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Unveiling the Repressive Culture Towards Female Sexuality: A Critical Communication Ethnography of *Sifon* Circumcision Rituals in *Atoni Pah Meto* Ethnic Community

Bherta Sri Eko, Hendar Putranto  and Veronika Veronika

ABSTRACT

Indonesia's ethnic-cultural diversity becomes a paradox when perpetuating discriminatory value and harmful practices. *Sifon* is a circumcision ritual practised by the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This study examines *Sifon* as a communication event and uses the critical communication ethnography approach and muted group theory to unveil its repressive cultural elements. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, participant-observers, and document studies. Observing how power, prestige, privilege, and authority systems construct women's dependent identity and silence them, the authors argue that *Sifon*-media women are doubly muted from their embodied experiences to enjoy a healthy cultural life.

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Cultural ritual as a form of expressive communication; *sifon* circumcision tradition; *aton pah meto* ethnic community; critical communication ethnography; the construction of women's marginalized position

Introduction

As a multicultural country, Indonesia has a variety of ethnicities and cultures. Cultural rituals become compulsory and the community accepts them mostly in taken-for-granted ways. It is not uncommon for cultural rituals to contain values that discriminate against minority or non-dominant groups, such as women, within community and organizational setting (Orbe, 1996, 1998; Yeganeh & May, 2011; Sankar, 2014; Ajayi et al., 2021). With a worldview, values, beliefs, and mindset that have been internalized from generation to generation, all aspects of cultural rituals appear legitimized by the people who perform these rituals.

Cultural rituals are part of the communication function, namely expressive communication. Drawing largely from cultural anthropology legacy, ritual communication is closely related to the idea of expressive communication performed collectively. A community often performs different ceremonies throughout the year and throughout life, which some anthropologists call "Rites of Passage" (Van Gennep, 1960): "a set of symbol-laden actions by means of which one passes through a dangerous zone, negotiating it safely and memorably" (Grimes, 2000, p. 6).

Ritual communication plays a critical role and contributes "to relieving tension in critical social situations and to regulating social differences and dissension by increasing the harmonizing functions of speech, by creating and stabilizing social relations, and by distancing emotions, impulses, and intentions" (Senft, 2009). By following the paths and

patterns of ritual communication, the members of the ritual-practicing community foster harmony and avoid social sanctions.

Carey (2009) once coined the term “ritual” to counter-balance the function of mass-media communication as the transmission of information within the media and communication tradition. His proposal of communication as a ritual shares the idea similar to the community of believers, who frequently used communicative terms such as “sharing, participation, association, fellowship and the possession of a common faith” (Carey, 2009). Ritual communication aims to unite the divergent community(-ies) of media users and practitioners in maintaining a particular conception of society and the world around them as “an overall form, order, and tone” (Carey in Anderson, 2011, p. 93).

Some ritual events involve people saying formulaic words or performing certain symbolic behaviours, such as praying (*salat*, *tahajjud*, *ibadah*), reading *Torah*, *Quran* or the Holy Bible, going on pilgrimage, and celebrating *Eid al-Fitr* or Christmas. These are some forms of ritual communication within religious-affiliated ideology and practicing community. Those who participate in this form of ritual communication reaffirm their commitment to their family, ethnic, national, state, secular, religious, or mixed traditions (Chistyakov & Chistyakova, 2020).

At this point, the ritual tradition of the *Sifon* circumcision is an expressive communication function that seeks to reaffirm the identity of members of the *Atoni Pah Meto* community to commit to the binding values that their ancestors have instilled. Through rituals communicated from generation to generation, community members must accept this tradition as part of their lives.

Traditional leaders and community spiritual figures from the deeply-rooted tradition regions have also contributed to the construction of women’s marginalization, furthering gender inequality. Practices like this are carried out in cultural rituals and continue to be maintained from generation to generation. The socialization and internalization of this kind of practice occur at various levels of discourse. For example, in local sayings or in the form of advice or prohibitions, women’s communication was trivialized and men “control the cultural discourse through interpersonal societal norms” (Meares, 2017).

At the attitude level, women must agree to standards that have been agreed upon by their ethnic community. Women must perform all cultural rules in common sense at the behavioural level. Another factor that drives the legitimacy of the ritual is the embedding of ritual practices as part of local wisdom, which is taboo to be questioned.

Rahmawati’s (2016) on Balinese women shows that the concept of *purusa* and *predana* in marriage rituals causes injustice to women. In this case, women (*predana*) are considered inferior to men (*purusa*). Balinese women view work as an offering (*yadnya*), so women must perform daily work sincerely without questioning the imbalance of roles between men and women. Balinese women do not feel they are experiencing gender injustice because they interpret each role as an obligation, even though Balinese women feel the workload cumbersome due to the unequal parts.

Rostiyati’s (2017) on “The Role of Women in the Traditional Rahengan Ceremony in Citatah Village, West Bandung Regency” shows that the Rahengan ceremony is a cultural practice intertwined with the discursive process of gender identity construction. The study is based on the assumption that there is an interrelation between the implementation of the *Rahengan* ceremony with hegemonic social discourse and asymmetric power

relations in the current gender context prevailing in society. Meanwhile, Hidayat (2016) viewed the *Sifon* tradition from a legal perspective. The results show that the *adat* law of the Atoni Pah Meto ethnic community legitimizes the structural oppression of women as part of the community.

In this study, the authors will examine the *Sifon* ritual and the process of silencing women in the *Sifon* tradition through the lens of critical ethnographic communication. Departing from Duranti's three paradigms in linguistic anthropology in the 20th century (Duranti, 2003), "ethnographic communication studies variously explored localized patterns of communicative conduct such as greeting rituals, cultural communication styles characterized in terms of (in)tolerance to open conflict, and culturally demarcated speech events such as sociable gatherings or public speeches" (Katriel, 2015: 455). Nevertheless, following Artz (2001) suggestion, "critical ethnography goes beyond description and representation of the subject other to empower the subject's voice and use that knowledge for change" (p. 243). Therefore, empowering the silenced women's voice within the *Sifon* tradition in order to facilitate change and social justice is the central focus of current study.

The *Sifon* tradition is a circumcision tradition for males over 17 years old who have had sexual intercourse. The uniqueness of the *Sifon* circumcision ritual lies in the process of healing wounds caused by circumcision, namely by having sexual relations with women who are not wives or close family members or women who will not be married to the circumcised man. In this tradition, women are positioned as a medium to put the heat. In other words, *Sifon*-performed women are objects to dissipate heat. *Sifon* rituals fetishize the female body.

This study seeks to make theory-based implications for traditional rituals in ethnic communities by looking at the existence of gender inequality and the marginalization of women in cultural rites based on the Muted Group Theory. We propose three research questions: (1) How do communication events in the *Sifon* tradition unfold? (2) How does the *Sifon* ceremony construct women's identities in the community and society? (3) How are the processes of silencing women in the *Sifon* tradition? Based on the questions above, we identify threefold research objectives as follows: First, to examine the communication events that occurred during the *Sifon* tradition; Second, to identify how the *Sifon* ceremony constructs women's identities in the Atoni Pah Meto ethnic community and larger society; and Third, to identify the process of silencing women in the *Sifon* practice.

