Integritas Terbuka
Peace and Interfaith Studies
INT E-ISSN: 2985-301X
PREFIX DOI: 10.59029

Potential Cultural Violence in Lineage Norms: An Analysis of Voluntary Childlessness in Karo Society, Indonesia

Petra Arai Jhorena Ginting[1*], Mochamad Ziaul Haq[2]

[1] Faculty of Philosophy, Parahyangan Catholic University Bandung, Indonesia.
[2] Centre for Philosophy, Culture, and Religious Studies (CPCReS), Parahyangan Catholic University Bandung, Indonesia.

* Corresponding Author, Email: petraarai9@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Childfree;
cultural violence;
patrilineal kinship;
Karo.

Article history:

Received 2026-06-02
Revised 2026-06-08
Accepted 2026-06-08

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between the voluntary decision to remain childfree, norms governing lineage continuity, and the potential legitimation of cultural violence in Karo society, Indonesia. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on a literature review of Karo kinship systems, reproductive autonomy, and Johan Galtung's theory of cultural violence. The researchers apply interpretive thematic analysis to examine the relationships among lineage norms, social pressure, and mechanisms of cultural legitimation. The findings indicate that Karo society assigns collective significance to offspring as successors to family lineages, bearers of family identity, and participants in kinship relations within the *Rakut Sitelu* system. These meanings shape social expectations that may conflict with the decision to remain childfree. However, kinship norms do not automatically generate pressure or violence, as their application also allows room for negotiation. The potential for cultural violence emerges when individuals invoke lineage continuity to justify practices or conditions that disadvantage others. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing reproductive autonomy while respecting the continuity of cultural identity. The study offers a contextual elaboration of Galtung's theory through three analytical processes: the formation of collective norms, moral justification, and the legitimation of social pressure or inequality. This framework clarifies the distinction between the integrative functions of cultural norms and their potential use in legitimizing violence.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis hubungan antara pilihan childfree (tanpa anak atas pilihan sendiri), norma keberlanjutan marga, dan potensi legitimasi kekerasan kultural dalam masyarakat Karo, Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka melalui penelaahan literatur mengenai sistem kekerabatan Karo, otonomi reproduksi, dan kekerasan kultural Johan Galtung. Data dianalisis secara tematik interpretatif untuk mengidentifikasi hubungan antara norma keturunan, tekanan sosial, dan mekanisme legitimasi budaya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keturunan memiliki makna kolektif sebagai penerus marga, identitas keluarga, dan hubungan kekerabatan dalam sistem Rakut Sitelu. Pemaknaan tersebut membentuk ekspektasi sosial yang berpotensi menimbulkan ketegangan dengan pilihan childfree. Namun, norma kekerabatan tidak secara otomatis menghasilkan

tekanan atau kekerasan karena penerapannya juga memungkinkan negosiasi. Potensi kekerasan kultural muncul ketika nilai keberlanjutan keturunan digunakan untuk membenarkan tindakan atau kondisi yang merugikan individu. Penelitian ini berimplikasi pada pentingnya memahami pilihan reproduksi dengan tetap menghargai keberlanjutan identitas budaya dan otonomi individu. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada elaborasi kontekstual teori Galtung melalui tiga proses analitis: pembentukan norma kolektif, pembenaran moral, dan legitimasi terhadap tekanan atau ketidaksetaraan. Kerangka tersebut memperjelas batas antara fungsi integratif norma budaya dan potensinya sebagai legitimasi kekerasan.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.

1. INTRODUCTION

Changing reproductive preferences have become an important phenomenon in contemporary family dynamics. Individuals and couples increasingly view childbearing not simply as an expected consequence of marriage but as a decision involving personal autonomy, financial readiness, health conditions, and family life goals. These changes have occurred alongside declining fertility rates in many countries, including Indonesia. Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2022) reported that Indonesia's total fertility rate (TFR) declined from 5.61 children per woman in 1971 to 2.18 children per woman, according to the results of the 2020 Long Form Population Census. World Bank data also indicate that Indonesia's TFR reached approximately 2.1 children per woman in 2024 (World Bank, n.d.). Although declining fertility rates do not necessarily indicate an increase in voluntary childlessness, these developments reflect changes in reproductive patterns that require examination in relation to family values and the social structure of society.

These changing reproductive preferences encounter deeply rooted pronatalist norms that position children as an essential component of married life. A Populix survey involving 2,608 respondents in Indonesia in November 2024 found that 45% of respondents opposed the decision to remain childfree. Among those who expressed opposition, 39% considered children a blessing from God, 27% emphasized the importance of continuing the family lineage, 24% associated children with family happiness, and 10% linked childbearing to expectations of receiving care in old age (Populix, 2024, as cited in Muhamad, 2024). These findings indicate that individuals evaluate reproductive decisions not only through personal considerations but also through religious beliefs, family continuity, and social expectations. However, the online survey does not necessarily represent the views of the entire Indonesian population. Its findings primarily illustrate the tension between recognizing individual reproductive choices and maintaining social expectations regarding the importance of having children.

This tension takes on particular significance in Karo society, which maintains a patrilineal kinship system. Within this system, descendants, particularly sons, hold an important position in continuing the *marga* (clan lineage) and preserving family identity. Children also contribute to the continuity of kinship relations within the *Rakut Sitelu* system, which organizes relationships among *kalimbubu*, *anak beru*, and *senina*. Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) examined Karo families without sons in Deli Serdang Regency and identified social pressure from relatives and community members through expectations of having male descendants and comments that placed psychological burdens on families. Meanwhile, Sitepu et al. (2026) demonstrated that descendants continue to occupy an important position in Karo customary inheritance practices, although families may adjust the application of customary rules through collective deliberation. These findings suggest that lineage continuity carries social significance beyond the nuclear family. Within this context, some individuals may interpret the decision to remain childfree as a rejection of kinship responsibilities. This issue warrants further investigation because norms that preserve collective identity may also provide justifications for social pressure against individuals who make different reproductive choices.

