instrument deeply embedded in Karo cultural practices. This study aims to trace its historical usage within traditional ceremonies and rituals, examine its functional evolution from ancient times to the modern era, and analyze its transformation from a ritualistic to an entertainment medium. Employing a historical approach, this research utilizes literature review and case studies related to the *kulcapi*'s role within Karo culture. Findings indicate that the *kulcapi* has experienced a significant functional transformation: initially a solo instrument in ritual contexts, it became an integral part of the *gendang telu sedalanen* ensemble and has more recently merged with modern instruments, such as the keyboard. This transition reflects the *kulcapi*'s adaptation to social and cultural changes while presenting challenges to its traditional values. The study concludes that preserving and developing the cultural heritage associated with the *kulcapi* is essential for maintaining Karo cultural identity amidst global modernization pressures.

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INTRODUCTION

The social changes occurring within Karo society have greatly influenced how they understand and practice their ancestral customs. Tradition is no longer seen as a rigid set of rules to be followed without question but rather as something dynamic that can be adapted to meet contemporary needs. This understanding has emerged as a response to modernization and globalization, which introduce various new values and practices that interact with local traditions (Rahmah et al., [2021](#)). Consequently, some members of Karo society see the necessity of adapting tradition to the present context to ensure it remains relevant and beneficial in everyday life (Tanjung et al., [2022](#)).

Conversely, there is a group within Karo society that still regards tradition as an integral part of their cultural identity, one that should not be altered lightly. They view tradition as a spiritual heritage with profound meaning, often linked to supernatural forces. This group believes that changes in tradition should be made with utmost caution, only if there is a strong spiritual and cultural justification. The debate between the more flexible perspective and the more conservative one reflects the complexity within Karo society's processes of social and cultural change (Latifah et al., [2022](#)).

The use of the *kulcapi*, a traditional Karo musical instrument, provides an interesting example of how social change influences cultural practices. Initially, the *kulcapi* was used simply as an entertainment tool or accompaniment for social gatherings. However, over time, its usage transformed into part of a more complex musical ensemble with spiritual connotations. The *kulcapi* then became an important instrument in various religious rituals and ceremonies, symbolizing its new role as a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds (Sibero & Sibero, [2017](#)).

The *kulcapi*, as a traditional musical instrument, plays a significant role in the various ceremonial practices of the Karo community. In this context, the *kulcapi* is not merely a musical instrument but also carries deep symbolic and ritualistic meanings. Its use in ceremonial rites is often associated with aspects of traditional beliefs, such as honoring ancestors or commemorating significant events in the life cycle of the Karo community. Studying the role of the *kulcapi*

in these ceremonies provides profound insights into how musical instruments not only entertain or enliven events but also serve as crucial mediums for spiritual or religious communication within the Karo community (Silangit et al., [2024](#)).

This transformation in the use of the *kulcapi* illustrates not only changes in the instrument's function but also how the Karo people incorporate modern elements into old traditions to create new, meaningful cultural practices. In this context, the *kulcapi* is no longer seen merely as a source of entertainment but as an important symbol in the spiritual expression and cultural identity of the Karo people. Further research into these changes can offer valuable insights into the cultural dynamics within Karo society and how they confront the challenges of modernization (G. A. A. Ginting et al., [2024](#)).

Musical transformation within a cultural context refers to the process by which music undergoes change or evolution in response to broader social, political, economic, or cultural shifts. This transformation may involve changes in musical style, techniques, instrument usage, or even the themes and content of the music. In some cultures, musical transformation occurs when traditional or ritual music adapts to modern or global influences to remain relevant in contemporary times. This process often involves interaction between local and external cultures, creating new forms of music or altering the way traditional music is played or understood. In the context of Karo society, musical transformation can occur in various ways, including in the use of traditional instruments like the *kulcapi* or changes in the style and content of music used in ceremonial or religious contexts. A deeper understanding of this musical transformation can help us appreciate how Karo music culture continues to adapt and evolve in response to changing times and external pressures (Minawati & Suryanti, [2022](#)).

Musical transformation not only affects the technical or aesthetic aspects of the music itself but also has broader social and cultural implications. For instance, changes in musical style or content can reflect shifts in cultural values or adaptations to social changes. In the Karo community, musical transformation can influence how they understand and maintain their cultural identity and how they interact with external cultures or modernity. A better understanding of the social and cultural implications of this musical transformation can help us appreciate the complex dynamics within the development of music culture among the Karo people and anticipate future challenges or opportunities.

