The \textit{Sifon} Culture (The Practice of Traditional Circumcision) of the Soe People, in the Aspect of Law and the Risks of the Female Reproductive Health

Siti Syahida Nurani\textsuperscript{1}, Absori\textsuperscript{2}, Khudzaifah Dimyati\textsuperscript{2}, Kelik Wardiono\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}Muhammadiyah University of Kupang, Indonesia, \textsuperscript{2}Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This research talks about women in the sifon tradition (the practice of circumcision) among the Soe people, Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. The sifon tradition is seen as an element with a cultural value on reproduction, where it is implemented through the practice of circumcision for men of the Timor tribe. In this ritual, women are the object for the sake of the men's sexual vitality, where afterwards, the men undergo intercourse with women. This practice is believed to have a magical and a religious sense. The sifon tradition is produced through a traditional ritual, in which a circumcisiond man undergoes intercourse with a minimum of three women as a process to heal the circumcision wounds. In the religious aspect, the sifon tradition becomes a belief for women to obtain values of propriety and compliance by sacrificing themselves for the sake of having the circumcisiond men healed. Sifon is a symbol of the men's masculinity towards their status in the society, with an ignorance of the women's rights of their reproductive health and also is a crimes.

\textbf{Keywords:} Oppression of women, Sifon culture, Human right, Reproductive health.

Introduction

The practice of traditional circumcision is a cultural phenomenon which takes place in the society, especially among societies who practice the Islamic religion, in which it is believed that circumcision must be done to males from an early age. Yet, the practice of circumcision is not only done among Muslims, as it is also a tradition of the people of the Timor tribe, where Christianity and animism is the dominant religion and believe. It is called the \textit{sifon} ritual. This ritual is a type of the traditional circumcision ritual which is preserved from generation to generation\textsuperscript{(1)}. In the past, the \textit{ohelet} (shaman) emphasized the role of widows or women who have been left by their husbands as the media of the \textit{sifon} ritual, yet as time goes by, commercial sexual workers (PSK / Pekerja Seks Komersial) are the priority media of the \textit{sifon} ritual.

The \textit{sifon} culture legitimizes a structural oppression towards women of the \textit{Atoni Pah Meto} tribe\textsuperscript{(1)}. People of this tribe have the belief that the practice of circumcision before marriage is executed may bring risks of impotency and infertility. Apart from that, those who are not willing to practice the \textit{sifon} tradition will be reproached and ridiculed.

The consequence of the traditional circumcision practiced by people of the Timor tribe is related to the obligatory rite which must be done by the men as the circumcision patients to undergo intercourse at least three times with different women. The involvement of women in the healing ritual for the circumcision patients surely raises various problems. For instance, in the aspect of health, this ritual harms women, as the pus and the wounds of the patients must be discarded to the female reproductive organ, which is the vagina.

According to Republic of Indonesia’s Constitution No. 7 year 1984 concerning to the Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, it is stated that the same rights of women and men have been described
and therefore it is stated that all forms of discrimination against women must be eliminated\(^3\). During the voting process in the said convention, Indonesia voted in agreement as a manifestation of Indonesia’s desire to participate in the international efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women\(^3\). It is clear that in the constitutional point of view, the practice of sifon is a form of violence and discrimination towards women. It is against the human rights, as it is an abuse of the women’s dignity. Moreover, in the health aspect, it is a risk towards the women’s health, as it may transmit contagious diseases such as sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. Therefore, the practice of the sifon culture not only refracts the concept of gender, yet it is also a neglect of the women’s right for reproductive health, both for the women who are the media of the sifon culture, as well as the women who are wives of the men who practiced the sifon ritual.

Hence, the practice of traditional circumcision (sifon) among people of the Central Timor tribe which is still practiced until today have caused women to experience oppression through different aspects. The cultural structure which is still maintained in the sifon culture in the Central Timor area, East Nusa Tenggara Province, have development impacts from different aspects, especially in the aspect of health, where the female reproductive health is troubled. Based on the frame of mind above, thus this writing tries to analyze the oppression of women in the sifon culture in the legal perspective and the risks of the female reproductive health in the Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia.

