

Resolving the Contradictions in Parenting Roles within Karo Culture and the Church

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Abstract

This article explores the contradictions in parenting role principles between Karo culture and the teachings of the Batak Karo Protestant Church (GBKP). Employing a qualitative method with a literature review approach, the research examines gender roles in parenting through the lens of Karo cultural perspectives and GBKP doctrines. The analysis reveals significant differences in the emphasis on gender roles, posing challenges for Christian Karo families in harmonizing parenting practices with both cultural values and religious teachings. The research recommends a pedagogical approach that balances the roles of fathers and mothers to foster harmonious and holistic parenting. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed to develop a more inclusive Christian family education model.

Keywords: Karo culture, parenting roles, Batak Karo Protestant Church, Christian education

Introduction

Christian education within the family is a crucial process in shaping the spiritual and moral foundation of a Christian individual. Bruner and Stroope (2010, p. 27) emphasize that a home is not merely a place of residence but serves as the primary context where individuals receive spiritual instruction and directly experience spiritual realities. Thompson (1989, p. 21), in discussing the negative impact of family dysfunction on a person's life, asserts that the family should be the first environment where one learns about love, sacrifice, and commitment—essential elements of spiritual life. Similarly, Horace Bushnell's classic theory of Christian education highlights the family as the foremost and most significant setting for nurturing such values.

One key aspect of Christian education in the family is parenting. Within this element, parents hold a vital role with inherent "authority" over their children from the time they are in the womb (Bushnell, 1947, p. 119). Rainey and Rainey (2018, p. 31) further, explain that parenting is a deliberate process requiring long-term commitment from both parents. Likewise, Balswick and Balswick (2021, p. 231) argue that families play a central role in teaching Christian moral and spiritual values to children, a process influenced not only by parents but also by other family members such as grandparents or uncles. These perspectives underscore the importance of parenting as a core element in Christian education, emphasizing the responsibility of parents as the primary contributors to this process.

Parents, as the primary agents of Christian education within the family, are inevitably influenced by culture. Pazmino (2016) asserts that Christian education is always shaped by its context, including cultural factors. Research by Boiliu and Polii (2020) reveals that cultural and social environments significantly impact how parents educate their children, including how specific cultural values and norms shape their approach to religious and moral education. Building on these perspectives, this discussion seeks to explore how cultural influences shape parenting principles and practices in nurturing children.

In various cultures, particularly in Indonesia, the role of parenting often positions mothers as the primary caregivers. This principle is also evident in Karo culture. The terms, idioms, values, and cultural practices of the Karo people tend to place mothers as the central figures in the parenting process (Brahmana, 2019, p. 10). Similarly, Karo's religious beliefs highlight the mother's dominant role in shaping a child's spirituality (Rae, 1994, p. 19). On the other hand, in catechism

training materials and church ministry practices, fathers are portrayed as the primary figures in teaching and exemplifying Christian values within the family, emphasizing the role of the father as the spiritual leader. This reality reflects a contradiction between the parenting principles rooted in Karo cultural traditions and those based on Christian beliefs, particularly within families that adhere to both. From the perspective of Christian education, parenting should be carried out equally by both parents, father, and mother, to ensure a holistic and balanced upbringing for the child. Therefore, this discussion aims to map these conflicting principles and propose an ideal framework for parental roles in parenting that aligns with Christian education.

In recent decades, several writings have focused on the cultural element to the role of fathers in parenting. First, Brahmana (2019) explores masculine ideology among Karo men, which she argues contributes to psychological gender role conflicts. Based on her field research on the husbands of the Batak Karo Protestant Church (Gereja Batak Karo Protestan - GBKP) pastors, Brahmana reveals a positive correlation between masculine ideology and psychological stress experienced by these husbands (Brahmana, 2019). However, this research focuses solely on the relationship between culture and psychological pressure on pastor husbands, without examining it from a Christian education perspective.

