

**MOLUBINGO TRADITION:
THE SACRED OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION
ON ISLAMIC RITUAL PRACTICE, TRADITION,
AND POWER IN GORONTALO, INDONESIA**

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Abstract. The practice of female circumcision is widely recognised across many regions, notwithstanding the ongoing debate and controversy surrounding it. Similarly, in Indonesia, this contentious issue encompasses various concerns regarding religion, tradition, law, and human rights, including women's rights, gender dynamics, as well as reproductive health and sexuality. This article concentrates on Gorontalo, Indonesia, examining the discussion on female circumcision, especially investigating its link to the sacredness of religious rituals and traditions, as well as the impact of power dynamics that sustain this traditional practice as a seemingly natural phenomenon. Through Michel Foucault's theory of normalization in power discourse, it dissects the factors sustaining this controversial tradition. Research methods included field observations and literature studies. The findings elucidate that female circumcision in Gorontalo not only elucidates aspects of religion and tradition but also unveils the power relations underpinning the perpetuation of this practice within the sociocultural fabric of Gorontalo society.

Keywords: female circumcision, sacred, tradition, Islam, power relations

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1. Introduction

The practice of female genital mutilation, or in this article using the term *sunat* or *khitan perempuan* (Female Circumcision) in the future abbreviated as FC, is known throughout the world, at least recorded as a traditional practice carried out in the Middle East, South Africa, and Southwest Asia (Amin and Lendrawati 2022, Raveenthiran 2018, Ziyada et al. 2020). The practice is also found elsewhere in Asia, the Middle East, and among communities worldwide (Gerbaka et al. 2021). Strabo, the Greek geographer, also reported that female circumcision was discovered while visiting Egypt in 25 BC (Gordon 1991, Hosken 1982). German explorers Niebuhr and, most famously, Sir Richard Burton and Sir Samuel White Baker described female circumcision in their writings from the 1800s (Hosken 1982, Kouba and Muasher 1985, Taba 1980: 21). Circumcision is performed as a routine procedure by Jews and Muslims for religious reasons (Totaro et al. 2011). It is also linked to sexuality, masculinity, and men's health (Adams et al. 2022). In many societies that have practised it, the same term is used for male and female circumcision (Mustafa Abusharaf 2006).

Around the world, the practice of FC still causes a lot of debate concerning religion, tradition, health, and human rights issues. Therefore, it is essential to elaborate on the same case in other locus regions. One of the debates or controversies about the practice of female circumcision is that it is often discussed in terms of extreme human rights violations that victimise non-Western women. However, many argue that the idea of human rights is a Western concept (Panikkar 1982) and the UN Declaration of Human Rights is an expression of constituents that are primarily from Western countries (Nader 1989: 11-27), also because it is considered to have a long past and severe health complications (Kouba and Muasher 1985, Taba 1980: 21). The phenomena of the Female Circumcision debate around the world covers three main issues, namely: *First*, female circumcision as a religious practice and local tradition; *Second*, the practice of female circumcision about medical and health measures, including sexuality and reproductive health and *the third issue*, the practice of female circumcision in legal and human rights aspects, including related to women's rights and gender justice.

Seeing this global phenomenon, then, it is essential to study the phenomenon of female circumcision in Indonesia. This article will discuss the phenomenon of circumcision in the eastern part of Indonesia, which is rarely discussed compared to other parts of Indonesia, namely in the Gorontalo Province. In particular, this study aims to present data and analysis of research results in Gorontalo Province, eastern Indonesia, on the northern peninsula of Sulawesi Island. Especially in Gorontalo, the term for female circumcision is called *Molubingo*. The important question to be answered from this research is how is the practice of female circumcision in the community in Gorontalo seen from the perspective of religion and tradition? How does the practice persist, and what factors cause the practice to continue?

In addition to the lack of studies on the Gorontalo locus, the novelty value of this article is the power relations factor behind the process of surviving this phenomenal

and controversial traditional practice. This study is significant and topical, considering that in general, in some cases outside and in Indonesia, more discuss the phenomenon of female circumcision from the perspective of religion and tradition, law and health. This problem, as in this article, will be explained in the literature review section regarding studies outside and in Indonesia. Next, the study data and research methods are described. After outlining the data collection and analysis methods, this article will explain the phenomenon of female circumcision from an Islamic perspective and tradition, considering the community's sociocultural and religious background at the study's locus. The following discussion concerns female circumcision from the power or power relations perspective. At the end, this article contains conclusions and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Study of female circumcision outside Indonesia

The phenomenon of female circumcision in Africa, as exemplified in Somalia, is considered an ancient cultural practice, and this example of practices and beliefs about FC as justification for the recognition of chastity and virginity (Catania et al. 2007: 45, Johansen 2019: 10). Some women, however, generally do not acknowledge such justifications in their own lives (Mohamed and Latvala 2020) in an effort to eradicate the practice (Abusharaf 2013). Other debates about female circumcision relate to medical and psychosexual issues (Ziyada et al. 2020). In other parts of Africa, such as Kenya, female circumcision is seen as thwarting efforts to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment (Matanda et al. 2022b 2022a).