Previous studies on voluntary childlessness have developed along two major research trajectories. The first trajectory examines the decision to remain childfree as a reproductive choice and an expression of individual autonomy. Höglund and Hildingsson (2022) demonstrated that decisions to avoid pregnancy and parenting may involve health considerations and perceptions of parental responsibilities. In a subsequent study, Höglund and Hildingsson (2023) identified freedom, independence, and control over personal time as important considerations in choosing a childfree life. Salgado and Magalhães (2024) found that childfree women construct their identities and pursue personal fulfillment beyond conventional expectations of motherhood. Through a longitudinal study in Australia, Jin et al. (2024) demonstrated that childhood and early adulthood experiences were associated with different forms of childlessness, including voluntary childlessness. Furthermore, Coufalová et al. (2026) showed that childfree women in midlife construct meanings of responsibility, care, and generativity that do not necessarily depend on parenthood. Collectively, these studies have expanded scholarly understanding of the motivations and subjective experiences of childfree individuals. However, they have not specifically explained how voluntary childlessness may conflict with obligations to maintain family lineages within patrilineal kinship systems.

The second research trajectory examines pronatalism, stigma, and social pressure surrounding voluntary childlessness. McCutcheon (2020) demonstrated that pronatalist values contribute to negative evaluations of women without children. In the Indonesian context, Stephani (2025) found that online news coverage reproduced pronatalist ideology by portraying childfree women as deviant, selfish, and unwilling to fulfill social expectations of motherhood. Rismarini and Adira (2025) demonstrated that Indonesian public perceptions of voluntary childlessness involve differences in knowledge, attitudes, stigma, and gender-based evaluations. Through three experimental studies, Denson et al. (2026) identified negative biases against individuals who voluntarily choose not to have children, particularly when others perceive their decisions as violations of pronatalist norms. Meanwhile, Permana and Himawan (2026) showed that family experiences and personal factors influence attitudes toward voluntary childlessness among married individuals in Indonesia. These five studies indicate that social norms, gender constructions, and moral legitimacy shape reproductive decisions within family life. However, they have not specifically explained how values associated with lineage continuity may provide justifications for social pressure within the Karo kinship system.

These two research trajectories have provided important insights into individual motivations, reproductive experiences, identity construction, social stigma, and the influence of pronatalist norms on voluntary childlessness. Nevertheless, the relationship between childfree decisions and the mechanisms that legitimize social pressure within patrilineal kinship systems requires further investigation. Previous studies of Karo society have also demonstrated the importance of descendants in maintaining clan continuity, inheritance practices, and customary relationships. However, these studies have not adequately connected lineage obligations with reproductive autonomy through the theoretical framework of cultural violence. This research gap concerns not only the limited examination of voluntary childlessness within Karo cultural contexts but also the need to explain the conditions under which cultural values that preserve collective identity may become sources of legitimacy for social pressure or inequality. Therefore, researchers need to examine lineage norms not merely as traditions but also as systems of meaning that may influence the acceptance or rejection of individual reproductive choices.

This study aims to analyze voluntary childlessness within the cultural context of Karo society by focusing on the relationships among patrilineal kinship structures, obligations to maintain clan continuity, and social pressure surrounding individual reproductive choices. Specifically, the study examines how descendants acquire social significance within the *Rakut Sitelu* system, how obligations to continue family lineages shape evaluations of childfree decisions, and how customary values may legitimize social pressure from the perspective of Johan Galtung's theory of cultural violence. By addressing these issues, this study seeks to advance scholarly understanding of the relationship between reproductive autonomy and kinship norms while offering a more context-sensitive interpretation of cultural legitimation mechanisms within family life.

This study advances the argument that potential social pressure surrounding childfree decisions in Karo society involves not only differing perspectives on childbearing but also the cultural legitimation of

obligations to maintain family lineages. Galtung (1990) conceptualized cultural violence as aspects of culture that individuals or institutions may use to justify or legitimize direct and structural violence. In Karo society, lineage continuity norms serve important social functions by preserving family identity and maintaining kinship relationships. However, these norms may also legitimize social pressure when individuals or groups invoke reproductive obligations to justify restrictions on reproductive choices, unequal social standing, or the exclusion of individuals who do not meet customary expectations. Accordingly, this study argues that cultural violence does not automatically arise from patrilineal traditions themselves. Rather, its potential emerges through processes in which individuals or groups use cultural meanings to justify social pressure or inequality against those who make different reproductive choices. This argument emphasizes legitimation mechanisms as the link between kinship values and the potential for cultural violence. It therefore supports a more context-sensitive application of Galtung's theory without equating customary norms with practices of violence.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study examines the relationships among voluntary childlessness (the deliberate decision to remain childfree), the patrilineal kinship system, and norms governing clan continuity in Karo society. The study takes representations of values, norms, and social relationships in the literature as its units of analysis, particularly those concerning the significance of descendants, family obligations, and the acceptance or rejection of childfree decisions. Specifically, the study investigates how the *Rakut Sitelu* system, the transmission of *marga* (clan lineage), and customary responsibilities shape social understandings of childbearing within families. It also examines how these norms may provide a basis for legitimizing social pressure against individuals or couples who voluntarily choose not to have children.