**Discussion**

**Legal Aspect of the Sifon Culture**

**Sifon** is a tradition of sexual intercourse which are done by mature men with the age of around 18 years old, who already have wives, with or without children. Sifon practicers, or those who undergo traditional circumcision, are obligated to have sexual intercourse with some women. The women they have sex with cannot be their own wives, nor can it be close relatives of the circumcisiond man. Yet, it can be with women who are unmarried or even with married women. In reality, sifon practicers who undergo the sexual intercourse ritual with a married woman can be charged with adultery and may be sentenced to jail for a maximum period of 9 months if the husband of that woman reports to the authorities.

In the point of view of the men who underwent the sifon tradition, their penises will be swollen, and they will have difficulties penetrating into the vagina. This will cause pain and the swell will break inside the vagina. After the men’s genitals are fully healed, they will give some rewards to the women whom they had had sex with for the sake of sifon.

The reward used to be some silver (a strip of silver). Following the dynamics of the times, the reward nowadays would be some money, with the sum of around IDR 250.000 (two hundred and fifty thousand rupiah) or some cattle, usually chickens. The procession of the sifon tradition starts off with handing over some ‘dowry’ to the shaman or the ohelet, usually some chickens, some knick knacks, and some money. After that, the patient will be taken to the river to undergo a confession of sins.

Then, the ahelet will form the cut (circumcision) using a sembilu blade (made from thin bamboo or it can also be a knife), where the man will then be returned to the river to be cleansed. This will be done in a period of a week or more. There is a term ‘Pria Ato in Meto Fatumnası’ which means seeking for women who will become the victims of sifon. The men may use fake promises and seduction, saying that they will marry the women as long as they are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sifon tradition. After having had sex, the men will actually leave the women. A term used among the Ato in Meto men is ‘Haiknikit’, which can be defined as seeking for sifon victims, or cooling down the end of their circumcisiond genitals, which aims to make it smooth.

Another term is ‘ta’sanutma’putu’ which means cooling down the heat, or ‘polinma’putu’. The seduction the men do to the women is merely a strategy to attain the ‘polinma’putu or at polin ai ma’out’ relations from the women. Therefore, the sperm from that intercourse will serve as a cure to heal the wound of the man\(^3\). This ritual is practiced when the circumcisiond genitals are almost healed, yet not yet fully healed, which is around 2-7 days prior to the circumcision\(^4\).

The culture of patriarchy still has a high influence in this culture, therefore women have trouble exiting from the confinement of the tradition which demeans women\(^5\). In one of the tabloids which discuss about the sifon culture, it is said that victims of this ritual may be
threatened to not be married for the rest of their lives\(^{(6)}\).

Traditional leader of the Tubuhue Village, Amanuhan Barat Sub-District, explains that the men who will practice the *sifon* culture must ask for leave to their wives or their families, because they will not directly return after the circumcision\(^{(7)}\). Meanwhile, the time of circumcision, according to the local culture, must be practiced when corn stats to grow grains. This has a meaning that the circumcision of a man’s face will shine. This is why, in the maize season, women in the Central Timor and also in other areas of the Timor Island are reluctant to travel alone as they are worried that they will become victims of the *sifon* ritual\(^{(8)}\).

Young men of the Meto tribe who do not undergo the *sifon* ritual will be isolated, ridiculed, and insinuated during traditional ceremonies\(^{(9)}\). Women whose husbands undergo the *sifon* practice will not be jealous nor will they feel betrayed as they believe that the *sifon* practice is also for their sake\(^{(10)}\).

The women may be widows, commercial sex workers, or even good women who are seduced with fake promises to be married. Legally, the men who seek women as the victims of the *sifon* ritual with fake promises may be charged with the Criminal Law Article 378, concerning fraud and may be sentenced with imprisonment for a maximum period of four years.

Women who sincerely accept the *sifon* tradition are because of their awareness towards the magical-religious values of that practice, without understanding its dangers for their reproductive health. Again, women are placed in an inferior position, where they are silenced by a masculine-dimentioned system. The healing ritual practiced by the circumcision patients through the vagina makes it seem that the vagina is a trash bin to contain filth as results of the circumcision, which has the aim to prevent impotency and to cure infertility\(^{(10)}\).

Regarding silenced women, the term ‘Subaltern’ is popularized by Spivak, which is followed by a question, “Can the Subaltern speak?” This question aims to emphasize that a subject named the Subaltern, who have difficulties speaking out, even regarding themselves. Spivak explicitly states that the Subaltern are women, as they are subjects who do not have a position nor an influence in social change\(^{(11)}\). Spivak understands that his desire to give voice to the Subaltern in history is formed by the imperialic-masculine ideology\(^{(12)}\).

