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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Adat, Islam and Female Body: An Ethical Perspective on Mongubingo Tradition in Gorontalo

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Abstract: Mongubingo tradition or female circumcision practiced by Gorontalo Muslims is largely examined as the part of an ongoing interaction between adat and over women's body. While the practice has also drawn significant criticism for violating women's right, the reason why the tradition is sustained remain underexplored. This study analyses the factors shaping its legitimacy and persistence, and its ethical implications for women's agency, socio-religious authority, and bodily morality. This text-based qualitative study critically deconstructs a discursive corpus of customary documents, religious texts, and scholarly literature to explore how the practice is sustained. Analyzing the data through critical discourse analysis, the finding shows that mongubingo persists through the intersection of customary inheritance, interpretations of Sharia, and social control over the female body. Therefore, ethical literacy, critical religious interpretation, and open dialogue are needed to reposition to redefine spiritual purity without compromising women's fundamental bodily autonomy.

Keywords: Mongubingo, Ethics, Customary Practice, Sharia, Female Body.

Abstrak: *Tradisi mongubingo atau sunat perempuan yang dipraktikkan oleh Muslim Gorontalo sebagian besar dikaji sebagai bagian dari interaksi yang terus berlangsung antara adat dan otoritas atas tubuh perempuan. Meskipun praktik ini telah menarik kritik signifikan karena melanggar hak-hak perempuan, alasan mengapa tradisi ini terus bertahan masih belum banyak dieksplorasi. Studi ini menganalisis faktor-faktor yang membentuk legitimasi dan persistensi praktik tersebut, serta implikasi etisnya terhadap agensi perempuan, otoritas sosial-keagamaan, dan moralitas tubuh. Studi kualitatif berbasis teks ini secara kritis mendekonstruksi korpus diskursif dari dokumen adat, teks keagamaan, dan literatur ilmiah untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana praktik ini dipertahankan. Melalui analisis data menggunakan analisis wacana kritis, temuan menunjukkan bahwa mongubingo bertahan melalui persilangan antara warisan adat, interpretasi syariat, dan kontrol sosial terhadap tubuh perempuan. Oleh karena itu, literasi etis, interpretasi keagamaan yang kritis, dan dialog terbuka sangat diperlukan untuk mereposisi dan mendefinisikan kembali kemurnian spiritual tanpa mengorbankan otonomi tubuh mendasar perempuan.*

Kata kunci: *Mongubingo, Etika, Praktik Adat, Syariat Islam, Tubuh Perempuan.*

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1. Introduction

An The encounter between Islam and local cultures in Indonesia throughout history has manifested in highly varied practices and traditions. One major stream in Islamic thought views this process as acculturation—the process of adopting and integrating a form of identity, tradition, or culture into a community throughout history. One such practice of acculturation is seen in the practice of mongubingo, or female circumcision, in Gorontalo. In short, mongubingo is defined as the practice of female circumcision through the cleansing of the clitoral area. The purpose of this tradition is none other than to shape the young girl into an ethical and noble individual so that later, she can achieve her nature as a woman who is obedient to her husband and preserves her honour In addition to reinforcing identity, this tradition also gains legitimacy as it is interpreted to have a correlation with the practice of thaharah (purification) in Islam. This purpose is then bound by the Gorontalo philosophy, which is deeply rooted in the integration of Islam and adat, namely adati hula-hula to sara', sara hula-hula to kitabullah, or custom rests on sharia, and sharia rests on the Quran. Shedding the light with this, data from the 2013 Basic Health Research (Riskesdas) show that the prevalence of female circumcision in Gorontalo reached 83.7% (Dachlan et al., 2024), positioning the region among those with the highest rates of the practice in Indonesia.