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an interpretive literature-based research design. The researchers selected this approach to understand social meanings and mechanisms of cultural legitimation through critical interpretations of written sources. Literature-based research allows researchers to integrate findings from previous studies and develop a conceptual understanding of social phenomena (Snyder, 2019). This study employs Johan Galtung's theory of cultural violence as an interpretive framework for examining the relationship between kinship norms and justifications for social pressure. Galtung (1990) explains that cultural violence involves aspects of culture that individuals or institutions may use to legitimize direct or structural violence. This framework enables the study to distinguish the role of customary norms in preserving collective identity from their potential use in justifying inequality.

The study draws its data from documents and scholarly publications addressing voluntary childlessness, Karo culture, patrilineal kinship systems, and cultural violence. The primary sources include journal articles, academic books, and previous studies examining reproductive choices, pronatalist norms, social stigma, clan continuity, and kinship relations in Karo society. The study uses Galtung's (1990) work as its principal theoretical source and draws on studies of Karo families and cultural practices to understand the social contexts in which lineage norms operate. The researchers select documents according to their substantive relevance, source credibility, and capacity to explain the relationship between individual reproductive choices and social obligations within kinship systems. Document analysis allows researchers to examine constructions of meaning and social relationships reflected in written materials (Bowen, 2009).

The researchers collect data through documentary research by locating, identifying, and selecting literature relevant to the research objectives. The literature search uses several groups of keywords, including childfree, voluntary childlessness, pronatalism, social stigma, Karo kinship, patrilineal system, *Rakut Sitelu*, and cultural violence. The researchers critically examine relevant publications to identify concepts, arguments, findings, and explanations concerning the social significance of descendants and social pressure surrounding reproductive choices. They then organize the extracted information into categories related to kinship norms, clan continuity, reproductive autonomy, and cultural legitimation. This procedure follows the principles of document analysis, which emphasize

systematic assessments of document relevance and credibility and careful interpretation of textual content (Bowen, 2009).

The researchers analyze the literature through interpretive thematic analysis combined with a theoretical examination grounded in Galtung's concept of cultural violence. The analytical process involves identifying patterns of meaning, developing thematic categories, and interpreting relationships among concepts presented in the literature. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify and develop patterns of meaning relevant to their research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analysis focuses on four main themes: the position of children as successors to clan lineages, reproductive obligations within kinship systems, social pressure surrounding childfree decisions, and the cultural legitimation of restrictions on individual choices. The researchers subsequently interpret these themes through the concept of cultural violence to explain the conditions under which customary norms may justify social pressure or inequality. Finally, they synthesize the findings to develop a conceptual understanding of the relationship between collective identity continuity and reproductive autonomy in Karo society, without treating the literature-based findings as direct representations of the experiences of all members of Karo society.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Social Construction of Descendants within the Karo Kinship System

The findings indicate that descendants hold social and cultural significance in Karo society beyond the biological relationship between parents and children. The presence of children contributes to the continuity of family identity, clan membership, and intergenerational relationships. Within Karo society, families do not function as entirely separate social units; instead, systems of descent and marriage connect them to broader kinship networks. Surbakti et al. (2025) explain that kinship relationships play an important role in maintaining solidarity and organizing social life in Karo society. These findings demonstrate that the significance of descendants extends beyond biological reproduction because successive generations also sustain collective identities and social relationships within the customary system.

This understanding of descendants closely relates to the patrilineal system, which establishes paternal descent as the basis for transmitting clan membership. Karo society recognizes five principal clan groups, collectively known as *Merga Silima*: Karo-Karo, Ginting, Sembiring, Tarigan, and Perangin-angin. Within this system, sons hold an important position as successors to clan lineages, while marriage establishes relationships between families and other kinship groups. Customary inheritance practices also reflect the significance of paternal descent. Bancin et al. (2025) found that patrilineal principles continue to inform inheritance arrangements among Karo families, particularly concerning property associated with lineage continuity. However, families do not apply these principles uniformly, as some adjust the position of female heirs within inheritance arrangements. Thus, the patrilineal system highlights the importance of descendants in maintaining clan identity while allowing families to adapt customary practices to changing social circumstances.

The *Rakut Sitelu* system further illustrates the social significance of descendants by organizing relationships among *kalimbubu*, *anak beru*, and *senina*. The term *kalimbubu* refers to wife-giving kinship groups, whereas *anak beru* refers to wife-receiving groups that assume particular responsibilities in customary activities. The term *senina* refers to kinship relationships based on shared familial affiliation or equivalent positions within kinship networks. These three components establish interdependent social relationships and define individuals' roles in various customary practices. Surbakti et al. (2025) demonstrate that *Rakut Sitelu* functions as a mechanism of solidarity that regulates social relationships, marriage, and everyday life in Karo society. Within this system, childbirth and marriage contribute to the formation and continuity of kinship relationships. Consequently, lineage continuity carries broader significance than the transmission of clan membership alone because it also supports social relationships and customary obligations among kinship groups.

Table 1. Dimensions of the Social Significance of Descendants in the Karo Kinship System

Dimension	Social Significance	Implications for Descendants
Patrilineal system	Paternal descent determines clan membership.	Sons occupy an important position as successors to clan lineages.
Clan identity	Clan affiliation identifies individuals and establishes their membership in kinship groups.	Descendants sustain family identity across generations.
Rakut Sitelu	Relationships among *kalimbubu*, *anak beru*, and *senina* organize customary roles and obligations.	Generational continuity contributes to the maintenance of kinship relationships.
Customary inheritance	Descent systems influence the distribution of family rights and property.	Children's positions relate to the transmission of family rights and responsibilities.
Collective responsibility	Families form part of broader social networks.	Reproductive decisions may become matters of concern for extended families.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Sitepu (2018), Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024), Bancin et al. (2025), and Surbakti et al. (2025).