Practical and theoretical significance of the research

Theoretically, current research aims to unveil cultural forms in traditions/rituals in the Eastern part of Indonesia which discriminate against women instead of empowering them. The *Sifon* tradition is the entrance point to uncovering this discriminatory culture and its impact on the construction of women's identities. The muted group theory developed in Feminist discourse and Western Communication (Ardener & Ardener, 1978, 2005; Kramarae, 1981; E. W. Ardener, 1975; Wood, 2005a) will be examined critically to what extent it applies in this critical ethnographic case study within the Indonesian context.

Practically, the current study employs critical ethnographic research. Our primary direction is to describe the discriminatory nature of cultural rituals that perpetuate the

oppression and victimization of women and legitimize these discriminatory practices to preserve the so-called tradition or local wisdom.

Literature review

Cultural rituals and worldview

Culture is an essential aspect of human life. Culture helps individuals see the world and interact in it using a cultural pattern of behaviour and attitudes shared by a group of people. Based on the social science perspective, *culture* is defined as learned patterns perceptions related to groups, including verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, distrust systems, and behaviour (Singer in Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 149). Drawing from cultural anthropology field, the interpretive perspective defines *culture* as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by which humans communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life” (Geertz, 1973; Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 149). Meanwhile, the critical perspective defines *culture* as “heterogeneous and dynamically contested sites of meaning” (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 148).

Here, *culture* is represented in the ritual activities performed. The tribal community will refer to their values, beliefs, and worldviews in performing the ritual. Culture limits and directs behaviour, including behaviour in ritual performance. Ishii, Klopff, and Cooke (in Samovar et al., 2017, p. 104) propose *worldview as a fundamental cultural orientation towards God, humanity, nature*. It questions the existence of things, nature and the cosmos, life, moral and ethical reasons, suffering, death and other philosophical issues that affect how members view the world. Meanwhile, Walsh and Middleton (in Samovar et al., 2017, p. 104) see worldview in terms of providing clues that guide followers practically. Worldview helps people define the picture of the world from how they fit in that world.

The worldview is at the core of every culture. It is passed on from generation to generation, comprises many elements, and takes many forms. Most of these forms can be classified into three categories, namely atheism, spirituality, and long-standing religious traditions. In many cases, individuals choose some of the three basic orientations above to construct their view of reality (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 105).

Manafe's (2016, p. 48–56) demonstrates the worldview of the *Atoni Pah Meto*. The worldview affects the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the *Atoni Pah Meto* members to differentiate between good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, and positive and negative. The *Atoni Pah Meto*'s worldview comprises cultural values that determine how they should behave.

36 *Muted group theory*

The researchers use the Muted Group Theory to study the phenomenon of repressive culture in the *Sifon* circumcision tradition. The researchers use this theory because we observe that women as speakers cannot contribute the same way as men do in utterance. Women are considered not as capable as men to say what they want, when, and where

they want because men, as the dominant group, have dictated the words and their usage norms.

According to Kramarae and other feminist theorists (Holmes, 2015; Houston & Kramarae, 1991; Kramarae, 1981, 2004; Levey, 2018; Solnit, 2014; Tannen, 1990, 1996, 2003), women's words are neglected in our society; women's thinking is underestimated. When women try to overcome these inequalities, the masculine control of communication puts them at a considerable disadvantage. Man-made language "helps in defining, demeaning, and excluding women." Women are thus the voiceless group (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 409).

The theoretical assumptions we use in this study are as follows:

First, the division of labour and its co-relating activities is basic worldview for women to perceive the world differently because it creates a gender polarization that causes people to see women and men as two very different people.

Second, because of their political dominance, the male perception system hinders women's alternative models of picturing the world. Men are interested in giving names and labels to social life, and as a result, women experience namelessness. Women then have difficulty expressing what they want to say and articulating their experiences, thus, their being "muted" (Ardener, 2005; Wood, 2005b).

Third, women's participation in cultural rituals are constricted by the expression system created and accepted by men. Women's task is to conceptualize a thought & then look for vocabulary that is more in line with men's thinking to get the best word that fits men's way of thinking (West & Turner, 2018, pp. 499–501).

Fourth, considering the aspects of communication speech acts before and during the performance of the *Sifon* ritual, the critical ethnographic approach to cultural rituals intersect with the "performative turn" in the field of intercultural communication. The highlight of these two intersecting approaches lies on its being "attentive to the intersectional identities of Others, centered in their perspectives and bodies (and) offer us knowledge about embodiment, affect, reflexivity, and decoloniality that previous approaches may have not attended to" (Calafell, 2020).

The processes of silencing women as marginalized groups occur in various ways, such as: First, Mocking. Men give labels to women's speech such as babbling, gossiping, nagging, and whining. Women's talk is considered meaningless and lacks a sense of humour; Second, Rituals. Many social and cultural rituals have impacted silencing women or declaring that women are subordinate to men; Third, Control. Communication practices put men at the centre and women only in the shadows; Fourth, Harassment. Men tend to harass women in various places and opportunities, making women feel not at home outside their domestic sphere (West & Turner, 2018, pp. 503–505).

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The masculine power to name experience

Kramarae assumes that women see the world differently from men because both have different experiences and activities that stem from the division of labour. Anyone who has the ability to naming will have tremendous power. According to the sociocultural tradition (Carey, 2009; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Senft, 2009), language shapes our perception of reality. Women are often silenced by not having a publicly recognized vocabulary to

express their experiences. Constant neglect of words will make the experience unspeakable and perhaps even unthinkable.

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Men as the gatekeepers of communication

Even though the public modes of expression that describe women's experiences contain a rich vocabulary, men's dominant culture will still silence women's modes of expression; they are ignored¹³ ridiculed. According to Dorothy (in Griffin et al., 2019, p. 413), men only care about what men say. What men do is relevant to men, written by men, and intended for men. Men are listened to and listen to what each other has to say. Researchers use Muted Group Theory to analyse how the silencing process occurs, what the dominant male group tries to silence in the *Sifon* tradition, and how the Muted Group talks to the dominant group (Meares, 2017).

Research Methods

Approach and methods

This study uses a feminist ethnographic research framework with a critical paradigm. This approach sees a system of power, prestige, privilege, and authority are used to marginalize individuals who come from different classes, races, and genders. The primary method is observational research conducted over time and motivated by a commitment to women. Researchers attempt to emancipate women as marginalized groups by doing critical ethnography (Creswell & Poth, 2015, p. 130). Feminist ethnography deconstructs patriarchal assumptions and finds out which parties are involved (especially women), cultural activities, and under what conditions. In this study, the group to emancipate was women who are used as the media to perform the *Sifon* circumcision ritual. Data collection techniques used in-depth interviews, participant-observers, and document studies.