However, the tradition is also gained critical examinations because it is subjected as violation, especially, of human rights. In 2025, World Health Organization (WHO) published a report conveying the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has no health benefit and only harm for girl and women; while UNICEF at the same token emphasize that FGM is profoundly a violation of children's rights. More specific in Islam, UNICEF and Al-Azhar University has even published a report in early 2016 that explains that FGM has violated the very basic of Islamic legal maxim "la darara wa la dirar" or "there shall be infliction of harm" based on Prophet Muhammad and most importantly, the practice has also no relevance in in the Quran and Hadith. Within Indonesian landscape, Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia – MUI) also issued an official religious ruling on this matter, by enacting Fatwa No. 2/2010 concerning on Female Circumcision. Nonetheless, the MUI took a middle-ground stance—as it is highly aware on the local tradition—attempting to balance traditional Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) with protection against medical harm. At final, FGM is regarded as makruh or "rewarded if avoided, no punishment if done" but following an urge for the government to provide a clear medical guidelines and training for healthcare workers.

In fact, this fatwa overlapped with the government regulation which has strictly prohibited the tradition through Child Protection Framework Law No. 35/2014 due to zero health benefit of FGM. This regulation even re-invoked as the basis of the National Action Plan and Roadmap (2020-2030), aiming to complete eradication of practice of FGM by 2030. There is no such regulation responding to the situation within the local context. However, Gorontalo authority has Regional Regulation on Adat No. 2/2016 which perpetuated every adat practices due to the moral and religious values. Though the regulation is not strictly describing what sort of adat practices should be defended, the adat leader in various levels (province to village) often use this claim against the critics. Consequently, this practice demonstrates how adat discourse is continually reproduced through religious interpretations that endow it with legal and moral legitimacy. We argue that what is missing in this debate is the female authority on their bodies, in which, has been increasingly appears as a site of power through the adat, identity, state-law, and morality.

Various publications related to mongubingo in Gorontalo have explained philosophy, practice, and even criticisms of this tradition. However, these discussions remain entangled within a black-and-white boundary; focusing on whether mongubingo is permissible to practice or not. The rationale behind this backdrop is highly predictable: proponents of the tradition consider it an integral part of adat and Islam. Conversely, those who vehemently oppose it base their claims on alternative interpretation of Islam rejecting the idea of mongubingo, reinforcing their arguments with with medical evidence showing that tradition has absolutely no positive

health impact on women, but only the potential to cause pain and impair of certain female genital functions instead. This paper intends to transcend this black-and-white dichotomy. The foundational argument of this paper seeks to demonstrate that mongubingo is an arena of power negotiation over the female body where tradition, Islamic sharia, and state regulations operate simultaneously. Therefore, placing the female body at the centre of analysis in discussions of mongubingo is essential since it is the subject of the contested power-relation.

This article is grounded in the argument that mongubingo is sustained but also contested by an interconnected network of legitimacy rooted in tradition, interpretations of Sharia, and the state intervention within the female body. Within this framework, we argue that adat operates as a value system that shapes understandings of honor, purity, and propriety. Sharia, in turn, does not appear as a singular doctrine, but as an interpretive framework articulated within the horizon of local Islam to provide normative justification for a practice that is already culturally embedded. From an ethical perspective, the female body thus emerges as the primary locus of concern, as it is positioned not primarily as an autonomous subject, but as a moral space regulated by the community. Mongubingo should therefore be understood as a site of ethical contestation and power relations, where custom and religion become intertwined in normalizing authority over the female body in Gorontalo.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mongubingo Tradition in Gorontalo

Mongubingo tradition can be defined as a ritual of cleansing the female genitalia from impurities women carried from birth. The mongubingo itself means “to scrape” or “to dig out” the impure substance (Najis) in the clitoris area. Therefore, it is not the the clitoris that is scrapped (lokuboliyo) but what is attached to it, or the labia (Kau, 2019). The process of removing the labia can be done easily with the tip of the fingernail. On the other hand, the ritual is an integral part of the ritual of Mopolihu lo Limu. Lamusu (2016) argues that mongubingo is an initial stage of mopolihu, conducted to every girl 1-3 years. Mongubingo is the followed by mopolihu lo limu which means “bathing with fragrant water or lemon water” then continued to the last stage that is mopohuta’a to pingge or “setting foot on seven dishes” (Lamusu, 2016). Later, Ka’u argues that mopolihu lo limu has moral and spiritual values aiming to invoke the inner fragrance. In response to that, Muda (2020) explains inner fragrance refers to the attributes of an “attractive personal charm” both physical and spiritual which is still covered by impurities. Therefore, women are recognized naturally carrying impurity since birth, and by only removing it, they can acquire higher status.