A study on the transformation of the *kulcapi* in Medan would be particularly interesting because Medan is one of Indonesia's major centers of urbanization and modernization. As a large city, Medan provides a unique context where various cultures and traditions interact and influence each other. This research could reveal how the Karo community in Medan maintains, adjusts, or even reconstructs their traditions amidst rapid social change. The results of this research would not only enrich our understanding of Karo culture but also provide significant contributions to the study of cultural change in urban societies in Indonesia.

Ethnic identity plays a crucial role in shaping how ethnic groups distinguish themselves from others. This includes elements such as dialect, which serves as a unique and easily recognizable way of speaking, and social norms, which are the rules and behavioral expectations adhered to by group members. Nonverbal expressions, such as hand gestures, facial expressions, and body posture, are also integral to ethnic identity as they often reflect cultural values and unique nonverbal communication. Symbols, such as traditional clothing, music, and musical instruments like the *kulcapi*, serve as powerful markers of identity in social interactions (Liliweri, [2021](#)).

Liliweri and several previous studies, such as research by Smith and Hasundungan, highlight the importance of material and non-material cultural elements in strengthening ethnic identity across various societal groups (Hasundungan, [2019](#); Liliweri, [2018](#); Smith, [2017](#)). These studies emphasize how cultural artifacts, such as traditional musical instruments, serve not only as mediums of expression but also as tools for preserving collective memory and ethnic heritage amidst globalizations. Additionally, research by Brown underscores the role of traditional music in fostering attachment and pride within ethnic groups, especially among the younger generation (Brown, [2020](#)).

Liliweri (2018) stresses that ethnic identity is a dynamic process that develops over time. Individuals cultivate their ethnic identity through the process of seeking and learning about their group (Liliweri, [2018](#)). This process involves active exploration and a deep understanding of the group's history, traditions, and values. Through this process, individuals develop a strong emotional connection to their ethnic group, which then becomes an integral part of their personal identity.

The *kulcapi*, as a traditional Karo musical instrument, plays a central role in strengthening Karo ethnic identity. As a cultural symbol, the *kulcapi* is used not only in various traditional ceremonies and rituals but also in daily contexts as a reminder of Karo cultural roots. Its use in cultural and social events reinforces a sense of community and collective identity among the Karo people, promoting their cultural heritage to younger generations.

This study aims to explore the genre, performance style, and social function of the changing use of the *kulcapi* in traditional ceremonies (such as death and marriage ceremonies) within the Karo community in Medan. The specific research objectives are as follows: 1) To trace the history of *kulcapi* use in traditional ceremonies and rituals. 2) To examine the evolution in *kulcapi* use from ancient to modern times. 3) To investigate how the *kulcapi* has transformed from a ritual instrument to an entertainment function.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive-longitudinal approach to observe and analyze cultural changes in musical instruments. The descriptive aspect aims to depict or explain phenomena without manipulating variables or establishing causal relationships. Meanwhile, the longitudinal approach allows the researcher to track cultural developments from the past to the present within a broader cultural context, emphasizing cultural change as a generational process (Zebua, 2020). Using this approach, the study seeks to identify factors influencing cultural changes in the Karo *kulcapi* from past to present. The research was conducted over a period of two months in and around the city of Medan (Sembiring et al., 2022).

The data collection methods employed in this study include both primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through interviews with relevant individuals, including *kulcapi* players, *kulcapi* artisans, and cultural figures. Information gathered from primary data includes respondent characteristics, music genres, musical styles, social functions of the traditional instrument, and applied practical theories. Meanwhile, secondary data was gathered through a literature review, which included relevant references, publications, and audio and video recordings from both field observations and archives concerning traditional Karo musical instruments, specifically the *kulcapi* and *gendang telu sedalanen*.

The respondents in this study consist of *kulcapi* players and artisans actively involved in traditional ceremonies, especially in death and marriage ceremonies within the Karo community in Medan and its surroundings. The interviewees include individuals with significant roles in the presentation of *kulcapi* music at these ceremonies. Additionally, two main figures who are experienced *kulcapi* players and artisans, with deep knowledge of cultural meanings and various ceremonial practices in Medan and surrounding areas, are also part of this study's respondents. They participate in traditional ceremonies held both in family homes and in community meeting places within Medan.