In the UK, cutting off female genitalia is a criminal offence (Möller 2020). Almost the same opinion also applies in other European countries, such as Germany, where the practice of circumcision is considered a practice of bodily harm since childhood (Yurdakul 2016). However, for most Muslims in the world, FC is regarded as a cultural practice, not a religion, as this has been done even before Islamization took place. Therefore, some Muslim communities cite religion (Islam) and customs as reasons for continuing the practice (Isa et al. 1999). In addition to the assumption that female circumcision can maintain honour and glory (Amin and Lendrawati 2022). Similarly, for people in western Russia, Dagestani attributed the practice to syncretic practices or the mixing of religion with custom (Bulatov et al. 2020) of the Afro-Arab community, the practice of circumcision is culturally embedded and closely linked to lineage, family honour and social position (Duivenbode and Padela 2019). The practice of female circumcision with a strictly medical approach is increasingly practised, although it continues to cause debate regarding human rights (Leye et al. 2019). Based on multiple perspectives, the results form a common ground for delegitimizing and abolishing harmful genital procedures (Duivenbode and Padela 2019, Muteshi et al. 2016).

Besides Africa, the Arab world, and the Middle East, FC practices are found in several Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In all

three regions, it is essentially a tradition of the Muslim community, although there is also data related to Buddhism, such as in Thailand (Merli 2010). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, this practice, which is similar in Africa, has drawn much criticism that the hadith that postulates the legitimacy of female circumcision is authoritative, thus confirming that the practice is part of Islamic law (Ithnin et al. 2023, Rashid and Iguchi 2019).

2.2. Study of female circumcision in Indonesia

In Indonesia, female circumcision first developed before the establishment of the kingdom in Java as an animist ritual and dynamism. Along with the entry of Islam into Indonesia, the practice of female circumcision became a religious symbol by adopting the concept of male circumcision (Suraiya 2019) so that it is considered part of Islamic teachings that accommodate customs or traditions (Hermanto 2016, Octavia 2014, Ramli 2020). Female circumcision is a social phenomenon that can still be found in several regions in Indonesia, such as West Java, West Nusa Tenggara, East Java, Gorontalo, Padang, Banten, Madura, Banjar, Makassar, and Lombok and others (Oktavia 2014, Ida 2020). However, the results of the study proved that some women, despite being Muslims, have little knowledge of female circumcision and do not understand the culture of female circumcision, which is medically damaging or not beneficial but still carried out because it has become part of the Islamic tradition (Jubaedah 2021).

Therefore, in most cases in Indonesia, female circumcision practice is more due to medical considerations. Major Indonesian Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and the Indonesian Ulema Council state that the practice of female circumcision is considered an implementation of Islamic rules (Budiharsana et al. 2003). On the other hand, Muhamaddiyah rejected that practice (Mundzirand Muthmainnah 2022: 285-311). Islamic discourse, medicalisation, and the desire to preserve this practice are due to hygiene factors (Kakal et al. 2023, Putranti 2005, 2008). Other research has concluded that it is easier to eliminate this practice in urban or urban communities (Imelda et al. 2018).

For the Indonesian Muslim community, most consider the practice of FC to be a purification process by removing faeces or dirt in the female pubic area. However, some believe that female circumcision is purely a tradition and not an Islamic teaching (Sariyah et al. 2023). A study in East Java, particularly in Situbondo, Surabaya and Bangkalan, shows that most women still do not know the function of female circumcision. The patriarchal culture that views women as inferior creatures do not allow women to ask questions about reproductive health (Haryanto 2017, Ramli 2020). Other research results recommend that the Indonesian government make every effort to eliminate the practice of female genital mutilation through legal channels and create regulations and policies that are binding and gender-based (Fitriani and Trisnawati 2023, Komnas Perempuan 2018).