This social construction indicates that lineage continuity concerns not only individual couples but also the expectations of extended families. Within a kinship system that recognizes clan affiliation as a collective identity, family members may express interest in reproductive decisions because these choices relate to the continuity of intergenerational relationships. Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) documented this situation in their study of Karo families without sons in Deli Serdang Regency. Their findings revealed that relatives and community members exerted pressure by encouraging additional childbearing, expressing expectations for male descendants, and making comments that imposed psychological burdens on families. These findings demonstrate that expectations regarding descendants may extend beyond couples' personal decisions. However, the experiences of families without sons do not necessarily correspond to those of couples who deliberately choose to remain childfree. These situations share only a potential point of connection: the social significance that families and communities attach to lineage continuity.

Customary inheritance practices and the distribution of family responsibilities further illustrate the relationship between descendants and the continuity of social structures. Within a patrilineal system, the transmission of clan membership contributes to the preservation of collective identity and the organization of individuals' positions within kinship networks. Sitepu (2018) demonstrated that developments in social perspectives, education, social environments, and religious values have influenced changes in Karo inheritance practices. Bancin et al. (2025) also found that some families adjust customary inheritance arrangements in response to social changes and family needs. These studies indicate that kinship structures do not necessarily maintain continuity through the rigid application of established norms. Instead, families may adapt customary arrangements to changing social circumstances. Accordingly, clan continuity represents an ongoing process through which families maintain collective identity while negotiating changes in their social practices. Descendants continue to hold significant cultural meaning, but social negotiation also shapes the relationships among lineage, inheritance rights, and customary obligations.

Understanding descendants as a collective concern also reveals potential tensions when extended-family expectations differ from individuals' reproductive preferences. On the one hand, lineage continuity norms provide a foundation for intergenerational solidarity and the preservation of cultural identity. On the other hand, these norms may generate expectations that married couples should have children, particularly descendants who can continue the clan lineage. Tensions may arise when such expectations conflict with couples' decisions about family formation. Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) demonstrated that expectations concerning male descendants can create social pressure on families. However, expectations regarding childbearing do not automatically constitute cultural violence. Researchers must distinguish between norms that sustain kinship relationships and the use of those norms to justify pressure or practices

that disadvantage individuals. This distinction provides an important analytical foundation for understanding the relationship between cultural values and reproductive autonomy.

Overall, the literature synthesis demonstrates that descendants play a central role in maintaining collective identities and social relationships within the Karo patrilineal system, *Merga Silima*, and *Rakut Sitelu*. Children acquire collective significance because they contribute to clan continuity, the organization of kinship relationships, and the transmission of family rights and responsibilities. Nevertheless, families do not apply lineage norms uniformly, as changes in inheritance practices and family relationships reflect broader social transformations. These findings indicate that obligations concerning descendants may generate strong social expectations without necessarily producing identical forms of pressure across families. Within the context of this study, the social construction of descendants provides a conceptual basis for understanding why voluntary childlessness may generate tensions with collective expectations regarding clan continuity. This relationship establishes the foundation for the following analysis of how kinship norms may influence reproductive autonomy through social expectations and pressure.

Childfree Decisions and the Pressure of Kinship Norms in Karo Society

The literature indicates that the decision to remain childfree represents a reproductive choice that differs from childlessness in its broader sense. The term childfree refers to individuals who consciously choose not to have children, whereas childlessness encompasses the condition of having no children, whether by personal choice or circumstances beyond an individual's control. Neal and Neal (2024) emphasize the importance of distinguishing these categories because researchers cannot infer reproductive intentions solely from an individual's parental status. This distinction also contributes to understanding the relationship between reproductive choices and family norms. Individuals who voluntarily choose not to have children may encounter different social evaluations from couples who desire children but have not had them. In Karo society, this distinction becomes particularly relevant because descendants play an important role in maintaining clan continuity and kinship relationships. Therefore, an analysis of childfree decisions must distinguish voluntary reproductive choices from circumstances in which individuals remain without children unintentionally.

The growing recognition of childfree decisions also reflects changing individual orientations toward marriage, family life, and parenting responsibilities. In their study of childfree individuals in Sweden, Höglund and Hildingsson (2023) identified freedom, independence, and control over personal time as important considerations in choosing a life without children. Their findings suggest that individuals do not necessarily choose to remain childfree because they reject the institution of family. Instead, they may view this decision as consistent with their personal needs and life goals. In Indonesia, Rismarini and Adira (2025) demonstrated that childfree decisions generate diverse responses involving knowledge, personal evaluations, gender constructions, and perceptions of family responsibilities. Together, these studies illustrate the complex relationship between changing reproductive preferences and prevailing social values. However, this study cannot directly attribute the economic considerations, employment circumstances, psychological readiness, or personal autonomy discussed in the literature to Karo couples because it did not collect primary data on their reproductive experiences.

The relationship between childfree decisions and the Karo kinship system reveals two value orientations that do not always align. Childfree decisions emphasize individual reproductive autonomy or agreements between partners, whereas the patrilineal kinship system assigns social significance to descendants as successors to clan lineages. Within this context, marriage not only unites two individuals but also establishes and maintains relationships among kinship groups. Brutu et al. (2023) explain that paternal descent plays an important role in determining inheritance rights in Karo society, demonstrating the relationship between lineage and the continuity of family status. Meanwhile, Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) found that Karo families without sons in Deli Serdang Regency may encounter social expectations to have male descendants. Although neither study directly examines couples who voluntarily choose to remain childfree, both provide a basis for understanding why decisions not to have children may attract evaluations that extend beyond personal considerations. Thus, normative tensions may emerge when couples' reproductive autonomy encounters family expectations concerning clan continuity.