Another scholarly publication is vehemently rejecting this practice is often categorized within the intertwined discourse of human rights, radical feminist critique and alternative Islam. Greenbaum et, al., (2022) for example, seeing the FGM is deeply rooted in misogyny and sexism which systematically destabilize even violating woman’s right to bodily integrity, health, and autonomous sexual identity. In relation to how FGM has been interpreted through religious texts, Lamrabet (2016) argues that it is totally depicting how patriarchal mode of reading is being used to justify harmful cultural habits. She, instead, is advocating a turn to egalitarian ethics of reading the Quran. In a similar vein, Wijayanti (2023) argues that textual transmission used by proponents of FGM is classified as fundamentally weak or unauthentic; while Rofiah (2024) asserts that this can be dangerous for women, since it can treat their bodily experiences as dangerous, impure, or inherently cursed—a condition which is really different from Islamic viewpoints that argues that women a full human subject. The gap then, as illustrated by Putri and Sundrijo (2024), consequently led to a contested power relation between the localized norms versus global discourses over female bodies.

Mongubingo shares similarities to other places, particularly in Indonesia. In Madura for example, Zamroni (2010) argues that the sonat practice is harmful for women but always being

maintained and preserved by adat, and not Islam. Maduranese uses Islam as only as a means of justification that the ritual is Islamic whenever it is questioned. In South Sulawesi, female circumcision is well-known as makkatte', in which Shuhufi (2023) argues is a part of Islam and adat innovation. However, she argues that the reason why it is still practiced because people do not know the risk to women. She advocates makkatte' to be continuously practiced but recommending removing the circumcision ritual. Alongside with the Islam and adat basis, Hikmalisa (2016) also highlights that female circumcision in Riau is regarded as an extreme culture but is always maintained due to family ignorance. To conclude, Dachlan, et.al., (2024) makes interesting point of view by addressing that why female circumcision survives because it is maintained by a powerful mix of religious-adat mandates and deeply entrenched in patriarchal power relations that continuously normalize the practices.

In a nutshell, Mongubingo may be understood as a practice that reveals how Gorontalo society weaves custom and religion, especially Islam, into a unified order of meaning that appears natural in everyday life. Therefore, mongubingo operates through collective recognition, symbolic authority, and religious justification (Feillard & Marcoes, 2018). Adat, at the same token, provides a language of propriety, honor, and female purity, while local Islam offers a normative framework through which the practice is understood as not only socially legitimate but also morally meaningful (Putranti, 2005). The combination of Islam and adat legitimacies is consequently obscuring the potential harm and risk over female bodies. Mongubingo, therefore, should be demonstrates that the female body is constituted as a site where values, authority, and social discipline converge. The body is not only endowed with meaning through custom, but is also framed within a religious discourse that defines what is considered good, proper, and honorable (Ida & Saud, 2020; Hidayana, 2024).

2.2. The Relationship between Custom and Sharia

The relationship between custom (adat) and Islamic law (sharia) in this study is understood as a reciprocal interplay between the authority of local tradition and the normative legitimacy of religion in shaping social practices within society. In the context of mongubingo, this relationship becomes evident when custom operates as a value system governing female propriety and purity, and is subsequently reinforced through interpretations of Islamic law selectively employed by the community (Ricklefs et al., 2014; Hidayana, 2024; Jaya et al., 2024). Within this framework, social practices are grounded not merely in cultural inheritance, but also in the ways communities interpret religious teachings to sustain the continuity of custom within their social world (Anggraeni, 2023; Lohlker, 2021).