### Sifon Culture and Its Risks towards the Female Reproductive Health

The *sifon* culture, if associated with the Constitution of Health, it can be said that the women related to it (the *sifon* women as well as wives of the *sifon* actors) do not reach a state of welfare for their bodies, their minds, nor their social lives. It is difficult for them to reach a welfare-state, both economically and socially, as they are confined in a culture which produces risks towards their health. Results of Lake states that *sifon* women, will cause the *sifon* women to become skinnier day by day. They will experience a lengthy fever and their skin and eyes will become yellowish\(^{(13)}\).

It is noted that the number of HIV cases in the area of Central Timor Regency in year 2013 is as many as 11 cases. It increased to 14 cases the next year, which then increases to 23 on 2015. On 2016, there are 11 cases. Meanwhile, there are 20 cases of AIDS in 2013, increasing to 25 cases in the next two years, and becoming 39 cases in 2016. The cases of HIV/AIDS are caused by free sex, drugs, a high mobility and migration, also the fast flow of information and communication\(^{(14)}\).

The high number of people with AIDS in the Central Timor area shows a potentially dangerous condition for women (both the *sifon* women as well as wives of the *sifon* actors). The ritual of free sex in the *sifon* ritual are usually done through the following method:

Penetration of the penis to the vagina even though there cannot be ejaculation, as its purpose is only to smear and to release blood and pus from the swollen penis as results of the circumcision. It is believed that it will bring effect towards the vitality of men.

*Sifon*’s done by married men with widows or women who have been left by their husbands or by virgin girl. The development of the era shifts this condition and nowadays the media of *sifon* may be commercial sex workers.

The *sifon* ritual is practiced through those methods, which may pose risks towards the occurrence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), such as:

Gonorhea and Chlamydia, caused by bacteria. Infection starts a few days until a few weeks after having sexual intercourse with an exposed person. In men, the genitals will excrete some liquid which will make uriniating feel painful. Meanwhile, in women, the...
Symptoms are not severe, or there might be none at all. But, if not cured, this disease will become worse and may cause infertility.

Herpes, caused by virus, which may be treated but not healed. Symptoms start to occur three until ten days after having sexual intercourse with someone exposed to this disease.

Syphilis, caused by bacteria. Symptoms will appear between three weeks until three months after having sex with someone who suffers from this disease. Blisters will look like holes in the skin, with higher edges. It is usually not painful. The blisters may disappear after a few weeks, but the virus will stay in the body and this disease may reappear as blisters all over the body.

Human Papilloma, caused by virus (HPV), where one or many boils or ulcers will appear, between one month until one year after having sexual intercourse with a sufferer. In women, it may cause cervical cancer.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a disease of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), caused by unprotected sex. It may cause death after around ten years after being infected by the HIV virus.

Because of that, the sifon ritual needs an immediate attention from all elements, to come together and to make efforts so that the sifon culture may be stopped. This may be done through continuous programs from the related authorities.

Education by the Public Health Office to give counseling concerning the sifon culture and the harm it causes. There needs to also be a data on the sifon practitioners and the commercial sex workers, so that they can be checked regularly.

Education by the religious leaders, such as the Christian/Catholic priests or the Islamic scholars to strengthen their spiritual knowledge, so that the society understands that the sifon culture is a primitive act which is against the religious, social, and legal norms.

Legal action must be taken to the practitioners of the sifon who undergo sexual intercourse with underaged women or with women who are married. This also applies to men who make fake promises and seduction to marry those with whom they will undergo sexual intercourse for the sake of sifon.

**Conclusion**

Sifon is a culture in which men undergoes a traditional circumcision and tries to heal it by having sexual intercourse with at least three women who are not their wives, which makes women victims of oppression. Politically, sifonis a strategy to strengthen the system of masculinity and patriarchy to subdue women to obey in becoming sexual objects. This unhealthy culture contributes greatly on the transmission of sexual diseases such as HIV/AIDS, which poses risks to the reproductive health of the women in the Central Timor area, East Nusa Tenggara. Legal action must be taken immediately to prevent further harms caused by this tradition.

**Source of Funding:** Authors

**Ethical Clearance:** Yes

**Conflict of Interest:** No

**References**


