



GENDER RELATIONS PORTRAYED IN NGADA LEGEND “PENU AND VEGU THE ORPHAN”

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini membahas relasi gender dalam “Penu dan Vegu si Yatim,” salah satu legenda dari Ngada. Analisis tematik dalam kajian ini mengungkapkan bahwa legenda tersebut menggambarkan tiga relasi gender yang saling terkait, yaitu (i) otoritas patriarki, (ii) agency perempuan dan transformasi diri, serta (iii) kerja sesuai gender dan kekuasaan domestik. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahwa gagasan biner sederhana tentang dominasi laki-laki atau subordinasi perempuan ditantang melalui tokoh Penu. Tokoh perempuan protagonis ini menavigasi masyarakat yang didominasi laki-laki, dengan menggunakan agency-nya melalui transformasi yang didorong oleh alam dan pekerjaan domestik. Kajian ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas mengenai gender dalam folklor dengan menekankan pentingnya sastra lisan tradisional sebagai media untuk memahami keragaman konstruksi gender di luar konteks Barat.

Kata Kunci: *gender, legenda, Ngada*

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at gender relations in “Penu and Vegu the Orphan”, one of the legends from Ngada. The thematic analysis of this paper revealed that the legend portrays three intertwined gender relations, such as (i) patriarchal authority, (ii) female agency and self-transformation, and (iii) gendered labor and domestic power. The analysis demonstrates that simplistic binary notions of male dominance or female subordination are challenged through Penu’s character. This female protagonist navigated a male-dominated society, using her agency through nature-driven transformation and domestic works. This paper contributes to a wider discussion of gender in folklore by underscoring the importance of indigenous oral literature as a medium for understanding the diversity of gender constructions beyond Western contexts.

Keywords: *gender, legend, Ngada*

INTRODUCTION

Legends have been commonly recognized as cultural repositories that reflect and shape norms and power structures in societies. According to Bauman (1992), local legends can provide valuable new insights into past narrative traditions. Across various cultural contexts, legends can reveal the values and practices people shared in the past that may explain the ways people live today. Understanding these values and practices can help people define who they are today (Field & Cuero, 2012; Silverman & Ruggles, 2007).



Among many different values and practices shared in the past through legends as oral narratives, gender dynamics in various cultural contexts can be revealed. According to Butler (2011) and Butler and Halberstam (2025), gender is conceptualized as a performance that is constructed through discourse and social practices. More specifically, Butler emphasized that gender is not biologically inherited, but it is repeated acts that are socially performed in line with the cultural norms. This implies that gender as socially constructed performance may have been scripted through legends that are considered as socially circulated narratives. The evidence suggests that legends play an important role as a mechanism for gender identity negotiation, with narratives simultaneously exposing gender inequalities and potentially perpetuating them (Darmadali, 2022; Sugiarti et al., 2022; Wulandari et al., 2025).

As revealed in the above-mentioned studies, narratives tend to reflect patriarchal ideology and female inferior positions (Darmadali, 2022; Sugiarti et al., 2022; Wulandari et al., 2025). In her seminal work *"Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"*, Ortner (1972) posited that female subordination tends to be a structural feature of many different societies. In Ortner's view, women are commonly associated with nature and domestic labor, while men are associated to power that is culturally and publicly manifested. This is evident in gender representation depicted in folktales that men are frequently associated with the roles and agency of particular occupations, while women are linked to beauty and domestic roles (Nagi Sarhan, 2023; Florence, 2013). An instance from Icelandic legends tends to portray supernatural women as threats to male hegemony, with narratives ultimately reinforcing dominant gender expectations (Jónsdóttir, 2021, 2023). These examples show that legends can reveal how gender is represented in different cultures. Pertaining to Ortner's (1972) view, domestic roles, labor classification and social expectation reinforce gender hierarchies that are potentially rehearsed within these oral narratives.