FC in Indonesia is generally seen as a hereditary tradition that must be respected and perpetuated. Although not based on strict religious propositions, the practice is often considered a marker of Islamic identity. Islam is deeply embedded in societal

norms, making distinguishing between spiritual teachings and cultural traditions difficult. Society believes that women who claim to be Muslims must be circumcised. Uncircumcised women are considered to betray their religious, ethnic, and cultural identity (Ida 2020, Octavia 2014, Zamroni 2011). Based on the results of studies throughout Indonesia, it is explained that the practice of FC is part of carrying out traditional practices integrated with Islam. Therefore, the implementation of this practice, although medically not significant and legally disputed, society generally still practices because it carries out and maintains tradition and Islam.

3. Research methodology

This research follows data in the field, which results from developing research studies that use a qualitative phenomenological approach. From the viewpoint of phenomenology, researchers understand an event that concerns people in each situation (Moleong 2019). In this case, the phenomenological approach does not want to elaborate theories and concepts that contain suggestions and inspirations but is concerned with the meaning of ethics in theorising and conceptualizing (Muhadjir 2010). Given that the Gorontalo area is one of 19 customary areas in Indonesia where Gorontalo customs are linked to Islamic religious values, this study focused on the Gorontalo Muslim community, which still practices the *molubingo* tradition.

This research is 'qualitative' and relies on primary and secondary data. Primary data are obtained from field studies to observe directly and from mapping aspects of research. The data needed consist of the form, factors and concrete implications of Islamic rituals in Gorontalo. This research involved the following parties in data collection: (a) informants consisting of religious leaders and (b) think tanks. In addition, people who can evaluate the accuracy/validity of research are also involved. The research process lasted two months, starting with a deskreview, field observation and interviews. It also collects secondary materials, including online news, to map the social dynamics of the Muslim community. Observations were made at several community settlement locations.

Data analysis is carried out in two forms. First, data processing follows the stages of Miles and Huberman (1996). The stage starts with reducing observation and interview data, displaying data carried out in summary and synopsis based on the themes of field findings, and verifying data for the conclusion process. Second, the analysis used follows an interpretation technique that starts from a 'restatement' of the data found both from observation and interviews, followed by a 'description' to find patterns or tendencies from the data, ending with 'interpretation' to reveal the meaning of the data that has been collected (Miles and Huberman 1994).

4. Result and discussion

4.1. *Molubingo practice of the sacred Islamic ritual and tradition*

This study found that the people of Gorontalo, Indonesia, are mostly obedient to Islamic traditions and teachings, including the practice of *female circumcision*. The strengthening of customary practices integrated with Islam, practiced in the form of culture constructed through the expression “*Adati Hula-hula’a to Syara’I, Syara’I Hula-hula’a to Quru’ani*” (custom rests on shara, sharia rests on the Qur’an), becomes the spirit of preservation of Islamic customs and values in everyday life (Mashadi 2012, Saepudin 2019). In other eastern parts of Indonesia, Islam generally incorporated into local customs such as Maluku (Handoko et al. 2023).

Molubingo, which in the local language is *cubikodo* (pinching the vagina), is a traditional process that begins with the reading of prayers by the priest. At that time, the girl who will be circumcised is wearing a sign on the forehead in the form of a natural herb typical of Gorontalo in orange, called *bontho* (sign) and the child is dressed in traditional clothes. After the child is purified by washing ablution water, the *mongubingo* procedure continues with a mother bringing her child into the room, and then the *hulango* (child shamans) follow. Then the child is placed on the mother’s lap. In front of them, the *hulango* was ready to carry out her duties. The *hulango* covered herself with the hood called *Alumbu Moputi’o*. In just a matter of seconds, the *hulango*’s finger, holding a small knife, entered, and opened the hood. The process was very fast, and no one knows exactly what happened inside the hood, apart from *hulango*, not even the mother knows. The procedure did not produce blood at all. However, the people of Gorontalo believed that through this *molubingo*, the *hulango* (child shaman) removed something in the form of a white membrane. This traditional ritual is believed to be able to control libido if adults can maintain respect for themselves and their families. Such a strong custom indicates how elements of religion and tradition are integrated with the scheme of the sociocultural life of the community. During the process, the sound of the child’s cries was heard, which according to *hulango* was natural because the child was afraid of strangers in front of her.

After the circumcision is completed, the child is directed to take a lemon bath (*mopolihu lo limu*) (Figure 1), the mother and baby sit on the *dudangata* (coconut shaving) facing east. The first watering is done by the mother, who is represented by the grandmother or aunt, if the mother is holding the baby. The splash is done up to seven times. But beforehand the family had prepared seven feathers filled with water mixed with *suwinggi* lemon or *limututu*. The seven reeds are passed one by one to the child and mother. After bathing, the child is dressed in traditional clothes again, then goes through the next process, namely stepping onto a plate containing coins. This means that in the future the child will be established economically, after that she will be directed to the next plate with a *polohungo* leaf, which indicates that the child will always look beautiful inside and out. The following plate contains corn and rice, which indicates that the child’s food needs are guaranteed. After that, the plate contains *potoheto* grass, indicating that women must maintain honour and

Figure 1. *mopolihu lo limu*.