Previous studies have generally developed along two main trajectories. Some emphasize custom as the dominant element, thereby interpreting mongubingo primarily as an inherited cultural expression. Others place greater emphasis on Islamic law as the principal foundation, focusing on its legal status, religious arguments, and normative evaluations of the practice (Fuad et al., 2025). These two tendencies reveal a persistent analytical separation between custom and religion, even though in social reality the two are deeply intertwined in shaping collective compliance. In the Indonesian context, such a relationship may be better understood through the lens of legal pluralism, in which customary law, Islamic law, and state norms interact, negotiate, and at times mutually reinforce one another in the regulation of social life (Zainuddin et al., 2024).

Within local Islam, the relationship between custom and Islamic law manifests in at least three forms. First, it appears as normative integration, in which custom is understood as being compatible with Islamic teachings and is therefore accepted as part of local religiosity (Lohlker, 2021). Second, it functions as a mechanism of social legitimation, whereby interpretations of Islamic law strengthen the authority of custom and render the practice socially appropriate and morally justified. Third, it constitutes a site of ethical negotiation, where the relationship between the two becomes contested because it concerns women's bodies, agency, and moral authority

(Fuad et al., 2025; Toyibah & Riyani, 2025; Miichi, 2025). In this sense, custom and Islamic law operate together in producing structures of power and social conformity. At the same time, this relationship demonstrates that the female body becomes an arena of interpretation, social discipline, and contestation over moral authority within local Muslim communities (Shin et al., 2024; Ismah, 2024; Kakal et al., 2023).

In relation to the interplay of Islam and adat, one of the most compelling reasons of mongubingo practice come to signify not merely a customary rite, but also a marker of piety and honour based in an absolute religious, specifically Islam, command. In defence of mongubingo, Kau (2019) explains that the tradition is Islamic because it is a manifestation hadith, precisely when the Prophet Muhammad says that “circumcision is a sunnah for men and an honorable deed (makramah) for women (HR. Al-Jama’ah). A term honorable deed is specifically interpreted by Kau (2019, p. 83) as the foundational argument of mongubingo practice which is aiming to cleanse the female genitalia of a gland, believed to be inherently ritually impure from birth. Therefore, mongubingo is a must; otherwise, through adulthood, marriage and childbirth, women will continue carry this ritual impure element.

In a similar vein, Muda (2020) also argues that mongubingo is essential for women because it serves as a building block mechanism of moral character and leadership behaviour in earlier stage. She is also aware that tension of global and local discourse which positioning mongubingo as harmful but at the same vein is being protected due to its moral and religious values. Conducting research in Hungayonaa Village, Boalemo District, Sultani, Panigoro and Saliko (2021), interestingly explain that the only justification of the mongubingo tradition relies entirely on oral traditions and memories, and not the religious interpretation. Their finding ends up by concluding that Islamic perspective relating on the knowledge production over female body in mongubingo tradition prevails and limited to the substantive meaning of the hadith but remaining unaware of the actual existence of the scriptural text and reasoning that serves as the religious foundation of the practices. This finding has successfully put radical criticism of those who argues that the core problem of mongubingo is located on the quality of hadith which is weak (dhaif).

Nevertheless, questions on the quality of hadith or other Islamic jurisprudences (fiqh) cannot answer why the practice is still maintained. We argue that the ignorance occurs due to the institutionalized meaning of mongubingo as part of Islam and adat of Gorontalonese. Even when question prevails, it does not enough to destabilize authorities over females’ body within the ritual which already constructed for years. In the similar vein, ignorance cannot also be seen as unintentional behaviours but rather produced by the intersection of Islamic and adat power relation and dynamics where the female body is conceptualized as capable of achieving purity by only through specific rituals. At peak, the intersection then becomes an identity, the identity of Gorontalonese.