Table 2. Tensions Between Reproductive Autonomy and Kinship Norms

Dimension	Orientation Toward Childfree Decisions	Orientation Toward Lineage Norms
Reproductive decisions	Emphasizes individual choice or mutual agreements between partners.	Incorporates expectations from families and kinship groups.
Meaning of marriage	Does not necessarily regard having children as an essential purpose of marriage.	Associates descendants with family and clan continuity.
Family considerations	Prioritizes personal readiness, life goals, and individual responsibilities.	Emphasizes the continuity of collective identity and customary relationships.
Social responsibility	Regards parenting as a responsibility that individuals consciously choose to undertake.	Assigns descendants social significance within kinship networks.
Social consequences	Individuals may encounter disagreement or social stigma.	Families may express concerns about the discontinuation of family lineages.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Neal and Neal (2024), Höglund and Hildingsson (2023), Brutu et al. (2023), Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024), and Rismarini and Adira (2025). This table illustrates differences in normative orientations identified in the literature; it does not imply that all childfree individuals or members of Karo society share uniform perspectives.

Previous studies indicate that social pressure surrounding reproductive decisions may emerge through family interactions, social evaluations, and cultural representations. In the Karo context, Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) found that some families without sons encountered encouragement to have additional children and comments emphasizing the importance of male descendants. Their study documented pressure associated with the absence of sons rather than pressure directed specifically at couples who voluntarily chose to remain childfree. Meanwhile, Rismarini and Adira (2025) identified variations in attitudes, stigma, and social evaluations surrounding childfree decisions in Indonesia. Through an analysis of 137 online news articles, Stephani (2025) demonstrated that Indonesian media representations of childfree women may reproduce negative evaluations associated with pronatalist ideology. In an international context, Höglund and Hildingsson (2023) also found that some childfree individuals experienced situations in which others questioned or failed to respect their reproductive choices. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that reproductive decisions may attract social pressure across different contexts. However, researchers cannot assume that such pressure takes identical forms or reaches comparable levels of intensity across different communities.

Expectations concerning lineage continuity may also function as mechanisms of social regulation when families and communities use reproductive decisions to evaluate individuals or couples. Within kinship systems that recognize descendants as essential to the continuity of collective identity, questions about childbearing may express concern, expectations, or a sense of family responsibility. However, these interactions may acquire different meanings when relatives repeatedly express the same expectations and use them to assess the legitimacy of couples' decisions. Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) demonstrated that demands for male descendants could impose psychological burdens on the families they studied. Similarly, Rismarini and Adira (2025) showed that social evaluations of childfree decisions relate to prevailing views of marriage and reproduction. Drawing on these findings, this study interprets lineage norms as potential mechanisms of social regulation when individuals or groups use them to establish a single standard of an ideal family. Nevertheless, family disagreement or questions about childbearing do not automatically constitute discrimination or violence.

An understanding of the relationship between kinship norms and individual choices must also account for variations in customary practices within Karo society. Although the patrilineal system continues to provide an important foundation for family identity and kinship relationships, families do not necessarily apply customary principles uniformly across different social circumstances. Sebayang et al. (2023) found

that Karo communities may resolve inheritance disputes through *arih-arih*, a customary deliberative process through which participants seek mutual agreement. Kaban et al. (2024) also identified changing social values concerning inheritance rights among Karo Muslim women in Lingga Cultural Village, Karo Regency. These findings demonstrate that community members have opportunities to interpret, negotiate, and adapt customary practices in response to changing social circumstances. Although both studies address inheritance rather than childfree decisions, they provide evidence that Karo kinship practices do not constitute an entirely uniform or unchanging system. Accordingly, researchers should approach responses to reproductive choices as potentially diverse interpretations shaped by particular family relationships rather than as a single attitude shared by all members of Karo society.

Overall, the literature synthesis indicates that childfree decisions and lineage continuity norms intersect through the relationship between reproductive autonomy and collective responsibility. Within the Karo kinship system, descendants play an important role in continuing clan identity and maintaining intergenerational relationships. Meanwhile, studies of voluntary childlessness demonstrate that individuals may choose not to have children for various personal reasons and may encounter different social responses to their decisions. Tensions may emerge when families evaluate individual reproductive choices according to collective expectations concerning descendants. However, research on changes in customary practices and the resolution of family disputes also demonstrates the existence of opportunities for negotiation within Karo society. Therefore, the available literature does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that Karo society as a whole rejects childfree decisions. Instead, this study develops the conceptual finding that lineage continuity norms may shape social evaluations and generate pressure surrounding reproductive choices when families establish collective expectations as standards that couples must fulfill. This finding provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis of the conditions under which cultural norms may legitimize social pressure or inequality through Johan Galtung's theory of cultural violence.

The Legitimation of Cultural Violence Through Clan Continuity Norms: A Johan Galtung Perspective

The findings also indicate that Johan Galtung's concept of cultural violence provides a framework for understanding the relationship between lineage norms and social pressure. Galtung (1990) defines cultural violence as aspects of culture that individuals or institutions may use to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. Direct violence involves actions that cause identifiable harm to individuals, whereas structural violence arises from social conditions that restrict individuals' ability to meet their needs and access opportunities. Cultural violence operates differently because systems of meaning can make certain harmful practices or inequalities appear normal and justifiable. In this study, Galtung's framework helps explain the relationships among clan continuity norms, social evaluations of childfree decisions, and the potential emergence of social pressure. However, the existence of customary norms does not automatically constitute cultural violence. Researchers must demonstrate how individuals or groups use particular cultural values to legitimize practices or conditions that disadvantage others.