Source: Arfan Documentation 2023



Figure 2. To step three plate.

Source: Arfan Documentation 2023

faith. Finally, a plate containing young areca nuts, so that in the future the child will be gentle (Figure 2). The event closes with thanksgiving prayers and lunch. The child is rubbed with *yinulamoonu/yilonta* (oil of a concoction of fragrant-smelling leaves).

Molubingo's practice is not handled directly by religious leaders or medical personnel but should be carried out by *local hulango* (child shaman). The priest's job is only to recite prayers before the *molubingo process*. The presence of the imam symbolically represents that the custom is following the demands of Islamic teachings and does not deviate from Islam. The argument of traditional leaders, religious leaders, and community leaders of Gorontalo, *molubingo* for girls must be carried out as a marker of Muslim children. Farha Daulima (2003) explains female circumcision as a Sharia imperative and customary imperative. The imperative of sharia rests on the firmness of a hadith of the Prophet, while the customary imperative of female circumcision aims to cleanse girls (Botutihe and Daulima 2003: 14). The part that is cleaned from the vagina is the clitoris. The child shamans call it unclean in that part, so one year is a good time for purification before the faeces are increasingly difficult to clean at an older age (Kau 2013). The tradition of *molubingo* is intertwined with the virtue of *thaharah* (purity) in Islam. *Molubingo* is understood as the cleansing of the genitals of girls with a purification ceremony, such as a splash of lime water. The practice clarifies that *molubingo* is a solid tradition, standing on religious texts and noble values of local culture and rooted in Gorontalo's Muslim community.

Based on interviews in the field, it was found that this tradition is related to the origin of human creation through Adam and Eve. After God created Adam, Eve was created to accompany Adam. But Eve was created in a condition where her sexual

organs were still tightly attached. At the same time, Adam received orders to perform circumcision. Adam then circumcised himself by cutting off his genitals, which were thin and unclean layers of skin. Then Adam threw the piece (impure) and hit Eve's genitals. Eve's was split open, and the faeces were attached to her genitals. Because it was unclean, Adam and Eve circumcised their children and grandchildren with the intention and purpose that the faeces on the female genitals be removed because there is an effect and influence on the development of children.

This myth is the basis for the interpretation that Gorontalo female circumcision is sacred. Therefore, myth becomes a narrative description or narrative of something sacred (*holy*). Ritual is a technique (way, method) of making a custom or a habit sacred. Rituals create and maintain myths, social customs, and religions because rituals are religion in action. Rituals can be private or group and form the personal disposition of ritual performers according to their respective customs and culture (Agus 2006). Thus, the practice of *molubingo* is intended because of the process of purifying girls before adulthood, as well as a symbol that female babies who have been circumcised have been Islamized (Wibawa et al. 2023). Through the process of strengthening religion, *the practice of molubingo* is based on religious normative texts, while cultural inheritance is through a process of consistent enculturation.

4.2. Power relations behind the preservation of the female circumcision molubingo tradition

For the people of Gorontalo, the influence of female circumcision is related to leadership. It is because the circumcision ritual gives a message to a woman, especially those who have a position, always to avoid damaging behaviour. The meaning in question is eliminating traits and behaviours contrary to religion, customs, and prevailing norms to maintain women's honour and identity (Muda 2020).

The phenomenon is, conceptually, a representation of the process of power. Power relations are a determinant factor in the survival of the practice of female circumcision. It can be related to the concept of domination and exclusion from the perspective of Michel Foucault (1978) associated with the problem of power relations in the construction of knowledge. According to Foucault, discourse production is related to the issues of control and mechanism, selection, marginalisation or exclusion, structuring, and dissemination through various procedures. According to Foucault, power is everywhere, expressed and created in the relationships that sustain it. Power operates through the domination of knowledge discourse, including, in this case, the dominant discourse on female circumcision or *molubingo*. The dominance of *molubingo* customs in Gorontalo society remains strong and transmits local values as a belief and behaviour in community life. The existence of cultural values that survive is due to the fact of perpetuation (retention) or, in Foucault's terms, referred to as normativity (normalisation) or discipline (Foucault 1978, 2020) through the mechanism of strengthening the religion and the process of cultural inheritance from generation to generation.