Data obtained from interviews and field observations will be analyzed qualitatively. Musical examples will be analyzed using a descriptive approach. After gathering data from field observations, interviews, literature studies, image/document analysis, and music recordings, the next step is data reduction. This data reduction is carried out by summarizing the core information, including processes, opinions, and statements that form the essence of the collected data. The summaries are then organized into units to verify the validity of the analyzed data. Data interpretation is conducted using emic and etic approaches after the data reduction phase. The emic approach reveals cultural realities from a local perspective, while the etic approach outlines cultural realities within a comparative framework according to the researcher's perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The early emergence of *kulcapi*

The *kulcapi* was originally a solo musical instrument, serving solely to entertain its player or as a medium for expressing emotions through music. One piece from this repertoire is "*Bagi Pengereng Biang Si Pitu*" in which the player imitates the sound of seven dogs in their performance. In earlier times, *kulcapi* players would carry the instrument everywhere—to the fields, while tending livestock, or even while relaxing at a coffee stall.

According to a prevalent myth, in an unnamed village, there lived a hunter with seven dogs. One of the dogs was lame yet had an exceptional sense of smell. One day, during a hunt, the hunter encountered a pangolin. The lame dog

had previously fought with this pangolin, which eventually took refuge inside a large tree hollow. Concerned for his dog, the hunter returned home and decided to sell the tree to check on his dog's condition. When he cut down the tree, unexpectedly, the hollowed wood produced a "teng-teng" sound. This inspired the hunter to create the *kulcapi*, an element that later became embedded in Karo oral traditions.

The felled tree was a *kembawang* tree, which became the primary material for making *kulcapi* at that time. *Kembawang* wood was chosen for its strong fibers, capable of producing a clear sound when its strings were plucked. The strings were crafted from the selected *pola* and *riman* roots, chosen specifically for their strength. Once mounted onto the *kembawang* wood, the strings were smoothed or scraped to produce the desired sound. Although the shape of the *kulcapi* has changed over time, the fundamental playing techniques remain, preserving its unique role within Karo musical culture (R. B. Ginting & Munthe, [2022](#)).

As a traditional Karo musical instrument, the *kulcapi* holds deep cultural significance. Its creation, inspired by a simple event, illustrates how natural elements and everyday experiences can give rise to enduring cultural heritage. *Kembawang* wood, with its robust fibers, not only served as the ideal material for making the *kulcapi* but also symbolized the resilience and tenacity of the Karo people in preserving their traditions.

The crafting process, which involves selecting *pola* and *riman* roots, demonstrates a profound knowledge of local natural materials. This reflects the close relationship between the Karo people and nature, as they make wise use of resources to create a musical instrument that serves as both entertainment and a marker of their cultural identity (Juwita, [2021](#)).

In addition to being a musical instrument, the *kulcapi* plays an essential role in various Karo ceremonies and rituals. The unique sound it produces often accompanies traditional dances, songs, and religious rites. In this context, the *kulcapi* serves as a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds, helping connect the Karo people with their ancestors and reinforcing a sense of community and collective identity.

The transformation of the *kulcapi* from an entertainment tool to an integral part of rituals and ceremonies demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of Karo culture. Although its form and usage have evolved, the essence and meaning of the *kulcapi* have been preserved. This illustrates the Karo people's ability to honor their heritage while adapting to the demands of modern life, balancing respect for cultural traditions with practical needs in contemporary contexts (Barus et al., [2022](#)).

Overall, the *kulcapi* is more than just a musical instrument; it is a symbol of ethnic identity and a rich cultural legacy. Through its sound and form, the *kulcapi* tells a story of strength, creativity, and resilience in Karo society. This heritage connects the past with the present, reminding younger generations of traditional values and fostering pride in their cultural identity. The *kulcapi* continues to play an essential role in Karo life, embodying the richness and diversity of Indonesian culture.

Changes in musical function in kulcapi usage

The use of the *kulcapi* can be divided into three stages: solo usage, usage alongside the *gendang telu sedalanen*, and usage with the keyboard in the modern era. The shift from entertainment to ritual function occurred when the *kulcapi* was integrated with other musical instruments, such as the *gendang telu sedalanen*, in an ensemble. This ritual function is closely tied to the *pemena* customs or ancestral beliefs that became widespread in society.