3. Method

This study utilizes a qualitative text-based approach, analyzing corpus on mongubingo tradition including customary records and scholarly articles. Data was gathered through intensive archival research and documentation, aimed to identify key narrative patterns on how female bodies are constructed through mongubingo tradition. Moreover, it follows a descriptive and interpretive framework focusing on how these texts notions of women agencies, socio-religious authority and moral legitimacy exercised over the female body (Colorafi, & Evans, 2016). This study is grounded in the view that mongubingo within Gorontalo Muslim society occupies a significant position in sustaining both customary tradition and local religiosity, while at the same time raising ethical concerns regarding moral legitimacy, power relations, and the construction of meaning surrounding the female body.

Existing scholarship has largely situated this practice within the frameworks of tradition, Islamic law, health, and women’s rights. Accordingly, this study directs its attention

to the ethical-philosophical dimension of the practice by positioning the female body as the primary locus of analysis. Studies on female circumcision in Indonesia further demonstrate that the practice is frequently understood through the intersection of custom, Islamic identity, sexuality, medicalization, human rights, and the negotiation of religious authority. For this reason, an approach that is attentive to local Islam, legal pluralism, and the morality of the body is particularly relevant (Xu et al., 2026; Nuzzo, 2023; Brown, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2017). To ensure the rigorous and validity of the interpretive process, this study deeply anchored in critical analysis of the socio-religious narratives that shape discourse on women's body through female circumcision tradition.

4. Result

Ethical dialectics have emerged in the interpretation of mongubingo in Gorontalo as a ritual situated at the intersection of custom, Islamic law, and the female body. This dialectic is evident in the fact that mongubingo is not understood in a singular or fixed manner. On the one hand, it is perceived as a cultural heritage embodying values of female honor, propriety, and social decorum. On the other hand, the practice is increasingly contested because it involves intervention upon the female body and raises questions concerning its moral foundation, religious legitimacy, and the limits of communal authority over women's bodily integrity. Accordingly, the findings of this study suggest that mongubingo is not merely an inherited tradition, but rather a contested arena in which meaning, legitimacy, and power are continuously negotiated within the horizon of Islam in Gorontalo over female bodies.

4.1. The Manifestation of the Dialectic of Custom, Islamic Law, and the Female Body in the Practice of Mongubingo

The following table presents a simplified summary of the dialectics surrounding the meaning of mongubingo. It highlights how the thesis, namely the perspective that legitimizes the practice, and the antithesis, namely the perspective that critiques it, confront one another and create a space in which meanings are negotiated within society. This simplification is intended to clarify the dialectical structure without diminishing the analytical depth elaborated in the subsequent discussion.

Table 1. The Dialectics of Meaning in *Mongubingo*

Aspect	Dialectical Positions	Implication
Definition of harm	*Mongubingo* is considered harmless and morally beneficial, yet it is also viewed as medically risky and harmful.	Duality in the meaning of "harm"
Status of the practice	The practice is regarded as a tradition compatible with religion, but it is also argued that it is not a religious obligation and therefore may be abandoned.	Normative ambiguity
Scope	It is perceived as a normal local practice, while at the same time being reframed as a public issue involving health and human rights.	Expansion of discourse
Intensity	The practice remains socially accepted and normalized, although it is increasingly subjected to critical contestation.	Overt and latent tensions
Female body	The female body is understood as a symbol of collective honor, yet it is also increasingly framed as a subject endowed with bodily autonomy.	Conflict over bodily authority

The table demonstrates that the meaning attributed to *mongubingo* is not static; rather, it is shaped through a dialectical process between cultural legitimation and critiques grounded in modern rationalities. At the definitional level, this dialectic is reflected in the tension between

empirically grounded traditional experience and evidence-based scientific knowledge. Those positioned within the thesis maintain that *mongubingo* is harmless because it has long been practiced without being perceived as producing significant negative consequences in social life. By contrast, the antithetical position defines "harm" through the framework of medical risk and reproductive health, including the possibility of long-term effects that may not be immediately visible. This divergence indicates an epistemological shift from experience-based knowledge to evidence-based knowledge, two modes of knowing that are not always mutually compatible.