Clan continuity norms in Karo society have social foundations that support the preservation of family identity and kinship relationships. As the previous findings demonstrate, the patrilineal system assigns descendants an important role in maintaining clan continuity, while *Rakut Sitelu* organizes relationships and responsibilities among kinship groups. Surbakti et al. (2025) demonstrate that *Rakut Sitelu* functions as a mechanism of solidarity that supports social order in Karo society. These findings highlight the constructive functions of kinship values in maintaining social relationships and collective identity. Nevertheless, socially recognized norms may also become standards for evaluating individual decisions when families view lineage continuity as an obligation that members must fulfill. From Galtung's (1990) perspective, the potential for cultural violence emerges when individuals or groups invoke such norms to justify harmful pressure, exclusion, or inequality. Accordingly, this study distinguishes the role of clan continuity norms in preserving cultural identity from their potential use in restricting individual reproductive choices.

The researchers can trace mechanisms of legitimation by examining the relationships among lineage expectations, moral justification, and social responses to families that do not meet these expectations. Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) found that some Karo families without sons in Deli Serdang Regency encountered encouragement to have additional children and social comments that caused psychological distress. These findings demonstrate that expectations concerning lineage succession may influence family

relationships. In the broader Indonesian context, Rismarini and Adira (2025) identified variations in social evaluations of childfree decisions, while Stephani (2025) found that online news coverage may reproduce pronatalist perspectives that portray childfree women negatively. These three studies examine different social contexts and therefore do not provide direct evidence of the experiences of childfree couples in Karo society. However, their combined findings support a conceptual analysis of how collective expectations regarding descendants may serve as standards for morally evaluating reproductive decisions. Within Galtung's framework, such evaluations may contribute to the legitimation of cultural violence when individuals or groups use moral judgments to justify practices that harm or disadvantage others.

Table 3. Interpretive Matrix of the Potential for Cultural Violence in Lineage Norms in Karo Society

Analytical Element	Identified Mechanisms or Aspects Requiring Examination	Relevance to Galtung's Theory
Clan continuity norms	Families understand descendants as essential to maintaining collective identity and kinship relationships.	Cultural values provide collective meaning but do not automatically constitute violence.
Moral legitimation	Families may use reproductive obligations as standards for evaluating family responsibilities.	Cultural norms may provide moral justifications for particular forms of treatment.
Social pressure	Individuals may encounter repeated encouragement to have children, social comments, or negative evaluations of childlessness.	Researchers must examine whether cultural norms normalize or justify such pressure.
Structural inequality	Individuals may face restrictions on rights, social standing, or opportunities based on their parental or lineage status.	Researchers must establish evidence of institutionalized disadvantage or barriers.
Negotiation of norms	Families may deliberate and adapt the application of customary principles.	Negotiation demonstrates opportunities for diverse interpretations and changes in social legitimation.

Source: Authors' synthesis and interpretation based on Galtung (1990), Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024), Rismarini and Adira (2025), Stephani (2025), Surbakti et al. (2025), and Sebayang et al. (2023). This matrix presents a conceptual interpretation of the literature rather than empirical evidence that all these mechanisms occur among childfree couples in Karo society.

An assessment of the relationship between lineage norms and cultural violence requires careful consideration of documented forms of pressure and their social consequences. Br Sinulingga and Sudirman (2024) found that family expectations and community comments caused psychological distress among some Karo families without sons. However, their study does not establish that couples who voluntarily choose to remain childfree experience exclusion or restrictions on their rights within the Karo kinship system. Similarly, Sebayang et al. (2023) examined inheritance disputes involving social standing and rights under customary law, but their research did not directly address discrimination against childfree individuals. These differences in research focus are important because interpersonal pressure, social disagreement, and structural inequality represent distinct analytical phenomena. Under Galtung's (1990) framework, researchers can interpret social pressure as part of cultural violence only when they can establish a connection between cultural justification and direct or structural violence. Therefore, the available literature provides a stronger basis for identifying potential mechanisms of legitimation than for concluding that childfree couples in Karo society have experienced empirically established patterns of cultural violence.

The analysis further indicates that kinship norms perform social functions that extend beyond regulating individual behavior. The *Rakut Sitelu* system maintains solidarity, organizes responsibilities among relatives, and supports customary social order (Surbakti et al., 2025). At the same time, collective norms may create differences in expectations when individuals make reproductive decisions that do not align with family preferences. Nevertheless, customary practices in Karo society also provide opportunities

for deliberation and adaptation. Sebayang et al. (2023) show that Karo families may resolve inheritance disputes through *arih-arih*, a customary deliberative process aimed at reaching mutual agreement. Although their study does not examine childfree decisions, its findings demonstrate that families can address certain disagreements through negotiation rather than unilateral enforcement of customary principles. Therefore, researchers should understand kinship norms as systems of values that allow diverse interpretations. This perspective makes it possible to examine both potential social pressure and opportunities for negotiation without assuming that all members of Karo society share identical attitudes toward reproductive choices.