Second, Tambunan et al. (2024) discuss how Karo's parenting patterns contribute to preserving cultural identity and shaping the character of young children. They argue that Karo parents – both fathers and mothers – and even the broader community play a role in instilling Karo cultural values and traditions (Tambunan et al., 2024). Their research emphasizes the need for deliberate and collective efforts within families and communities to pass on Karo cultural values from one generation to the next. Ultimately, culture significantly influences Karo's parents' principles in raising their children (Tambunan et al., 2024).

Sembiring et al. (2021) conducted research on the term *si rukat nakan* in Karo society, which they argue that it reflects traces of gender equality within the culture. They explain that while this term is often misunderstood as a symbol that demeans women, it conveys the opposite. Their research demonstrates that *si rukat nakan* is a form of respect toward women (Sembiring et al., 2021, p. 170). Although this research helps readers understand how Karo culture perceives gender roles, it does not explore its connection to Christian education.

S.U. Ginting (2019), in her article *Familialism Ideology Among Karo Batak and Javanese Women in Purwobinangun Village*, examines how cultural

ideologies drive Karo Batak and Javanese women to strive to be good wives and mothers. This has led to domestic roles being fully assigned to women. On a positive note, Ginting observes that this ideology fosters hard work among Karo women, making them pivotal figures in family life (S. U. Ginting, 2019, p. 85). However, her research does not address the impact of cultural ideologies on parenting roles within Christian families or in the context of Christian education, as her analysis is framed from feminist and cultural perspectives.

Based on the theoretical explanations about parenting and previous writings, this research will delve deeper into how the Karo people understand the principles of parenting within families, particularly in identifying who holds the primary role in parenting. Furthermore, it will examine the Church's teachings regarding the figure responsible for parenting within the family, especially from the perspective of Christian doctrine. Finally, it will explore the ideal Christian parenting role based on the principles of Christian education, emphasizing a balanced role between father and mother.

This research aims to demonstrate the contradictions between cultural views in Karo society and Church teachings, particularly those of GBKP, regarding who should assume the primary role in parenting. The author seeks to bridge these differences by adhering to more comprehensive pedagogical principles, providing insights to help the Church reevaluate the parenting roles it teaches to Christian families.

Method

This research uses a qualitative method with a literature review approach. The literature review is employed to collect, examine, and analyze literature related to the research topic. To support the thesis statement in this article, the author will first explain the principles of parenting roles within Karo culture. Next, the author will describe the principles of parenting in Church teachings, particularly in GBKP, as outlined in catechism books. Finally, the author will outline key parenting principles from the perspective of Christian education and the nurturing of Christian families. Through this process, this paper aims to offer readers a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive concept of Christian parenting roles.

Findings and Discussion

In Christian education, as well as in education in general, there are two terms commonly used in parenting principles: parenting and nurturing. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, parenting is defined as the responsibilities and activities related to raising a child. Nurturing, derived from the word "nurture," refers to the act of feeding, caring for, and protecting someone or something (Jones et al., 2011). In the Indonesian dictionary (KBBI), the term *mengasuh*, derived from the word *asuh*, is defined as the act of caring for, guiding, and leading (Puspita et al., 2022).

Based on the definitions explored, parenting has a broader scope compared to nurturing. It is more philosophical and principle-based, while nurturing is more practical. In Christian parenting principles, according to Jensen (2011, pp. 95–96), parenting is more than just the physical care and upbringing of a child. It is a spiritual responsibility undertaken by parents, involving the formation of the child's character and values, teaching them about love, and fostering their ability to love. Christian parenting is a process where parents provide instruction, guidance, and role models to their children within the context of Christian values. Parents create a harmonious and loving family environment, actively discuss spiritual matters, and build a close relationship with their children. This aligns with what Horace Bushnell expressed in Saputra's (2022) writing, stating that Christian nurture is the experience of a child growing up in a Christian family. Bushnell notes that children raised in a Christian environment tend to absorb the piety of their parents, and more importantly, God commands parents to guide them.