The research uses the ethnographic method of communication. The ethnographic model adopted in this study will be portrayed in Figure 1 below:

Based on Figure 1 above, the unit of analysis employed in this study includes 1. **Speech acts** are actions that function as a single interaction, such as statements, requests, commands, or non-verbal language; 2. **Communication events** are a whole set of communication components intact. Communication components: type of event, topic, purpose or function, setting, participants, message form, message content, sequence, ion, interaction rules, and interpretation norms; 3. **Linguistic aspects** include verbal, non-verbal elements, patterns of elements in certain speech events, and the meaning of variants in certain situations; 4. **Social interaction aspects** include the perception of important characteristics in communicative situations, selection of interpretation of appropriate forms for certain situations, roles, and relationships, norms of interaction and interpretation, strategies to achieve goals; 5. **Cultural aspects** include social structures, values, attitudes, cognitive schemas, and enculturation processes (transmission of knowledge and skills); 6. **Communication patterns** are typical and recurring relationships between communication components

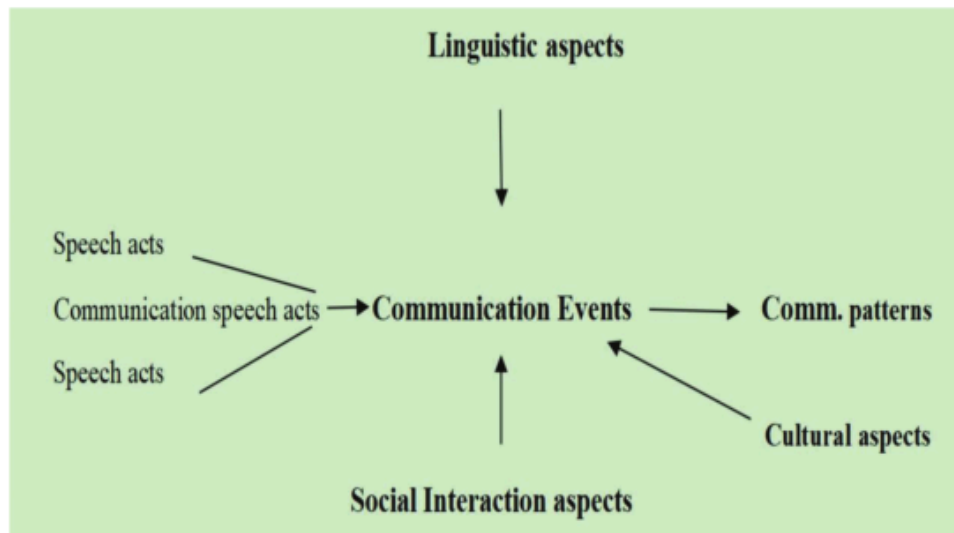


Figure 1. Communication Ethnography Model. Source: Kuswarno, 2008, p. 19

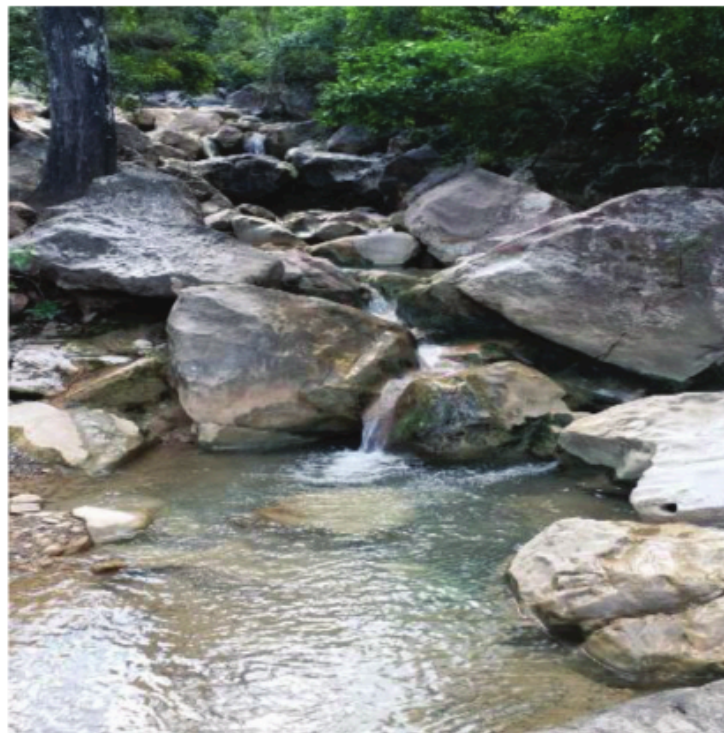


Figure 2. The river where the *Sifon* circumcision ritual be performed.

Object of research

The object of the study is the traditional *Sifon* ceremony performed in ¹the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community in East Nusa Tenggara Province. This study examines the role and treatment of women in the entire series of ritual activities, from preparation to the ritual procession up to post-ritual. The unit of analysis includes patterns (rituals, social behaviour, customs, and mental activities), ritual actors, parties involved in ceremonies, ritual processions, the role of women in rituals, and practices of power in these rituals.

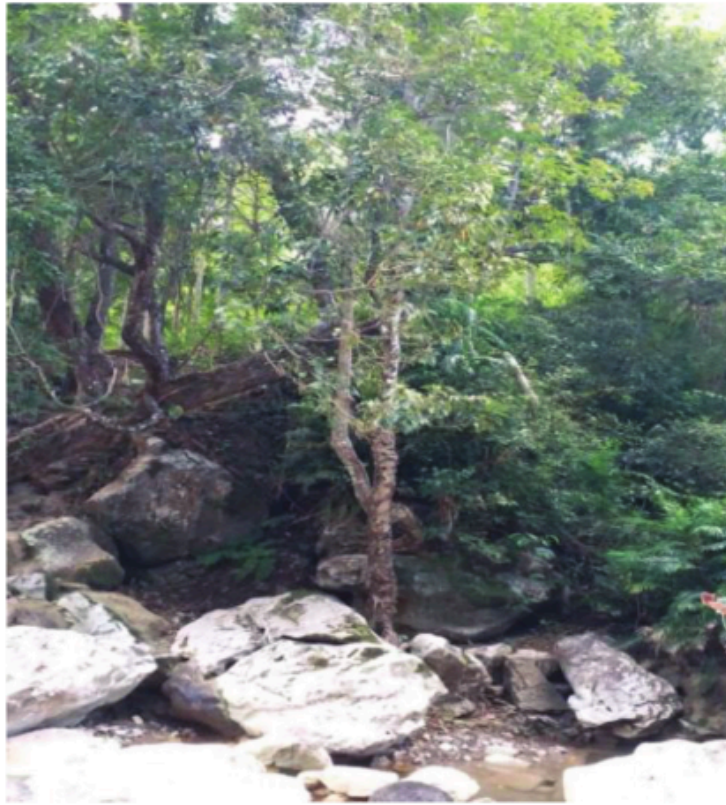


Figure 3. The fig tree where the circumcised skin is attached.