However, it is important to note that gender representation is not universally hierarchical. In some societies, gender roles are differentiated but equally valued, highlighting a social and ritual equality. The example can be found in Ngada society residing in Ngada Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province of Indonesia. Gender relations in this society are deemed culturally unique because Ngada people follow a blend matrilineal kinship and ritual practices that accentuate balanced gender dynamics (Schröter, 2005). While having the roles as bearers of lineage and cultural continuity, Ngada women occupy central roles within the family. This does not



mean that men have subordinated position in Ngada society, but men are responsible in ritual and leadership roles. This gender system suggests that men and women occupy equal important positions in the society (Sile et al., 2020; Vianey, 2023).

Similar to many other cultures, Ngada gender relations are embodied in varied cultural beliefs and practices, including legends. One of the legends from Ngada is “Penu and Vegu the Orphan” that was documented in Djawanai (1983). This legend illustrates nuanced gender dynamics through characters who embody societal ideals and conflicts pertaining to gender roles, marriage, and autonomy. This legend can be the means for illustrating how gender relations are portrayed in society.

Considering the importance of legends in revealing gender concepts implemented in society, this paper looks at how gender relations are depicted in Ngada Legend “Penu and Vegu the Orphan” in order to reveal the cultural codes that capture gender stereotypes in Ngada society. This paper further explores how the legend functions as a critique of patriarchal authority and as an affirmation of female agency and transformation. The examination into this legend offers an insight into the matrilineal yet complex gender dynamics that reflect the potentially balanced roles between men and women.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study applied thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis was considered appropriate for this study because it offers a lens for systematically examining cultural gender norms embedded in narrative structures as in legends. This examination was done by paying careful attention to the roles that characters played, linguistic strategies and symbolic representations that were used in the legends that provided information on how legends either contest or perpetuate gender stereotypes.

The source of data of this study was taken from the legend “Penu and Vegu the Orphan” adapted from Djawanai’s (1983) foundational work on Ngada oral corpus. This legend began with narrating the proposing practice, in which Penu, the female protagonist, was forced by her uncles and brothers to marry a man that they chose for her. The story went on with the refusal of this proposing practice by Penu that consequently led her to cast herself into a ravine. She transformed into a large fish, which was taken home by Vegu who went fishing at that time. Every time Vegu went out for work in the field, Penu returned to her human shape and cooked



delicious food for Vegu. This happened for around three weeks until Vegu found out that it was the beautiful Penu who cooked for him. The rest of the story was predominantly about the exchanges between Penu and Vegu. Every day Penu gave the instructions to Vegu in order to do something which was then became reality. The story ended with Penu and Vegu living a happy life until they died. This legend became the source of data for examining how gender relations are portrayed.

Data was collected through documentation techniques (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). It was conducted by repetitively reading the text and extracting parts of the sentences that contain gender relevant information. These sentences were the primary data for this study.

As mentioned earlier, thematic analysis was applied in this study. It was done by adopting the procedures as outlined in Nowell et al. (2017). The steps taken were (i) familiarizing with data through intensive reading of the documented legend; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) defining and naming the themes; and (v) producing the report. Having read the legend text intensively, the initial codes were generated. These codes were connected to marriage coercion, agency, transformation, domestic labor, agricultural work and production, social status and wealth. These codes were then re-organized into three key gendered themes, namely (i) patriarchal authority, (ii) female agency and transformation, and (iii) gendered labor and domestic power. These themes were interpreted in light of gender concepts (Butler, 2011; Butler & Halberstam, 2025; Ortner, 1972). The results are reported in the next section, results and discussion.

To ensure rigor (Huffman, 2023), validity, reliability, and ethical considerations were carefully addressed in this paper. In order the data analysis to be valid and reliable, this paper provided detailed textual analysis along with transparent methodology, including clearly documenting the coding process and analytical decision regarding result interpretation. Since this paper was a textual analysis by relying on the existing published material (Djawanai, 1983), no human subject was involved. However, cultural sensitivity was maintained by acknowledging oral narratives, as in the Legend of "Penu and Vegu the Orphan" as communal heritage and respectfully contextualizing the beliefs and practices of Ngada society.