The discussion on the definition of parenting demonstrates that it is closely related to the roles played by parents in educating, shaping, teaching, and nurturing the development of their children. Each parent has a unique parenting style. According to a study on contemporary family issues edited by Abela and Walker (2013, p. 247), different cultures significantly influence parenting principles and shape how parents raise their children. For instance, in Asia, mothers are expected to be actively involved in their children's education and upbringing. This is influenced by the patriarchal culture prevalent in many Asian societies. Patriarchy leads to an unequal division of responsibilities, with mothers shouldering the majority of parenting and household duties, while fathers are more involved as providers (Abela & Walker, 2013). The Karo culture is also

patrilineal in nature. Therefore, the following section will explore how Karo culture views parenting roles within the family.

Parenting in Karo Culture

The Karo people adhere to patriarchal cultural values, where ultimate power lies in the hands of men. As a patriarchal society, the Karo people generally distinguish individuals based on gender, not only in terms of physical appearance but also in its impact on social life (Brahmana, 2019). In Karo culture, lineage, or *merga*, follows the paternal line. However, the mother's *merga* is also part of one's identity, albeit referred to as *bebere* (Tambunan et al., 2024, p. 164).

In general, within Karo culture, men are considered superior to women. The opinions and decisions of men are more likely to be listened to than those of women (Tridah, 1986, p. 22). In rituals or traditional ceremonies, men are placed at the front or in a position of honor (*amak mentar*). During these ceremonies, it is the husband's name that is called, not the wife's name, even if the husband is absent. This reflects the societal expectation that men are primarily involved in public activities (Brahmana, 2019).

However, according to E. Ginting (1995), in the traditional Karo perception, women were viewed in a dichotomous manner – either respected or degraded. In terms of respect, the wife's family is referred to as *Kalimbubu* or, in Karo religious beliefs, honored with the title *Dibata ni idah* (visible God). The Karo people are expected to show respect and adhere to strict norms of politeness when interacting with *Kalimbubu*. On the other hand, Ginting notes that women were often seen solely as producers of offspring, and when a woman is unable to bear children (infertile), a man is permitted to take another wife or "discard" his current wife. According to Singarimbun (1975, p. 42), a Karo wife was viewed as her husband's property, a result of the "gold exchange" or dowry.

In family life, the mother's role is to nurture, while the father's role is to discipline, although these roles were not always clearly defined. Tasks related to household chores, such as sweeping, fetching water, caring for children, or nurturing, were considered women's duties. When a husband took on tasks outside his gender role, it could diminish his dignity. For instance, carrying a child during a traditional ceremony could lower a man's social standing. A man who frequently performed tasks typically reserved for women was often called *pa diberu* – a man who is commanded by his wife, or a man who behaves like a woman (Tridah, 1986).

In parenting, when a child is considered disobedient, neglected, or violates societal norms, the mother is blamed for not properly raising the child. However, psychologically, it is the father who feels ashamed, and this situation often triggers him to resort to violence against his wife and children. According to Rae (1994), in ancient beliefs or *perbegu*, women also played a dominant role as shamans or mediators to communicate with the spiritual world.

According to E. Ginting (1995, p. 87), in family or marital relations, women are given the title "si rukat nakan," which refers to their responsibility to prepare food and drink for their husbands. In other words, *si rukat nakan* symbolizes someone who performs domestic chores in the home. However, based on research conducted by Sembiring et al. (2021), the term *si rukat nakan* is not a form of violence or a way to degrade women. The domestic role associated with *nakan*, which represents honor in Karo society, indicates that those who fulfill this role are considered respectable. Nevertheless, from a parenting perspective, this title emphasizes that the mother is primarily expected to assume the role of parenting.