Based on this synthesis, the study develops a conceptual proposition concerning mechanisms of cultural legitimation in the relationship between lineage continuity and reproductive autonomy. This proposition identifies three interrelated analytical processes: the formation of collective norms, the use of moral justification, and the legitimation of social pressure or inequality. In the first process, clan continuity norms acquire social significance through kinship systems and intergenerational responsibilities. In the second process, individuals or groups may use these norms as standards for evaluating individual reproductive decisions. In the third process, the potential for cultural violence emerges when individuals or groups invoke such evaluations to justify harmful actions or social conditions that restrict individual opportunities. This proposition offers a contextual elaboration of Galtung's (1990) perspective on the relationship between cultural meanings and the legitimation of violence. Its contribution lies in demonstrating the need to examine legitimation processes systematically and sequentially rather than automatically classifying traditional values as forms of violence. However, this proposition still requires empirical investigation that specifically examines the experiences and interpretations of Karo community members regarding childfree decisions.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the relationship between clan continuity norms and cultural violence is neither direct nor automatic. Values associated with descendants play an important role in preserving clan identity, family solidarity, and the continuity of kinship relationships in Karo society. However, these values may acquire a different legitimizing function when individuals or groups use them to justify social pressure or inequality against those who make different reproductive choices. From Galtung's perspective, the central issue does not concern the existence of a patrilineal system itself but rather the use of cultural meanings to justify direct or structural violence. The synthesis of previous studies provides a basis for identifying this potential relationship, but it does not establish that childfree couples throughout Karo society experience cultural violence. Accordingly, the study's conceptual contribution lies in emphasizing that analyses of cultural violence must distinguish the integrative functions of kinship norms, processes of moral legitimation, and justifications for actions or social conditions that disadvantage individuals. This distinction supports a more context-sensitive application of Galtung's theory while recognizing the diversity of cultural values and customary practices within Karo society.

Discussion

The findings indicate that descendants hold significance in Karo society beyond biological relationships because they contribute to clan continuity, collective identity, and kinship relationships. These findings extend the perspectives offered by Höglund and Hildingsson (2022, 2023), Salgado and Magalhães (2024), and Jin et al. (2024), whose studies examine childfree decisions in relation to individual circumstances, reproductive autonomy, and personal identity construction. Coufalová et al. (2026) also demonstrate that childfree individuals can develop a sense of responsibility and care beyond the parental role. In contrast to these research trajectories, the present study offers a conceptual perspective that situates reproductive choices within kinship systems that assign collective significance to descendants. In the Karo context, potential tensions arise not merely from differences in individual preferences but also from the relationship between reproductive decisions and expectations concerning clan continuity and intergenerational relationships.

The findings concerning potential pressure arising from kinship norms also relate to research by McCutcheon (2020), Stephani (2025), Rismarini and Adira (2025), and Denson et al. (2026), who identify relationships among pronatalism, moral judgments, stigma, and negative biases toward childfree individuals. Permana and Himawan (2026) further emphasize the importance of family experiences and

personal factors in shaping attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. The present study complements these findings by identifying clan continuity obligations as a social context that may shape evaluations of reproductive decisions. However, kinship norms do not necessarily generate rejection because customary practices also allow opportunities for interpretation and negotiation. Accordingly, researchers should understand potential pressure surrounding childfree decisions as a possible outcome of interactions among collective expectations, moral evaluations, and family dynamics rather than as an inherent characteristic of Karo society.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of legitimation mechanisms within Johan Galtung's concept of cultural violence. Galtung (1990) explains that individuals and institutions may invoke cultural meanings to justify direct or structural violence. Based on the literature synthesis, this study clarifies this relationship through three analytical processes: the formation of collective norms, moral justification, and the legitimation of social pressure or inequality. In Karo society, clan continuity norms primarily support the preservation of collective identity and kinship solidarity. The potential for cultural violence emerges when individuals or groups use these norms to justify practices that disadvantage others because of their reproductive choices. Therefore, this study does not extend the definition of cultural violence to encompass every form of social disagreement. Instead, it provides a more detailed explanation of how collective values may acquire a legitimizing function in relation to direct or structural violence. This conceptual elaboration also demonstrates that cultural norms can maintain their integrative functions without necessarily justifying inequality.

The originality of this study lies in connecting three issues that previous research has generally examined separately: reproductive autonomy in studies of voluntary childlessness, identity continuity within patrilineal kinship systems, and mechanisms that legitimize cultural violence. Unlike studies that primarily examine personal motivations or pronatalist stigma, this study advances the proposition that researchers should analyze reproductive tensions by distinguishing the social functions of norms, processes of moral justification, and potentially harmful consequences for individuals. Theoretically, this proposition offers a contextual elaboration of Galtung's framework. Practically, it supports an approach that respects cultural continuity while recognizing individuals' autonomy in making reproductive decisions within families. However, the literature-based research design limits the study's ability to establish the direct experiences of childfree couples in Karo society. Future empirical research should therefore investigate how family members and customary leaders interpret lineage obligations, negotiate differences in reproductive choices, and distinguish family expectations from social pressure.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that descendants hold social significance in Karo society beyond their biological role because they contribute to clan continuity, collective identity, and kinship relationships within the *Rakut Sitelu* system. These meanings generate collective expectations concerning childbearing that may create tensions with childfree decisions as expressions of reproductive autonomy. However, such tensions do not necessarily result in social pressure because kinship practices also provide opportunities for interpretation and negotiation. Drawing on Johan Galtung's theoretical perspective, this study emphasizes that clan continuity norms do not inherently constitute cultural violence. The potential for cultural violence emerges when individuals or groups invoke these values to justify actions or social conditions that disadvantage others because of their reproductive choices. Thus, the central issue does not lie in the existence of patrilineal traditions themselves but in the mechanisms through which collective expectations may provide justifications for social pressure or inequality.

The study's scholarly contribution lies in its contextual elaboration of Galtung's theory of cultural violence through three analytical processes: the formation of collective norms, moral justification, and the legitimation of social pressure or inequality. This framework clarifies the distinction between the integrative functions of cultural norms and their potential role in legitimizing direct or structural violence. Nevertheless, the qualitative, literature-based research design does not allow the study to establish the direct experiences of childfree couples or empirically demonstrate the occurrence of cultural violence in Karo society. Future studies should engage couples with diverse reproductive preferences, extended-

family members, and customary leaders to investigate how they interpret, negotiate, and apply lineage norms in everyday life. Such empirical research would help evaluate the study's conceptual proposition and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between cultural identity continuity and respect for reproductive autonomy.