Figure 4. The locus of the *Sifon* ritual with the *Sifon* shaman sits at the rock.



Figure 5. The appearance of Daun Kirinyuh (*Chromolaena odorata*).



Figure 6. The Circumcision's instruments. Source: Primus Lake

Research informants

The selection of informants was made purposively. The criteria for informants in this study were (1) the individuals initiating the *Sifon* tradition, (2) the performer of the *Sifon* ritual, and (3) the victim of the *Sifon* tradition. Below is the table of the matrix of informants in current research (See, [Table 1](#))

Table 1. The Matrix of Informants.

No.	Name of Informants	Sex	Status (roles)
1.	LZS	Male	<i>Sifon</i> shaman
2.	YBT	Male	<i>Sifon</i> shaman
3.	Primus Lake	Male	<i>Sifon</i> researcher; a renowned historian of <i>Amfoang Ambenu</i> tribal Kingdoms
4.	Dr. Pius Weraman	Male	A reputable scholar from East Nusa Tenggara
5.	Ririn Hayudiani	Female	Gender activist located in West Nusa Tenggara

Data analysis technique

¹¹ In data analysis stage, the researchers rely on the participants' views as an insider (emic) perspective and report this in verbatim citations. Then, researchers synthesize the data, filtering through the researcher's perspective (etic) to develop a comprehensive cultural interpretation. Cultural interpretation describes groups and themes related to the theoretical concepts being explored in the phenomenon. The researchers analyse various issues of power, empowerment, inequality, injustice, domination, oppression, and hegemony (Creswell & Poth, 2015, p. 130).

Creswell and Poth (2015) describes the ethnographic procedure through the following steps (pp. 133–134):

1. Identify and determine a group with the same culture
2. Select various themes, problems, theories that provide a guiding framework for the study of culturally similar groups;
3. Gather information in the context or environment in which the group lives
4. Compile a description of the same cultural group and determine the emerging themes and the overall interpretation.
5. Develop a series of rules or theories about how groups with the same culture work to obtain a holistic cultural portrait of the group, including the participants' (emic) and the researchers' (etic) views.

Result and finding

The authors conducted research on the *Sifon* circumcision ritual in Fatukoto village, South Central Timor Regency. This ritual is led by a shaman who has received inspiration from his ancestors. If the shaman has not received a mandate, the *Sifon* participants do not dare to do it. The authors will study the *Sifon* circumcision ritual in two aspects: the circumcision ritual process and the *Sifon*, the circumcision healing process through sexual intercourse. The term *Sifon* itself means getting rid of the heat. Authors use an ethnographic communication approach to study the phenomena, which involves communication components such as setting, participants, goals, message content, message content form, instrumentalities, norms and genre.

The authors will describe the result and finding in four interrelated stages. First, the Setting and Scene. Second, why the *Sifon* ritual is performed; Third, the locus of the circumcision and the proceeding *Sifon* ritual, and Fourth, the communication components of the *Sifon* ritual.

Circumcision ceremony

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Communication events in the *Sifon* ritual include speech situations that refer to the time, the place where the speech act occurs and refers to the physical state (setting & scene). The setting refers to the location where the *Sifon* tradition is carried out, which expresses the beliefs of the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community. The place chosen should not be arbitrary but should follow the rules such as the location of the ceremony, the proper moment it is held and in which season, the physical aspect of the situation, the size of the room, the layout of furniture, and the symbols used. At the same time, the scene is an abstract of a psychological situation (the mood) and describes the situation's cultural definition.

The circumcision ritual begins with a prayer led by "Ahelet" or a circumcision shaman. The *Sifon*-performer man who will be circumcised must pay a dowry to the circumcision shaman. After that, the *Ahelet* will take the man to the river. In the morning, the sun has not yet risen, and the man to be circumcised must bathe in a pool and squeeze his penis until it cramps to reduce pain and bleeding. After that, he has to take some stones and count them (*Nain Fatu* process). Each stone represents the number of women who have had sex with them. The *Sifon*-performer man should not lie while doing the *Nain Fatu*. Otherwise, the blood will not stop, and the healing process will take longer. After the *Nain Fatu* ritual is complete, the circumciser will perform ritual actions to strengthen the circumcised male penis.

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After praying, the patient is directed to a small stream at the back of the shaman's house. The river is secluded, and no one passes through it, so it is quite safe, and people cannot see the circumcision process. Before starting, the patient is asked to soak naked in a small river that forms a pond. After the skin of the penis has been withered, the patient is directed out of the pool. The *Sifon*-performer man sits on a rock in the river, and the circumcision process begins.

The following process is the circumcision ritual using a traditional technique. According to another circumcision shaman, YBT,

"The tools used are two bamboo twigs which are small enough to pinch the ends of the skin and then pulled and then cut using a razor. The skin cut is then stuck together with bamboo, used on the fig tree on the edge of the river. The circumcision technique is performed by pinching the upper foreskin and then cutting it off with a knife. The upper foreskin is split open with the help of a small piece of wood as a surgical pad inserted under the foreskin. Or it is done by using a coconut shell with a hole, and then the upper foreskin is pulled through the hole in the surface, then cut with a razor blade. This process doesn't hurt. What hurts is when it is tied. Then proceed with the foreskin removal ceremony, which is a preparation for the Sifon ceremony."

According to the main informant, Mr Primus Lake, and YBT,

"At this stage, the foreskin is inserted into the thorns of the tamarind or lime tree. The purpose of doing this is that the patient experiences an 'acid tooth' (lust) when proceeding to Sifon-stage. Then the foreskin is attached to a tree trunk or placed on a maja or jackfruit tree to attract women to Sifon with the already circumcised Sifon-performer man. The ceremony of severing the foreskin is a symbol of maintaining good relations between humans and their ancestors (Uis Neno and Uis Pah)."

According to YBT, the next process runs as follows:

We put the skin with bamboo here because we appreciate the body parts of the circumcised. After that, the incision is sprayed with betel that has been chewed beforehand to reduce the possibility of infection. Next, the wound is rubbed with a traditional herb from the leaves of a plant called goat's tooth leaf or kirinyuh (*Chromolena odorata*) leaves that are also chewed. The traditional ingredients are bandaged using torn cloth or clothes. The bandage used is not gauze because the gauze will be sticky when the potion is dry, so when it is removed, it will hurt. Afterwards, some patients' friends will help the patient cross the river to the fireplace prepared in advance. The fire was already prepared because, after the circumcision, the patient bleeds a lot and will be cold. After the process is complete, the patient must go home and be given a message that when he is still injured and experiencing a reaction, the patient is asked to rub with a knife or be given drops of water to stop the reaction.