The evolving role of the *kulcapi* in Karo society reflects an interesting progression. Initially, it was used solo, playing simple yet rich melodies, as a form of personal entertainment. During this stage, the *kulcapi* functioned as a medium for personal expression and leisure, often played to fill spare time or as part of informal performances (Rahmah, [2013](#)).

The second stage in the *kulcapi*'s evolution was its integration into the *gendang telu sedalanen*, a traditional Karo ensemble comprising three types of drums. The incorporation of the *kulcapi* into this ensemble marked a significant shift from entertainment to ritual function. The *gendang telu sedalanen* itself has spiritual significance and is often used in ceremonial rituals. The addition of the *kulcapi* enriched the musical and symbolic dimensions of the performance. In this context, the *kulcapi* serves not only as a musical instrument but also as a medium for conveying prayers and hopes

to ancestors, reflecting the close relationship between music and spirituality in Karo culture (Minawati & Suryanti, 2022).

The *Gendang Lima Sedalanan* is a traditional Karo musical ensemble consisting of five main instruments: the *Sarune*, *Gung*, *Penganak*, and two unnamed instruments. Each instrument has a respected role and position in the ensemble, with the *Sarune* as the leader. The *Sarune* not only plays the main musical role but also carries the responsibility of leading the ensemble during performances or ceremonies (P. Ginting et al., 2021).

The transformation from five players to four reflects adaptations within traditional music practices, possibly due to the need for efficiency in performances and adjustments to modern demands. As a whole, the *Gendang Lima Sedalanan* is not merely a musical instrument but a crucial component of Karo cultural identity and spirituality. It plays a key role in preserving and transmitting Karo traditional music heritage while continuously adapting to remain relevant in today's cultural life.

At this stage, the *kulcapi* is no longer a solo instrument but part of a larger ensemble, the *gendang telu sedalanan*. This ensemble consists of the *kulcapi*, *mangkok*, and *keteng-keteng*, which work together to create musical harmony. The term "gendang telu sedalanan" arises from the presence of three instruments and three players working in unison. In the Siadi era, the use of *gendang telu sedalanan* became common in various rituals, especially in the *Erpangir Ku Lau* ceremony. The *kulcapi*'s popularity during this period was limited to well-known players like *Tukang Ginting*, whose playing skills were highly regarded. The distinctive and beautiful technique of playing the *kulcapi* sets it apart from other traditional instruments (Angin & Wimbrayardi, 2022).

The shift from entertainment to ritual function also reflects the social and religious dynamics within Karo society. *Pemena* customs, or beliefs in ancestral spirits, play a central role in the spiritual life of the Karo people. In this context, the use of the *kulcapi* helps preserve connections with ancestral traditions and reinforces cultural identity. Through music, spiritual values and beliefs can be conveyed and passed on to future generations (Tarigan et al., 2022).

Evolution of *kulcapi* use reflects how this musical instrument has not only survived but grown alongside Karo society. From solo usage to traditional ensembles and integration with modern technology, the *kulcapi* remains an important symbol of Karo cultural identity and heritage. Its role in ritual and spiritual contexts highlights the significance of music as a medium for connecting the past with the present, ensuring traditions remain vibrant while adapting to change.

The modern era of kulcapi usage

In the modern era, the *kulcapi* has undergone further transformation through its integration with the *gendang keyboard*, reflecting an adaptation to technological advancements and changing musical preferences. This combination illustrates the ability of the Karo community to blend traditional elements with modern innovations, creating a new form of musical expression that still respects their cultural roots. The *gendang keyboard* brings a different tonal quality and allows for more variety in musical performances, while the *kulcapi* continues to provide its distinctive traditional touch (P. Ginting et al., 2021).

During this period, the use of the *kulcapi* became closely linked with the introduction of a new instrument to the Karo community: the keyboard. This instrument was brought by *Djasa Tarigan* to facilitate musical performance, especially in playing the *gendang karo*. The shift from traditional instruments to the Western keyboard occurred in the 1990s.

Initially, the keyboard was incorporated into traditional Karo ensembles to accompany the *gendang guro-guro aron*, a traditional performance art. However, over time, the Western instrument began to be used independently, without traditional musical accompaniment, in *gendang guro-guro aron* performances. This adaptation was possible because the keyboard could be programmed to mimic traditional Karo rhythms, producing an imitation sound referred to as *gendang kibod*. This transition reduced the use of traditional Karo instruments, including the *kulcapi*. However, unlike other traditional instruments, the *kulcapi* retained its presence. This persistence is evident in the modern era, where some *kulcapi* players began to embrace the keyboard and experimented with combining it with the *kulcapi* in various ceremonial and ritual settings (Tarigan et al., 2022).