With respect to the status of the practice, the dialectic emerges through the ambiguous relationship between custom and religion. The thesis presupposes a harmonious relationship between the two, in which tradition acquires religious legitimacy through local interpretation. However, the antithesis challenges this assumption by asserting that no normative religious obligation exists in relation to the practice. This tension places *mongubingo* within a normative gray area, which sociologically opens the possibility for future reconstruction of both its meaning and its practice.

In terms of scope, the dialectic reveals a significant transformation whereby a practice once understood as local has become a broader public issue. As medical discourse, human rights, and gender perspectives enter the debate, *mongubingo* is no longer seen merely as a cultural expression, but also as an object of critique and problematization within a global framework. This process demonstrates how modernity and the globalization of knowledge intervene in local practices while simultaneously generating a new dialectical arena between locality and universality.

The intensity of this dialectic is inherently ambivalent. On the one hand, it appears an open conflict expressed through debates among social actors. On the other hand, it remains latent insofar as the practice continues to be normalized in everyday life. This condition reflects a coexistence of contradiction, in which acceptance and rejection operate simultaneously within the same social structure. In other words, changes at the level of discourse are not necessarily followed by immediate transformations in practice.

4.2. Factors Underpinning the Continuity and Legitimacy of the Practice of Mongubingo

The findings of this study indicate that differences in understanding constitute one of the key factors underlying both the continuity of mongubingo and the ongoing debate surrounding it. Some members of the community perceive mongubingo as an ancestral tradition that is compatible with Islamic teachings and therefore regard it as a practice that is legitimate both customarily and religiously. Others, however, have begun to question the practice because it involves intervention in the female body and raises ethical questions regarding who has the authority to determine actions concerning that body. These differences in understanding demonstrate that mongubingo does not exist within a single and fixed horizon of meaning; rather, it operates within a field of interpretation that is continuously negotiated.

The following table clarifies the principal factors that enable the practice of mongubingo to endure and to retain legitimacy within Gorontalo society.

Table 2. Factors Underpinning the Continuity and Legitimacy of the Practice of *Mongubingo*

Factor	Mode of Operation in Society	Implication
Interpretation of custom and religion	*Mongubingo* is understood as an ancestral tradition considered compatible with Islam	Provides cultural-religious legitimacy
Collective moral values concerning women	Female honor, purity, and propriety are positioned as central values	The practice is regarded as important for safeguarding social dignity
Social authority over the female body	The female body is situated within the framework of communal	Reinforces social authority over the practice

Factor	Mode of Operation in Society	Implication
	interests rather than solely individual autonomy	
Cultural habituation and intergenerational transmission	The practice is passed down across generations and accepted as something normal	Normalizes the practice in everyday life
Unequal power relations among competing values	Unequal power relations among competing values	The legitimacy of the practice is more easily maintained

As shown in the table, the first factor is the interpretation of adat and Islam. In the context of Gorontalo society, mongubingo is frequently endowed with religious meaning through local interpretations that connect adat with Islam. This perspective presents mongubingo as a legitimate practice. At the same time, critical views have emerged asserting that practice is not a religious obligation. Yet it is precisely this divergence in interpretation that reveals how the legitimacy of mongubingo depends heavily on the community's capacity to sustain the symbolic relationship between custom and the sharia.

The second factor is the strength of collective moral values concerning women. As indicated in the table, mongubingo continues to endure because it is closely associated with the value of female honor. Within such a social framework, the female body is perceived as a symbol of family dignity. This suggests that what is being preserved is not merely the ritual form itself, but the broader system of values that underpins it.

The third factor concerns social authority over the female body. The table shows that the female body is situated within a field of power that is not fully individual in nature. The community, family, and customary institutions occupy an important position in determining what actions are considered appropriate with respect to the female body. This helps explain why mongubingo continues to retain legitimacy, as society still grants considerable space to communal authority in regulating the female body in the name of tradition and honor.

The fourth factor is cultural habituation and the transmission of tradition. The table underscores that the continuity of mongubingo is strongly supported by social habits passed down across generations. A practice that is repeatedly enacted over a long period comes to appear natural, normal, and beyond question.