After the ritual on the river is complete, the next process is Sifon, or getting rid of the heat. Primus Lake informs the researchers that,

Sifon is the following process to do if the wound has healed. The Sifon-performer man is looking for a woman to dissipate heat from the process. On previous occasions, getting rid of the heat was carried out before the wound was completely healed. Recently, the process continues when the wound has healed. The Sifon-media women have no kinship with the patient. Even more often, they are taken from outside the village. The Sifon process is also carried out at least twice with different women, provided that they have already given birth. The first Sifon-media woman requires a woman who already has more than two children, and the second Sifon-media woman has one child.

The process of having sex is called sifon maputu, which means cooling or dissipating heat because Sifon is analogous to making knives by a blacksmith. So a man who has just done circumcision is like an iron being burned in a fire. Iron becomes soft when burned by fire, as well as the penis will become weak due to circumcision. Strength is reduced due to heat (called maputu, malala). So to get the power back, the heat must be removed (polen maputu) to obtain cold (manikin, oetene). The insertion of the penis into the vaginal fluid is called Sifon.

The rules of sexual intercourse forms between the Sifon-performer man and the Sifon-media women are as follows:

The rules of sexual intercourse forms between the Sifon-performer man and the Sifon-media women are as follows: The first sex is called "getting rid of the heat" should involve a married woman aged 50 or over 50 years. The second sex (hemanikin) aims to cool down the heat targets a younger woman, and the third sex (haeki/howena) goal is to smooth. The taboo is the Sifon-performer man is no longer allowed to have sex with any women who once served as a Sifon medium.

Why Sifon ritual is performed

According to LZS, an experienced Ahelet:

An Ahelet carries out the ritual prayer to ask permission from the ancestors and The God Almighty to ask for blessings for the smooth proceedings of the ritual. This ritual communication is closely related to the perspective of the Atoni Pah Meto ethnic community, which influences their belief and way of life who strongly believe in the existence of ancestors. Ritual communication is delivered in prayer, while the Sifon ritual is performed so that

men avoid impotence. The process of having sex is called *sifon maputu*, which means cooling or dissipating heat. Another name for Sifon is Malonaik (big medicine).

The locus of the circumcision and the proceeding *sifon* ritual

The Sifon circumcision ritual must be performed outside to get rid of bad luck and in a hidden place because the character of the practice is hot. LZS says that *“the circumcision occurs in a pond or river where the water has to flow because the spilt blood has to flow. The running water brings away the sins.”*

Meanwhile, according to Primus Lake,

“The circumcision is performed hidden, and their whereabouts are kept secret. Only the shaman and his assistant may know. If more people understand that a man will be circumcised, then the women who live around the village will refuse to be part of the ritual.” (See, Figure 2 and Figure 3)

Meanwhile, the Sifon or cooling ritual performed through sexual intercourse with several women also happened in a secluded area. (See, Figure 4)

The time of ritual's proceeding

Circumcision ritual

According to customary rules, the circumcision tradition is usually performed in certain seasons. Primus Lake confirms this by saying,

Circumcision season is usually in the young corn season. Because after the circumcision, the patient typically hides in the garden (kebon). In addition, it happens when the candle-nut tree (ponon nenes) bears red fruit and when the rice begins to turn yellow. It all points to a symbol of a radiant face. The Pah Meto Atoni believe that if men are circumcised during this season, their faces will turn red and glow. The glowing reddish countenance signifies that the man is healthy and fertile. The circumcision happens early in the morning because the air and the water are colder than in the day, so bleeding in the penis can be minimized.”

Meanwhile, the healing ritual of Sifon circumcision is carried out at the beginning of the dry or rainy season. According to Primus Lake,

Three weeks after treating the circumcision wound and doing the siphoning, the circumcision participants went home and were seen as ordinary people. The circumcision healer announced their return. Then the circumcision shaman will weave a small basket with a lid (tanasak) tied with colourful threads. The basket's body is plugged with chicken feathers, and then the tanasak is positioned in a place that many people quickly see. This sign means that village people who see tanasak know that there is already a man (meo) circumcised, a mighty man in his village.

The scene or speech situation refers to the atmosphere before the ritual is performed. The atmosphere is closely related to an event's psychological setting and cultural boundaries. The communication that occurs in the Sifon ceremony takes place in a formal, solemn manner. The speaker's expression, especially the Sifon shaman, is calm, sacred, and magical. Meanwhile, the Sifon participants were nervous, anxious and afraid. So the

psychological atmosphere of the *Sifon* circumcision ritual is dominated by a sacred, quiet, tense and uneasy atmosphere.

The communication components of the sifon ritual

(1) Participants (Speaker and Performer)

Speech components or participants are the parties involved in the ritual. The speaker in this ritual is a shaman of *Sifon*, while the listener is the performer of the *Sifon*. The only person who qualifies as a speaker is the *Sifon* shaman. The gender is male and is considered to have magical powers and is believed to have the mandate of the ancestors to carry out the ritual. Participants in the circumcision or *Sifon* healing ritual consist of a shaman, a man who will do the *Sifon* (*Sifon*-performer man) and a *Sifon*-media woman.

Primus Lake's narrative on the circumstance runs as follows:

The party who is considered competent in the circumcision ritual is the circumcision shaman. He is believed to have inherited the skills of circumcision and the mythological and ritual traditions of the tribal culture. Furthermore, the Sifon shaman will provide several conditions for the Sifon-performer man, such as one silver coin to find a Sifon partner. No one except the man's parents should know this.

(2) **Ends** are intention, results and goals. The achieving desire of the speaker in the *Sifon* ritual is to perform the circumcision ritual according to certain agreements and rules. By allowing men to perform *Sifon* circumcision, the goal is to avoid impotence. Another goal is to show that they have become real men, which is called "Hamanean."

(3) Next is the **act sequence** or the sequence of communication actions that explains how the series of communication actions (opening, ritual execution, closing) occurs in a ritual. This aspect includes the form and content of the message (speech acts). The form of the message refers to how the topic is conveyed. The messages transmitted in the *Sifon* circumcision ritual are delivered directly by the *Sifon* shaman. The message conveyed is an action that the recipient must take. For example, "you have to do the stone count," "you have to soak in cold water," "you can't lie," etc. The message is delivered directly, and the content of the message is formative, which means that there must be real action. If this is not fulfilled, it will have negative consequences for both the shaman and the participants of the *Sifon* circumcision.

The content of the message is the things and beliefs communicated. The content of the message in the circumcision ritual includes denotative and connotative messages. The *Sifon* shaman conveyed the message through a traditional prayer containing a request for safety, permission, and respect for *Uis Neno*, *Uis Pah*, and *Bei Nai*. These three things are believed to have the highest power. The message is also conveyed indirectly and connotatively. The Taro of land symbolizes the head, also the ritual of counting stones (*nain fatu*) and soaking in water.