In the 2000s, the combined use of the *kulcapi* and keyboard in ceremonial and ritual performances became increasingly popular within the Karo community. However, some uses of the *kulcapi* began shifting from ritual to entertainment functions. This shift began as the *kulcapi* attracted the interest of Karo musicians who aimed to popularize the instrument more broadly. One notable example is Jacky Raju Sembiring, a renowned *kulcapi* player who combined it with modern instruments, resulting in compositions featuring guitar, bass, drums, and other instruments, with the *kulcapi* as the main melodic voice. He also began organizing concerts and participating in various cultural festivals across North Sumatra. This led to broader experimentation within the community, as more people began incorporating the *kulcapi* into modern ensembles or bands. Consequently, the *kulcapi*'s musical function evolved from primarily ritualistic to a form of entertainment (Rahmah, [2013](#)).

This process of adaptation demonstrates the flexibility and creativity of the Karo community in preserving their cultural identity while remaining open to new influences and innovations. Through all its transformations, the *kulcapi* has remained a strong symbol of ethnic identity and cultural heritage. Its use in various contexts, from traditional ceremonies to entertainment performances, highlights how this instrument continues to play an important role in Karo cultural life.

The application of amplification technology to the *kulcapi* represents a significant adaptation for maintaining the relevance of this traditional instrument in the modern era. By installing a spool on the resonator, the *kulcapi* sound can be amplified, making it clearly audible even in performances with modern instruments like the keyboard. This is especially important in the context of the *gendang guro-guro aron*, where various instruments are played together, and balanced sound is key to achieving harmonious music (Silangit et al., [2024](#)).

The use of amplification on the *kulcapi* exemplifies how tradition and technology can combine to enrich cultural experiences. With enhanced volume and sound quality, the *kulcapi* is better suited for larger and more varied performance formats, such as concerts and festivals. This not only enhances appreciation for Karo traditional music but also enables the *kulcapi* to compete with modern instruments in terms of clarity and power.

Moreover, the adoption of amplification technology for the *kulcapi* reflects innovation in how the Karo people respond to modernization challenges. By retaining traditional characteristics and playing techniques, the electronically amplified *kulcapi* can continue to play a central role in various aspects of Karo cultural life. This approach helps preserve musical traditions while ensuring that the instrument remains relevant and appealing to younger generations growing up in a technology-driven world (G. A. A. Ginting et al., [2024](#)).

The use of amplification also enables the *kulcapi* to feature in a variety of events, from traditional ceremonies to contemporary music performances. This broadens the scope of *kulcapi* usage and allows players to experiment with different musical styles and genres. Thus, the *kulcapi* not only maintains its function as a cultural identity symbol but also transforms into a dynamic and versatile instrument within the modern musical landscape (Sembiring et al., [2022](#)).

In summary, the transition of the *kulcapi* from a ritualistic to an entertainment function reflects the dynamic process of cultural evolution. It illustrates how the Karo people can preserve their traditions while adapting to changes and technological advancements. As part of Karo cultural heritage, the *kulcapi* remains a bridge linking the past with the present, ensuring that cultural values and traditions continue to live and evolve within modern society.

CONCLUSION

The *kulcapi* embodies the cultural resilience of the Karo people in navigating changes over time. Although it has transformed from a sacred ritual instrument to an entertainment medium within contemporary music, the *kulcapi* continues to uphold core values that symbolize Karo cultural identity. This evolution demonstrates that tradition can adapt to modernity without losing its cultural roots. The integration of the *kulcapi* with modern instruments by musicians such as Jacky Raju Sembiring reflects efforts to maintain its relevance and broaden public appreciation for Karo cultural heritage.

This study is limited to exploring the functional transformation of the *kulcapi* within the cultural and musical context of Karo society without delving deeper into the technical or musical aspects of the instrument. Additionally, constraints related to data sources and recent references regarding the Karo community's understanding of the *kulcapi* in the modern era pose challenges in further examining shifts in cultural perceptions and values. Further research is

needed to examine how the Karo community's perspectives on the *kulcapi* evolve amidst continuously shifting cultural dynamics.

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