The final factor is the unequal power relation between traditional values and the value of women's autonomy. The table demonstrates that traditional values possess a far more deeply rooted social basis than newer values emphasizing bodily rights, agency, and female autonomy. As a result, although criticisms of mongubingo have begun to emerge, they do not yet always possess an equivalent degree of social legitimacy.

4.3. The Relationship between Custom, Islamic Law, and the Female Body in the Practice of Mongubingo and Its Implications

The relationship between custom, Islamic law, and the female body in the practice of mongubingo gives rise to several significant implications in the social life of Gorontalo society. When custom provides the cultural framework for the practice, Islamic law reinforces its moral legitimacy, and the female body becomes the site upon which both are enacted, what emerges is not merely the continuity of a ritual, but also the formation of specific patterns of understanding, value orientation, and authority within society.

The first implication is evident in the way society constructs knowledge about mongubingo. Because the practice is understood through the intersection of inherited custom and religious belief, public knowledge of mongubingo tends to be accepted as something already valid, normal, and beyond serious contestation. As a result, public understanding is shaped more by traditional and religious legitimacy than by a critical reading of the female body as an ethical subject. In

this context, the relationship between custom and Islamic law contributes to the formation of a normative collective consciousness, thereby restricting the space for critical engagement with the practice.

The second implication can be seen in the reinforcement of socio-religious values. This relationship positions mongubingo not merely as a ritual act, but also as a medium through which values of female honor, purity, propriety, and obedience are affirmed. Consequently, women are situated within a moral framework regulated by communal standards. The implication is that the female body is understood not only as a private bodily entity, but also as a symbol of social dignity that must be preserved in accordance with the expectations of both custom and religion.

The third implication concerns the strengthening of social authority over the female body. Because the female body occupies the point of intersection between custom and religious legitimacy, the community acquires a strong basis for determining what forms of action are considered appropriate in relation to that body. The implication of this condition is the weakening of women's autonomy in determining matters concerning themselves, since authority over the body is placed more firmly within the framework of collective interests than that of individual decision-making.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that mongubingo or female circumcision in Gorontalo has evolved from a localized ritual into a contested arena of how female body is negotiated. The data reveals the three interrelated dimension of how Islam, adat and modern criticism towards the ritual concerning female body. Firstly, there is an epistemological tension on the definition of harm itself, showing the dualistic interpretation of mongubingo as harmless because it is morally beneficial, but when it comes to medical understanding, it turns out to be risky and harmful. Secondly, reproduction of social legitimacy has successfully positioned female body as a site of how honor could be obtained through ritual, but at the same time contested due to the diminishing of women agencies. Therefore, rather than being sustained through a single and fixed meaning, mongubingo is continually maintained and contested at the intersection between adat, Islamic justification and modern discourse on bodily autonomy collied. Reflecting on these findings, therefore, the persistent continuity of mongubingo is rooted in socio-religious mechanism and unequal power relations.

At the causal level, the survival of this tradition is not merely a matter of blind adherence to the past but is actively fuelled by local structures of adat and Islam, including customary elder and Islamic clerics, even academia who works on the discourse, in synthesizing adat with Islamic law, thereby granting the practice a dual layer of moral-religious invulnerability. Furthermore, the practice is structurally reproduced because traditional communal structures naturalize it through generational habituation through family members, rendering the ritual invisible as a form of violence and instead framing it as a necessary act of moral purification. This structural inertia ensures that deeply embedded values continue to carry far greater social authority than modern health frameworks. Critiques of mongubingo have begun to emerge through an emphasis on bodily rights, women's agency, and ethical considerations; however, these counter-values do not always possess a social authority equivalent to that of more deeply rooted traditional values.