This is further complemented by the title *si encari nakan* given to the husband. *Si encari nakan* can be translated as "the rice provider" in Indonesian. This title reflects the role of the husband or father as the breadwinner, responsible for meeting the family's material needs (E. Ginting, 1995). It is also connected to the concept of *sangap* or prosperity in Karo society. In other words, a husband or father is expected to work, typically outside the home, to ensure the family's needs are met or to achieve prosperity. Parenting duties and domestic tasks are assigned to the wife. In daily life, Karo women generally also work in the fields, farms, or gardens, but the responsibility of being the "rice provider" remains focused on the man (E. Ginting, 1995).

The views of Karo ethnologists and cultural scholars align with recent studies on fathers and mothers within Karo families. Karina Brahmana's research on the wives of GBKP pastors reveals that the cultural emphasis on the mother's role, rather than the father's in parenting, creates psychological pressure for the pastors. This is due to the conflict between cultural expectations and the actual needs within the family (Brahmana, 2019). In his research, Sembiring et al. (2021) also revealed that the idiom *si rukat nakan* in Karo society should not justify perpetuating subordination of women or Karo mothers. However, according to them, this still frequently occurs in Karo society today.

Based on these principles and research findings, Karo culture has principles that continue to influence parents' roles in parenting today. This aligns

with what Brofenbrenner, as cited by Bornstein (2019), expressed regarding the role of culture in shaping the foundation of parenting. He explains that a central issue in understanding parenting and appreciating children is the role of culture (Bornstein, 2019, p. 477). He argues that this environmental layer has a profound impact on individuals. Culture not only guides behavior but also shapes the meaning and actions in parenting.

Parenting in GBKP Teaching

The Church's teachings on the family and the role of parents can be viewed in the Catechism textbooks used in GBKP. These lessons are given to teenagers aged 15-17 and adults wishing to become members of the GBKP congregation. The material is also provided during catechesis for parents who are about to baptize their children. In the Catechism textbook specifically designed by GBKP, it is stated that the father is the priest in the family and is responsible for being a role model in living out the faith. Meanwhile, the wife is described as a helper to her husband (GBKP, 2020, p. 164). In the Sunday worship liturgy, during the confession of sins, it is also mentioned that the father acknowledges his failure in fulfilling his role as the priest in the family (Moderamen GBKP, 2015, p. 35).

In the PA Mamre (Bible Study for Fathers Commission), it is often reiterated that the father is the priest in the family, primarily responsible for parenting the family's faith. The Book of Deuteronomy 6 and Proverbs, which are often highlighted in the PA reading materials, are frequently used as the foundation for emphasizing the father's central role in family education, especially in relation to children. The Pre-Marital Counseling materials, which serve as the basis for couples preparing for marriage in the Church, also emphasize that a husband must be the head in teaching Christian faith values to the family members (Moderamen GBKP, 2015, p. 51).

From the explanation above, it is clear that in the GBKP teachings, the role of parenting is primarily emphasized for the father. In this teaching, the roles of the father and mother are not seen as equal, with the father being placed higher hierarchically in teaching Christian values. Although the mother is also encouraged to take part in parenting, her role tends to be supportive, assisting the father in parenting.

Parenting Role Contradiction

Based on the two parenting concepts outlined above, particularly regarding who should take the primary role in parenting, both Karo culture and the teachings of the GBKP reveal fundamental differences in who holds the primary responsibility for parenting within the family. In Karo culture, the responsibility for parenting is primarily placed on the mother. This is reflected in various terms and responsibilities assigned to women in domestic contexts, such as "*si rukat nakan*," which indicates the mother as the main person responsible for caring for and providing for the household's needs. This reveals that in Karo culture, the mother plays the central role in parenting, while the father is more focused on public duties and providing for the family.

In contrast, in GBKP teachings, the primary responsibility for parenting and spiritual development within the family is placed on the father as the head of the household. The father is seen as spiritually responsible for leading the family in the Christian faith, with the mother serving as a helper who supports the father's duties. This teaching is rooted in biblical teachings and the Calvinist theology adopted by GBKP (GBKP, 2020). This perspective reflects GBKP's view of the father as the primary leader, especially in the spiritual upbringing of the children, and emphasizes a hierarchical family structure that positions the father as the head of the household.