Acknowledgments: -.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions: The first author contributed to the research and the writing of this manuscript, while the second author contributed to the writing and editing of the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies: The author(s) declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate the scholarly content, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions of this manuscript.

References

Badan Pusat Statistik. (2022). *Long Form Sensus Penduduk 2020*. https://sensus.bps.go.id/main/index/sp2022

Bancin, M. R. A., Ananda, F., & Iwan, I. (2025). Local wisdom based on indigenous cultural values of the Karo Batak community. *Scaffolding: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam dan Multikulturalisme, 7*(1), 184–203. https://doi.org/10.37680/scaffolding.v7i1.6941

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Br Sinulingga, A. W., & Sudirman. (2024). Analisis tekanan sosial terhadap keluarga tanpa anak laki-laki dalam tradisi keturunan Suku Karo di Kabupaten Deli Serdang. *Transformasi Manageria: Journal of Islamic Education Management, 4*(3), 681–689. https://doi.org/10.47467/manageria.v4i3.7324

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Brutu, S., Sitepu, E. M. R., & Sihombing, F. T. (2023). Problematika pembagian hak waris anak laki-laki dan perempuan pada masyarakat Karo Muslim. *Mediation: Journal of Law, 2*(4). https://doi.org/10.51178/mjol.v2i4.1619

Coufalová, P., Cichrová, V., & Přikrylová Kučerová, H. (2026). After forty, it feels settled: How childfree women experience identity, care and generativity in midlife. *Women's Studies International Forum, 119*, Article 103383. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2026.103383

Denson, N., Ferreira, D., & Denson, T. F. (2026). Evidence of a negative bias toward people who are childfree by choice. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 166*(4), 557–577. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2025.2573719

Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research, 27*(3), 291–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005

Höglund, B., & Hildingsson, I. (2022). Perceptions and imagined performances of pregnancy, birth and parenting among voluntarily child-free individuals in Sweden. *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare, 31*, Article 100696. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2022.100696

Höglund, B., & Hildingsson, I. (2023). Why and when choosing child-free life in Sweden? Reasons, influencing factors and personal and societal factors: Individual interviews during 2020–2021. *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare, 35*, Article 100809. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2022.100809

Jin, C., Tooth, L. R., Xu, X., & Mishra, G. D. (2024). Associations between factors in childhood and young adulthood and childlessness among women in their 40s: A national prospective cohort study. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 360*, 26–32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2024.05.113

Kaban, L. B., Harahap, S., & Desky, A. F. (2024). Pergeseran nilai sosial pada hak waris perempuan Karo Muslim di Desa Budaya Lingga Kabupaten Karo. *Sosial Simbiosis: Jurnal Integrasi Ilmu Sosial dan Politik, 1*(4), 43–65. https://doi.org/10.62383/sosial.v1i4.811

McCutcheon, J. M. (2020). Reviewing pronatalism: A summary and critical analysis of prior research examining attitudes towards women without children. *Journal of Family Studies, 26*(4), 489–510. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2018.1426033

Muhamad, N. (2024, November 20). Sebagian warga RI tolak "childfree", ini alasannya. *Databoks*. https://databoks.katadata.co.id/demografi/statistik/673d536753c82/sebagian-warga-ri-tolak-childfree-ini-alasannya

Neal, Z. P., & Neal, J. W. (2024). A framework for studying adults who neither have nor want children. *The Family Journal, 32*(1), 121–130. https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807231198869

Permana, A. A., & Himawan, K. K. (2026). Beyond pro-natalist norms: The role of family experiences and personal factors in attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. *Journal of Family Social Work, 29*(5), 394–412. https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2026.2714821

Rismarini, N. A., & Adira, N. (2025). Between personal and social matters: Identifying public perceptions of childfree decisions in Indonesia. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 27*(6), 719–732. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2024.2398619

Salgado, F., & Magalhães, S. I. (2024). "I am my own future" representations and experiences of childfree women. *Women's Studies International Forum, 102*, Article 102849. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102849

Sebayang, K., Lubis, A. A., & Kartika, A. (2023). Implementation of daughters' rights in resolving traditional inheritance disputes through charity among the Karo tribe (A case study in Nangbelawan Village, Simpang Empat District, Karo Regency). *ARBITER: Jurnal Ilmiah Magister Hukum, 5*(2), 124–134. https://doi.org/10.31289/arbiter.v5i2.1741

Sitepu, I. F. B., Hutabalian, M., & Simanjuntak, M. F. A. (2026). The role of Karo customary law in the distribution of inherited property among families without male descendants in Sukadame Village, Tigapanah District. *Indonesian Journal of Advanced Research, 5*(7), 1221–1228. https://doi.org/10.55927/ijar.v5i7.16991

Sitepu, R. A. (2018). Eksistensi ahli waris dalam hukum adat Batak Karo di Surabaya. *Novum: Jurnal Hukum, 5*(3). https://doi.org/10.2674/novum.v5i3.36066

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 104*, 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

Stephani, N. (2025). You still want to have kids, right? Representation of childfree women in Indonesian leading online news outlets. *Media Asia, 52*(1), 102–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2024.2335013

Surbakti, B. J., Yuli, G., & Lauterboom, M. (2025). Solidaritas dalam Rakut Sitelu sebagai instrumen pendampingan kebudayaan bagi masyarakat Suku Karo. *Jurnal Basataka, 8*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.36277/basataka.v8i1.572

World Bank. (n.d.). *Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – Indonesia* [Data set]. Retrieved November 9, 2026, from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=ID