(4) **Keys**: These refer to a speech act's manner, tone, or spirit. Speech acts can have different meanings because of the keys whether messages are conveyed formally or informally, respectful or disrespectful, modest or arrogant. In circumcision and

Sifon rituals, the form of the message to God and ancestors is performed explicitly in the form of prayer. The *Sifon* shaman chant out messages in prayers delivered to *Uis Neno*, *Uis Pah*, and *Bei Nai* respectfully but straightforwardly. According to YBT, the traditional circumcision shaman in Fatutoko Village, North Mollo Regency, the process of circumcision must begin with a prayer,

"Put some dirt on your head and pray to God that there are no obstacles. The content of the prayer, 'God, you are the one who has set the rules that we must have circumcision; therefore, we ask the Sifon-performer men to get women for Sifon.' They also recite the prayers in their native language."

The prayer recited before going to circumcision (in Dawan's language): "*Uis Neno, Ho es mumautun mukleoba lasi. Es bi tabu i hai mtil ma mnao mutuin jef bala han bala. Ho hes moeta ma muuba mani lasi paloli*"

The prayer recited before embarking to perform *Sifon*: "*Uis Neno ho meknom manom. He nati Ho es mtoup ma mhel, He nafek noel ma netu, Maut nai he naonai, He nati muton ho kuasat neu Ho ate*" (God, you are the one who has set the rules that we must have circumcision; therefore, we ask the *Sifon*-performer men to get women for *Sifon*.)

The content of the prayer is a manifestation of communication to God and ancestors. Its form is a request for blessing and salvation for those involved in the ritual. During the reciting of the circumcision prayer, the *Sifon* shaman or the *Sifon*-performer present offerings in the form of a red rooster and *sopi* (a traditional liqueur). In addition, ritual actions performed before circumcisions, such as praying to God and ancestors, also show that the act of circumcision is a sacred thing.

The following is the statement from YBT, a circumcision healer and one of existing *Sifon* shamans,

"Before the proceedings of the circumcision and Sifon ritual, Sifon shamans and Sifon-performer men must pray to ask for protection from God and their ancestors so that the circumcision process runs smoothly. They believe in the importance of ancestral involvement. They believe that blood flowing from the penis can be fatal."

With regards to the media used (See, Figure 6), the following items are a must: stones, flowing river water, tree trunks, *sopi* or *arak*, and red roosters, the leaves of *kirinyuh* trees (See, Figure 5), bark with bamboo tree trunks to put the skin cut of a newly circumcised male genitalia as a symbol to appreciate the circumcised male body parts.

The language used in the *Sifon* tradition is the native language of the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community, namely the Dawan language, in the form of a series of prayers. According to Silab, Kanahebi, and Bessie (1996, p. 17), the Dawan language has the following functions: first, prayers (*Onen*), second, traditional oaths (*Fanu*), third, rhymes (*makanuan*), fourth, advice (*basan*) and, fifth, satire (*Uab pollin*). The communicative nature of Dawan language is deployed as a prayer for the spirits of the ancestors (*Ba'i-Na'i*), the Spirit (*Nitu*), and the highest form (*Uis Neno*) or the King of the sky.

4. Instrumentalities

The interaction rule is a practical language applicable to the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community in communicative events. The rules of interaction include the form of the message, the vocal and non-vocal channels, and the code used. Communication channels

deployed in the *Sifon* circumcision ritual are manifest in verbal and non-verbal messages. The verbal messages applied during the circumcision ritual are traditional prayers recited by a circumcision shaman (*Ahelet*).

Meanwhile, the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community deployed and communicated nonverbal messages through various symbols and objects, for example:

- (1) Put the ground on your head and pray to God so there will be no obstacles.
- (2) Count stones (*Nain fatu*)
- (3) Give offerings to ancestors in the form of *sopi* and red roosters
- (4) Make a sign on a big tree that hangs on tiny houses attached to it, which contains a mirror, an engraving of a penis model, and the doors of the houses, all of which are directed to the girlfriend's house as a sign that "I have become a man."
- (5) Step over the head of the *Sifon*-media woman and shout "awe." It symbolizes that the man has finished doing the *Sifon* ritual.

The ritual communication in the *Sifon* tradition needs to pay attention to the rules that the circumcision shaman or *Ahelet* has set by referring to the values upheld within the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community. Men who are circumcised must comply fully with what the circumcision shaman commands because it will be fatal if violated. According to one of the *Ahelets* interviewed,

"The Sifon-performer man must pay attention to and obey the essential components of the ritual, such as the required procedures of the ritual and prayer. This ritual describes the belief in the magical power of the ancestors. Blessings can only be obtained through revelation. Uis Neno is a mother who regulates, supervises, and maintains the universe's life and its contents, including humans. Uis Pah is the father who is the ruler of the afterlife who will determine whether a person can enter heaven or hell based on his actions in this world. Bei Nai or ancestral spirits mediate human affairs with Uis Neno. Therefore, in both the circumcision and the Sifon rituals, the Sifon shaman must address and beseech the blessings of Uis Neno, Uis Pah, and Bei Nai."

5. Norms or interpretative norms

The norms here refer to how members of the ethnic community adhere to politeness, a sense of acceptance (*nrimo*), and no conflict in interactions. This activity will form a common understanding that guides a changing behaviour towards a permanent one. Personal norms that arise in certain behaviours and situations are guided by the characteristics of that person in making his understanding relatable to the situation. The person carries out the tradition of circumcision as a cultural value to perform. By adhering to specific cultural values, mostly arranged at one's parents' suggestion, the person embodies the collective tradition into a personal mission to accomplish.

Echoing the words of one *Ahelet*,

"We have to perform circumcision in Sifon's way. If we do not perform Sifon, we will bring disease to our wife. So we have to do Sifon, no matter what. When I did Sifon, I was already married, and I asked my new wife for her approval to be circumcised. I adhere to my culture. Sifon is malonic (a big cure). Moreover, the wife must allow her husband if he

wants to perform *Sifon*. Meanwhile, *Sifon*-media woman cannot refuse if *Ahelet* chose her to be one. To refuse is to violate customary norms.”

The norms to guide the selection of *Sifon*-media woman should follow specific rules. Primus Lake observes this by saying,

“The circumcision shaman will find women doing the *Sifon* ritual, or the *Sifon*-performer man will look for himself. However, there must be spells enchanted and potions made from certain tree roots. Then there are signs that the would-be *Sifon*-performer man meets a woman who smiles at him and will have an erection.”

6. Genre or types of communication event

A genre is a group of speech events types with typical characteristics, such as poetry, mythology, proverbs, lectures, commercial messages, and so forth. In circumcision and *Sifon* rituals, the traditional prayer or prayers addressed to *Uis Neno*, *Uis Pah*, and *Bei Na* (to *sine ume*) become a specific genre. According to Silab, Kanahebi, and Bessie (1996, p. 42), participants need to connect with the spiritual leader and ancestral spirits in each ritual. This relationship is sacred and considered a force of customary law and ethics. The relationship is manifested in a prayer requesting blessing and salvation during the ritual.