This contradiction highlights the difference between the patriarchal culture of the Karo people, which prioritizes the mother's role in domestic parenting, and the GBKP teachings, which focus more on the central role of the father in spiritual matters. In an ideal Christian educational perspective, a balance between the roles of both father and mother is necessary to shape a child's character and faith holistically. Therefore, the next section will discuss the concept of an ideal parenting role from a Christian education perspective.

Pedagogical Principles of Christian Parenting

In the tradition of the Reformed and Evangelical Church, according to Robert Pazmino, the principle of parenting receives significant attention. He asserts that parents are responsible for the spiritual training of their children. Faith-based parenting takes place in the home through the use of catechisms, which are written for both children and adults. Additionally, parents are encouraged to foster personal application of the Christian faith and to serve as role models in living out the teachings of the church. The Reformation

emphasized the importance of the family in religious education and the transmission of Christian faith to the next generation (Pazmino, 2016). From this paradigm, parents are called to actively teach and nurture their children in the ways of the Lord, integrating faith into all aspects of life. Parents must also recognize and honor the uniqueness and individuality that God has given to each child. Pazmino encourages the Church to equip parents to be ministers and educators within their own homes (Pazmino, 2016).

Balswick and Balswick (2021) in *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, which comprehensively addresses family life issues, particularly from a theological and pedagogical perspective, states that the involvement of both parents in parenting not only provides emotional support but also creates a stable and conducive environment for the child's development. According to Balswick and Balswick (2021), when both parents are actively engaged in parenting, they offer a strong model for children on how to build healthy and respectful relationships. This underscores the importance of both parents in shaping a child's character and values.

In line with this, Barna and Myers (2017, pp. 21–22) emphasize that the roles of both father and mother are crucial in shaping the cultural and spiritual norms of children in today's context. Parents today face the challenge of instilling Christian principles in their children while combating the pervasive negative secular influences in society. Mothers and fathers must build strong relationships with their children, actively engage in their upbringing, and prioritize their spiritual and moral development (Barna & Myers, 2017, pp. 21–22).

Miller (2006, pp. 79–82), in his writing on parenting in the modern era, emphasizes the importance of parents working together as a team in parenting. In this framework, both the father and mother collaborate to develop effective methods, discipline, and communication strategies for their children. The parents also share equal responsibility in making decisions regarding the upbringing of their children. The relationship between parents and children is one of mutual respect, not a hierarchical one, fostering a friendly and cooperative bond (Miller, 2006, pp. 79–82). This principle highlights that while fathers and mothers may have different personalities, they unite in their parenting roles within the family.

Regarding the spiritual formation of children, Anthony (2010, p. 2) explains that the role of parents in parenting is to shift their focus from self-centeredness to caring for others. Parents are responsible for shaping their children's worldview based on the teachings of love that Jesus taught. Both

parents are expected to model authentic transformation by applying spiritual truths in their lives. Through the active presence and involvement of both parents, children gain a clear and complete understanding of Christian values and develop a strong faith (Anthony, 2010, p. 2). Pedagogically, this principle underscores that both parents have equally important roles in the spiritual formation of their children.

Solving the Contradictions of Parenting Roles

To bridge the contradiction between the parenting roles in Karo culture and the teachings of GBKP regarding parenting, the author proposes an integrative approach based on Christian pedagogical concepts. The first guiding principle for the Church or Christian family educators is to emphasize that while the roles of father and mother may differ, both are equally significant in raising children spiritually and emotionally. Integrating cultural and Church perspectives involves recognizing the strengths of each role in its respective domain, while still collaborating to create holistic parenting. In this way, fathers and mothers can work together, both in spiritual activities and everyday parenting, each in their role but with mutual support.