When compared with previous literature on female circumcision in Indonesia, these findings offer a distinct conceptual departure from established scholarly paradigms. Prior studies, such as Zamroni's (2010) analysis of the sonat tradition in Madura largely frame as a "cultural shackle" (belenggu adat), adat innovation (Shuhufi, 2023), or even extreme culture (Hikmalisa, 2016) rely heavily on a rigid, uncritical analogical reasoning (qiyas) enforced by local religious authorities. Similarly, broader historical analyses (Yusuf et al., 2020) often emphasize the linear survival of pre-Islamic, Pharaonic roots as a form of systemic gender-related violence. While this

study agrees on the elements of gender bias, it diverges by showing that in the case of mongubingo, the tradition is not merely a static, passive survival of archaic customs; rather, it is a highly dynamic, sophisticated, and fluid process of linguistic and theological negotiation where concepts of "inner fragrance" (keharuman diri) (Ka'u, 2019) and "theological scent" (Muda, 2020) are actively deployed to reinvent its modern relevance.

Moreover, the relationship between custom, Islamic law, and the female body generates broader socio-ethical implications. Public knowledge of mongubingo tends to be shaped by social inheritance and religious belief, making the practice readily accepted as normal and legitimate while limiting the space for a critical reading of the female body as an ethical subject. This relationship reinforces values of female honor, purity, propriety, and obedience within the community's moral framework, while simultaneously consolidating social authority to determine what forms of action are deemed appropriate with respect to the female body. Yet the data also reveal the emergence of new tensions as women increasingly come to be understood as subjects possessing rights, agency, and autonomy. In this situation, mongubingo becomes an arena of value contestation between a communal orientation that seeks to preserve tradition and an ethical orientation that demands recognition of women's bodily autonomy.

To resolve the ethical deadlock surrounding mongubingo, this study proposes a transformative shift in conceptual and policy approaches. Conceptually, future frameworks must move beyond binary oppositions—such as purely normative Islamic rejection versus defensive customary justification—and instead adopt an internal, empathetic hermeneutic that deconstructs how communities articulate honor and purity from within. Methodologically, researchers should transition from detached field observations to critical textual and discursive mapping that treats local cultural documents and oral histories as dynamic, changing archives rather than fixed dogmas.

6. Conclusion

The principal finding of this study is that the practice of mongubingo in Gorontalo reveals a complex relationship between custom, Islamic law, and the female body, giving rise to a dialectic of meaning, legitimacy, and authority. This relationship suggests that mongubingo is not merely an inherited ritual tradition, but also a socio-ethical arena in which customary values, local religious interpretations, and competing views on women's bodily autonomy are continuously negotiated. While custom and Islamic legitimacy have contributed to sustaining the practice within the community, emerging ethical perspectives have increasingly challenged its normative acceptance, particularly regarding women as moral subjects. The insight generated by this study highlights the need for a more critical and dialogical engagement with local cultural practices, so that cultural continuity is not treated as a justification that obscures ethical reflection on bodily authority and women's autonomy.

The strength of this study lies in its contribution to understanding mongubingo not only as a cultural practice, but also as a site of contestation in which symbolic honor, religious legitimacy, and communal power converge on the female body. This research provides both a theoretical and empirical basis for examining how local traditions are maintained, legitimised, and contested at the intersection of adat, Islam, and gendered embodiment. Academically, the study contributes to broader discussions on local Islam, gender, and the moral regulation of the body by showing that the continuity of tradition is inseparable from ongoing struggles over meaning and authority. Practically, the findings may serve as a point of reflection for community leaders, religious authorities, and policymakers in developing more ethically grounded approaches to cultural practices involving women's bodies.

Despite these contributions, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged, particularly regarding its focus on the practice of mongubingo in Gorontalo, which does not fully represent the diversity of relationships between adat, Islam, and gender in other local contexts

across Indonesia. In addition, the study primarily concentrates on the dialectics of meaning, legitimacy, and socio-ethical implications, and therefore does not explore other important dimensions in greater depth, such as women lived experiences, intergenerational transformations, or comparative variations across communities. Accordingly, future research should broaden its scope by examining similar practices in other cultural settings and by further exploring women's voices, changing religious interpretations, and shifting moral frameworks that shape the relationship between tradition and bodily autonomy. Despite these limitations, this study provides an important foundation for further research seeking to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between local tradition, Islamic legitimacy, and the ethical status of the female body.

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