Meanwhile, the circumcision shaman conveys advice to circumcised men using rhymes and prayers. Some factors influence the manner of speech and behaviour in this ritual, such as age, ethnicity, situation, subject, and purpose of the conversation.

Discussion

The *Sifon* ritual consists of unique and distinctive events, situations and acts of communication. *Sifon* communicates the values, norms, beliefs and worldviews of the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community. *Sifon* is the “cooling act” for the “hot” penis due to the wound cut and flowing blood. *Sifon* should be performed with a permanent partner, and it must be swiftly carried out two until four days after the traditional male circumcision. To perform *Sifon*, women are compulsory medium, and the ritual is performed through a sexual act. Vaginal fluid is believed as a cure for circumcision.

According to Primus Lake, a renowned scholar on the issue, there are many motives for doing the *Sifon* ritual. Some of them are to achieve personal hygiene, fulfil the demands of tradition, enhance sexual strength and pleasure, avoid social sanction in the form of mockery and avoidance from the local practising community, and invigorate the face to be more radiant and youthful. It is not surprising that the *Sifon* tradition is still performed today within this context.

The urge to perform *Sifon* is based on intense cultural pressures. Primus Lake, in his research, observes that men who are circumcised and uncircumcised have different social statuses. Uncircumcised men are considered barbarians. Society will usually exclude men who have not been circumcised in social interaction. The public will mock and disrespect men who have not been circumcised in *Sifon* by addressing this poem “*Bambu wulung* grows in a clump, he has two curved shoots, not two but one.” This poem portrays an uncircumcised penis.

Some female members of the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community view *Sifon* is a vital thing to perform by men, especially their husbands. The optimistic view of *Sifon* is based

on the understanding that the husband does not bring the disease to his wife and avoids impotence. LZS, a shaman and *Sifon* performer, professed that “If I do not perform *Sifon*, I will bring disease to my wife. So I had to perform *Sifon* even though at that time I was already married, and prior to doing *Sifon*, I asked my wife’s approval to be circumcised.” Furthermore, the women from the *Atoni Pah Meto* ethnic community perceive *Sifon* as a token of obedience to their husbands and customs. They do not realize that women are objectified and exploited by upholding the practice, both physically and psychologically.

When viewed from the *Atoni Pah Meto*’s ethnic community cosmology, *Sifon* is a celebration of life-confirming energy. The community emphasizes the male penis to create life, a belief that sees life as mighty and robust energy (Zacharias & Natar, 2020, p. 62). The male penis is a symbol of strength and might, and the sperm symbolizes the forerunner of life. Women are means to help men in creating life.

Sifon women generally do not know if they are victims of (s)exploitation. Usually, the *Sifon*-performer men will not tell the *Sifon*-media women because if they know, they will refuse. Usually, *Sifon*-performer will persuade women to be *Sifon*-media using various strategies. Rarely found the women who consent to be *Sifon*-media because the *Sifon*-performer men do not openly convey their true meaning. LZS, one of the *Sifon* shamans, confirmed that the shaman used incantations to choose *Sifon*-media women. In other words, the female chosen ones partnering with the *Sifon*-performer male during the circumcision do not dare to refuse because it means that they go against the prevailing cultural norms. Consequently, the community will punish the women refused as *Sifon*-media in a socially-approved way or social ostracism.

One of the *Sifon*-shamans interviewed says that *ahélet* (a *Sifon*-shaman) is considered a person who receives divine insight (*wangsit*) from ancestors and has supernatural powers. Therefore he has full authority to lead cultural rituals and become an intermediary with supernatural life power holders (*Uis Neno*, *Uis Pah*, and *Bei Na*). Before the *Sifon* ritual proceeding, the *ahélet* has the right to determine which woman is the medium of the *Sifon*.

Apart from being chosen by the *ahélet*, men can also choose women as the *Sifon* medium through various strategies, such as offering them money. The *Sifon*-media targeted women are usually those who have economic difficulties. They unwittingly serve *Sifon*-performer men who want to get rid of the heat after circumcision.

According to Primus Lake, there must be a strategy to persuade women to participate in the *Sifon* ritual. Usually, men ask shamans to find proper women to make *Sifon*. Shamans make incantations with magical nuances to attract women. A woman’s consent is not an option because if a woman knows she will participate in the *Sifon* ritual, she will refuse. It is as if women were framed, except for economic reasons. Women who want to do *Sifon* have traditional medicine to clean themselves, such as herbs or *jamu*. Primus Lake’s research data shows that nearly 99% of women do not know they are *Sifon*-media.

There are many risks to the woman serving the *Sifon*. At the time of circumcision, the cut of the male penis was only from the skin of the *kulum*. Then a liquid comes out, which causes swelling like a tomato, and this has to burst at the time of the *Sifon*. The risk for women is because blood pus (the swollen tomatoes) must burst in the woman’s vagina. So all kinds of diseases from men were transmitted during the *Sifon* tradition. Afterwards, the *Sifon*-media women must endure significant health and psychological risks. Some of

the health risks received by women due to *Sifon* are *Memuti* (gonorrhoea), *Sopo* (painful genital wounds), *Menat nanas* (pain in the waist) and *Menmoro* (yellowish genitalia).

The social impact happened to *Sifon*-media women is local community harassment and socially-deemed worthlessness. Women are considered decadent by their surroundings. If a man knows that a woman has served *Sifon*, he will not want to marry her unless they move to another area. This perception affects the mental health of *Sifon*-media women. They would feel prolonged shame and depression.

Based on Primus Lake's research, the *Sifon* circumcision ritual involves magical powers, up to the point that the women recruited feel heavy, hot, and dizzy. When the *Sifon*-performer man she served has finished undergoing the "saup" or "hanikit" ritual – a cooling ritual to release the magic power of the circumcision from the body of the circumcised patient – then the woman will feel recovered until the ritual is complete.

According to Primus Lake, the *Sifon*-media women realize that they are used as a *Sifon* medium when bleeding. Usually, the *Sifon*-performer man will emit a signal by stepping over the head of the *Sifon*-media woman and shouting "awe." This symbol has the meaning that the man has completed the *Sifon* ritual. At this time, the magic incantation dissipated, the blood shed, and the woman was brought to consciousness.

During the *Sifon* ritual, there are chosen unmarried women used as the *Sifon* media and the wives of the husbands who perform *Sifon*. According to LZS, he asked his wife to perform *Sifon* because he was afraid of becoming impotent. His wife was a migrant domestic worker for several years, and by the time she arrived home, he wanted to ensure that he was not impotent. Therefore, he had to do *Sifon*. In this context, wives allow their husbands to do *Sifon* because they think their husbands will be more assertive in sexual relations after undergoing the ritual. In addition, the *Sifon*-approved wives consider themselves to have obeyed the prevailing cultural ¹⁸ ms.