The second principle is that the Christian parenting concept developed should prioritize balance between the responsibilities of the father and mother, as stated by theologians such as Robert Pazmino and Jack Balswick. In this context, the Church, as a supporting community for Christian families, should guide Karo fathers to take on not only public or economic roles but also emotional and spiritual responsibilities within the family (Balswick & Balswick, 2021). Conversely, mothers continue to play an essential role in the moral and spiritual education of children. The Church should develop catechism teachings and parenting education to help both fathers and mothers recognize themselves as active figures in shaping their children's character, modeling the love and commitment taught in the Bible (Koch, 2023, p. 10).

Third, GBKP needs to consider the influence of local culture, such as the terms "*si rukat nakan*" for mothers and "*si encari nakan*" for fathers. Through study and education, these roles can be reinterpreted within a Christian framework of equality, where both mother and father are equally respected without diminishing their respective primary functions (Barna & Myers, 2017). The Church can facilitate discussions and family training to avoid placing an undue

burden on one party and to strengthen collaboration between partners in parenting.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this paper has shown how Christian education, within the context of local culture, needs to consider the cultural dynamics that influence parenting patterns in families. In this regard, there is a need for awareness of the necessity for an inclusive and contextual Christian education approach, which not only emphasizes theological and biblical values but also respects local cultural aspects. Another theoretical implication is that Christian education should adopt a parenting perspective that places fathers and mothers in equal roles, rather than hierarchical ones. This aligns with Christian pedagogical principles that stress collaboration, where parents work as a team, with both actively contributing to the formation of a child's character and spirituality.

Practically, the Church needs to upgrade or improve catechism materials and family guidance programs, focusing on the importance of synergy between fathers and mothers in guiding their children spiritually and culturally. This way, Christian parenting practices, especially within the Karo community, can become more integrative, addressing contemporary needs while maintaining a strong foundation in the Christian faith. The GBKP Church, as well as churches in Indonesia, should continually evaluate and study evolving parenting principles within cultural communities and church teachings so that Christian education within families and the Church can become a significant foundation for character development.

Further Research Recommendations

The strength of my research lies in presenting data from various literatures on the concept of Karo parenting. This research provides a comprehensive understanding of gender roles and parental responsibilities within the context of local culture. Additionally, the use of Christian pedagogical references strengthens the argument that the ideal parenting role should be balanced between the father and mother. This approach highlights the values of Christian education, emphasizing family harmony and equality in parenting, making it a valuable reference for the Church seeking to develop a more integrative parenting model.

This research is also significant in bridging the principles of two different perspectives: traditional culture and church teachings. By mapping out these contradictions, the author hopes to help readers understand the challenges that Karo Christian families deal with in integrating cultural and spiritual values. This forms a crucial foundation for designing educational programs that can be adapted for other communities facing similar issues.

However, a limitation of this research that needs further development is the lack of empirical data illustrating how the principles of parenting roles in Karo culture and GBKP have been applied. Relying solely on literature analysis, this research focuses more on theory and does not provide concrete evidence from the real-life experiences of Karo families. Field research, including interviews with Karo Christian parents, would enrich these findings and offer deeper insights into how the roles of father and mother are implemented in everyday life.

Additionally, this research could be expanded by examining the psychological and social impacts of unbalanced parenting roles on children. Incorporating a psychological perspective would provide insight into how parenting structures influence a child's mental and spiritual development. Thus, this research would not only focus on gender roles and parenting principles but also lead to a more comprehensive understanding of how parenting affects the well-being of children in Karo Christian families.

Conclusion

From the explanation above, it is clear that there is a contradiction between the role of parenting in Karo culture, which places the mother as the central figure in parenting, and the teachings of the Batak Karo Protestant Church (GBKP), which emphasizes the father as the spiritual leader of the family. This discrepancy presents a challenge for Karo Christian families in fulfilling parenting roles that align with both cultural values and religious teachings. To address this contradiction, this paper offers a Christian pedagogical approach that emphasizes a balanced role between father and mother, with both parents actively participating in the spiritual and moral education of their children in a harmonious and equal manner. This approach is expected to create a comprehensive parenting model that is sensitive to the local cultural context while strengthening the child's spiritual foundation in line with Christian values.

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