In this process, discourse alignment occurs, characterised by the dominant discourse marginalising other existing or developing discourses. To build gender

justice discourse, for example, the pattern of exclusion is carried out by feminists to leave or annul discourses, knowledge, ideas, or ideas that are considered gender biased and lead to discrimination against women. Exclusion includes both external and internal domains. External domains include *division, rejection strategies, and opposition between true and false*. The internal domain includes commentary strategies, external effects, discipline (panopticon), and the implications of forming methods, definitions, techniques, and instruments for new statements, which show the power of discourse. At the same time, the internal domain functions to limit and control discourse. The internal area includes commentary strategies, external influences, disciplinary measures (panoptic) and consequences for forming new rules, methods, definitions, techniques, and certification instruments.

Normalisation, in Michel Foucault's view, is:

“a mechanism to ensure the operation of power; the new methods of power whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalisation, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus” (Foucault 1978).

Normalisation is thus a mechanism to ensure that the power of knowledge is working. In normalisation, power operates through normalisation techniques, not through law, good or bad. Normalisation explains the learning process into a dominant discourse with norms that become control tools of knowledge and methods or mechanisms applied at all levels. The normalisation mechanism is comprehensive and allows the continuation of knowledge power so that it becomes the dominant discursive discourse and experiences perpetuation/retention.

Normalisation is a mechanism of knowledge related to knowledge that is considered normal and abnormal so that it discursively masters discourse (Rohmaniyah 2020). Society or its traditions that are considered ‘normal’ in the perspective of power relations theory are the historical result of a technique of power that operates in people's lives (Foucault 2020). Problems in the Indonesian context illustrate how patriarchal knowledge power techniques operate in society. The patriarchal constructs and traditions that give rise to social discrimination normalise, endure and are regarded as usual, natural, and accepted as normal.

Parents, institutions, religious institutions, customary institutions, schools, and governments are cultural agents who perpetuate the *molubingo* tradition. Thus, this practice cannot be separated from the communication process in community interaction through oral and written learning. This form of practice by women's activists, health institutions, and *Komnas Perempuan* is considered symbolic violence. Moreover, this tradition is related to the myth that women who have passed the circumcision process can provide excellent sexual services to men. Removing thin membranes is considered as removing the masculine part of the female body until what appears is a beautiful shape in the vagina. The myth of this practice by *Komnas Perempuan* (National Commission on Violence Against Women) reflects gender injustice, representing patriarchal sociocultural conditions. Female circumcision is a

symbolic tradition experienced by girls through the patriarchal culture that has long existed in society. In this context, women are often unaware of their position in these unequal gender relations, including when they are victims of violence.

Violence against women, by the UN definition, is “any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or mental injury or suffering to women” (United Nations 1993). Included in this category are threats of violence, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of women’s freedoms, whether they occur in public or private life. The Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPA) of the Republic of Indonesia outlined that there are several types of violence experienced by women, namely physical violence, emotional or psychological violence, economic violence and limiting activities. Violence, according to KPPA, is a form of imbalance between the roles of women and men, causing domination and discrimination that will prevent women from progressing (Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan (Komnas Perempuan) 2023).

From the author’s description, both judging from local wisdom and gender bias, cultural actors, the Women’s Protection Commission, and health institutions will continue contesting the scrambling discourse. When Women’s Protection Commission and health institutions wanted to criticise and even ban *molubingo*, it seemed that indigenous institutions were against this action. On the contrary, the tradition of *molubingo* continues to be echoed, although the Women’s Protection Commission tends to reject it. Yet in various forms of close interweaving, it is called acculturation, another mention of the manifestations of Islam and tradition, which replenish each other continuously through discursive processes.

5. Conclusions

The practice of female circumcision in Gorontalo in particular, is related to tradition and Islam. Both are parts of Gorontalo’s local culture. This tradition continues to survive, one reason being the power relations that regulate the sociocultural scheme of society. In this context, the construction of patriarchal culture and religious and customary institutional factors are representations of power relations, which also determine the form of normalisation or retention of the tradition of female circumcision.

The research results found that parents, social institutions, religious institutions, customary institutions, schools, and the government are cultural agents that perpetuate or maintain the tradition of *molubingo*. In addition, the integration of customary institutions and Islamic institutions, symbolically represented in customary expressions, rests on sharia and sharia based on the Qur’an into a unified institutionalised concept so that every norm and value applies to the cultural scheme based on the system. This institutional aspect is intended as a power construction for the retention or normalisation of the customs and traditions of female circumcision in Gorontalo.

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