In the tradition of *Sifon* circumcision, women's groups are people belonging to a low-power group who have to change their language when communicating in public. Therefore, their ideas are often ignored. Women's words and thoughts are not respected in the Atoni Pah Meto tribal community. When women seek to eliminate injustice, men's control over communication puts women in a position of powerlessness. Man-made world and symbolic ritual "helps define, demean, and exclude women." Women are "the muted group," which does not make a sound.

The processes of silencing women's groups in the *Sifon* ritual are carried out in various ways, namely:

First, Insult. Men give negative labels to women who serve as the *Sifon*-media. By the time the ritual is complete, they are considered worthless. Whatever women say is not heard by men.

Second, Rituals. Social and cultural rituals often contribute to silencing women and declaring that women are subordinate to men. In the *Sifon* tradition, women used as the *Sifon* media cannot refuse. They had no other choice. In addition, women only know that they are used as media if there is bleeding after having sex. It happens because men consider women as unequal and must obey what men want. Patriarchal culture also strengthens this view.

Third, Control. Communication practices put men at the centre and women only in the shadows. The rein of communication control lie at the hands and mouths of men. No man wants to marry a woman who once served as a *Sifon* medium.

Fourth, Harassment. Men tend to harass women in various places and opportunities. Women do not fit in places outside their domestic sphere (West & Turner, 2018: 503–505). A form of harassment against *Sifon*-media women happens when the *Sifon*-performer man steps over the head of the *Sifon*-medium woman and shouts awe. The jubilant shout appears as a victory for *Sifon*-performer man who excels at completing the ritual and defeating the victim. Another form of harassment is that men choose women in financial difficulty by giving them money. Money talks more decisive than upholding women's dignity. The material token in the form of money leaps across the sacred border of the symbolic values. The *Sifon*-performer men bear no responsibility for spreading venereal diseases to *Sifon*-victim women.

The silencing of *Sifon*-media women is reinforced by the dominant view of Atoni Pah Meto's cosmology which adores men and their penises as the symbol of strength and a means of creating life. In line with Zacharias & Natar's finding (2020: 62), the muted group of women is perpetuated by Phallocentrism. This tacit ideology emphasizes the "penis" as the centre of the development of sexuality. Directly, *Sifon* objectifies women's bodies as mere instruments in achieving men's goals and desires. Indirectly, *Sifon* as cultural practice materializes a woman's body under the pretence of maintaining traditional values.

In line with the international women's health movement central tenets, "women's material bodies, as well as their embodied experiences, are central to the development of a critical knowledge and health politics which is empowering to women both individually and collectively" (Davis, 2007: 52), *Sifon*-media women are doubly muted: from their own embodied experiences and their equal participation in enjoying cultural life. The cycle of gender-based violence directed against *Sifon*-media women perpetuates men's domination over women in private and public (cultural) spheres.

Therefore, in this particular context, the authors triangulate the findings above by interviewing Ririn Hayudiani, a gender activist focusing on social problems concerning women in West Nusa Tenggara. Based on her rich and extensive experiences on the gender-related problem faced by women in West Nusa Tenggara, she suggests several strategies to overcome the *Sifon* problem. First, to organize critical education sessions to the community. Second, to build and to dismantle a conservative cultural perspective by providing education to policy makers, especially the village elders who maintain customs and traditions. Third, to provide training for traditional and cultural leaders to use new perspectives in cultural practices. Fourth, to approach and to assist youth groups to reject the notion that some demeaning cultural practices, including *Sifon*, must be maintained because if they do not do so, they will be condemned. The cultural context of *Sifon* practice which victimize *Sifon*-media women should be dismantled and rearranged towards achieving gender justice goals. Women from Atoni Pah Meto ethnic community should enjoy the cultural life without any physical and mental harm.

Conclusion

The *Sifon* ritual uses women as a tool for healing the wounds of the circumcised male. Only through having sex with a woman chosen by *Ahelet* can the wound on the male genitalia be healed. Women are used as sex objects, not subjects in the ritual, because they cannot reject the constructed norms set by their culture. The myth about the circumcised

men going through the *Sifon* ritual considered mature in a physical context and are believed to have more strength and virility makes women victims. The apparent contradiction is that they will get a cultural sanction of “curse” if they refuse to participate. But when women accept themselves as tools for healing circumcision wounds, these women are socially marginalized afterwards. When men find out that the woman has been used as a tool for the *Sifon* ritual, then the woman is considered as “used goods.” The dire consequence is that no men want to marry them, and the *Sifon*-performed women are excluded from social appropriateness.

Identity is essential to describe self-awareness, and it is reflective of the more extensive and complex societal arrangements. The *Atoni Pah Meto* tribal community positions women as subhumans. A woman’s identity is highly dependent on speech, the practice of the *Sifon* circumcision ritual, and the perception of the male group. Identification always has a dependency on a condition and is always never completed.

The *Sifon* tradition contains asymmetric power relations and is culturally naturalized. By nature, women are considered to be attached to domestic roles. The role of women in a sexual context trapped in a *Sifon* ritual depends on men’s values, beliefs, and views, including, but not limited to, people, culture, and particular values. The naturalized culture then becomes the societal norm to determine good/bad, proper/improper, and accepted/unaccepted behaviour. The impact of naturalized culture then is that sexual intercourse (copulation) as a crucial part of biological impetus and life-driving force to survive (nature’s way of proceeding), a spontaneous act within the law of attraction and legalized in the framework of family, becomes no longer natural.

Within the *Sifon* ritual, the sexual act serves as an element of coercion. When performed within the frame of cultural rituals, the sexual act becomes coercive and has harmful consequences. Women’s autonomy as individuals and relative heteronomy as members of sociocultural groups are doubly marginalized. Autonomy as self-determination is considered non-existent and the *Sifon*-media women are subjugated as cultural objects (artefacts): they are revered but instrumental.

The implication on culture is that cultural sources respect traditions and symbols that are practiced. Unfortunately, respect becomes a distortion because culture disrespects it. On the one hand, culture wants to achieve respect for existing symbols, values, and beliefs. But *Sifon*-rituals’ culture disrespect women’s dignity. Social and cultural norms say that women should participate and be part of the culture, but these injunctions are not based on the freedom and willingness of the women’s role. The paradox lies in the community’s desire to preserve a culture that upholds the value of respect by doing something disrespectful.

Cultural values and rituals are part of a lasting legacy passing from generation to generation. Without intentional intervention from the cultural participants, it will not last, both internally and externally. With the intervention, cultural practices will change, and the awareness of the cultural participants will expand. *Sifon* rituals as a harmful cultural practice will be challenged and resisted by victimized women and women who have the potential to become objects. Here, the situated women’s agencies emerged from women who had been victims of the past practices. The future modified cultural practice will appear based on the growing awareness that *Sifon* circumcision was detrimental.

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