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data revealed that gender relations are portrayed in Ngada Legend “Penu and Vegu the Orphan” through three key intertwined points. These are (i) patriarchal authority, (ii) female agency and transformation, and (iii) gendered labor and domestic power. These findings confirm that this legend functions as a critique of patriarchal authority and as an affirmation of female agency and transformation. These findings and their discussion are put forward in the following three subsections.

Patriarchal Authority

Patriarchal authority is explicitly reinforced in the beginning of the legend. This is evident in the traditional proposing practice in which Penu was forced to marry the man chosen by her uncles and brothers (Djawanai, 1983).

Extract 1 – *“You must agree to marry that young man! That is because to our eyes this is good, in our hearts this is right.”*

Extract 2 – *“If the spouse that the parents chose should be refused by the girl, they would put her in stocks.”*

Extract 3 – *“Though she refused, still all of her uncles kept pressing, insisting like that, saying, “You must agree to marry that young man!”*

The three extracts above indicate patriarchal authority is reflected in a system that allows male kin (uncles, brothers, parents) to have control over female marriage life through coercion and threat (putting in stocks). In relation to Butler’s (2011) perspective, these acts are performative in which commands, repeated pressures, and coercion appear to perpetuate female subordination. Penu’s refusal is considered as a disruption to this norm that is potential to expose fragile gender performance. In a similar vein, this situation exemplifies a hierarchy that is culturally practiced in which women are subordinated because the decision making is in the hand of men. This aligns with Ortner’s (1972) view that women are often linked to being the less powerful.

Female Agency and Transformation

Female agency and transformation are evident in two parts of the legend: (i) Penu’s determination to refuse the imposed marriage and in her supernatural transformation into a fish and (ii) Penu’s nature-derived power in establishing agricultural productivity with the help of male



character, Vegu the Orphan. Extracts 4 to 8 below is to illustrate female agency and transformation in the beginning of the legend (Djawanai, 1983).

Extract 4 – *“If you, my uncles, keep pressing ... I will go cast myself into a ravine.”*

Extract 5 – *She then went to cast herself into a ravine. From down at nearby Takatunga she came up this way, and coming up, arrived downhill there at nearby Saraseddu. From Saraseddu, she kept heading to the left (as one faces downstream), heading to the left, until she also arrived down there at nearby Zeu, and on to the left to So 'a. From So 'a there, she also kept going on, going to the left, until she also arrived at the left at the Kolupenu river. Upon arriving at Kolupenu there to the left, she then climbed up in a tree.*

Extract 6 – *Though the "brothers" called her to return home, she said, "Well! To satisfy your desires, my "brothers", you will witness then, that here I am really casting myself down the ravine."*

Extract 7 – *“Climbing up in the tree ... she then threw herself down.”*

Extract 8 – *“Down inside the pond ... there she then transformed (herself) into a large fish.”*

Extracts 4 to 8 illustrate a female agency through Penu's strong self-determination. Penu refused the imposed marriage not only through verbal refusal (Extracts 4 and 6), but also through her efforts to cast herself into a ravine (Extracts 5 and 7) and her physical transformation into a supernatural form (Extract 8). Penu's refusal to enact the gendered roles defined by her uncles and her supernatural transformation indicate that Penu relocates her identity outside the conventional norms accepted in Ngada society at that time. This can be considered as a performative distortion (Butler, 2011; Butler & Halberstam, 2025), in particular Penu's acts that were against the society's acceptable norms. Moreover, her transformation shows that gender is not fixed and that society beliefs and practices may likely be violated. From Ortner's (1972) perspective, Penu's movement into the natural realms, as illustrated by the tree, ravine, pond, and waterfall, may symbolize her crossing from male-dominated cultural domain into the nature domain from which she gains power. Penu's nature derived power gives her social influence, and thereby challenges the idea that nature, in which women tend to be associated with, is powerless (Ortner, 1972).



The rest of this section, containing Extracts 9 to 14, explains female agency and transformation as revealed in Penu's nature-derived power in establishing wealth and agricultural productivity with the help of male character, Vegu the Orphan (Djawanai, 1983).

Extract 9 – *He said, “Oh my! Whose rice is this steaming, whose meat is this simmering for me?”. He looked all around but saw no one. When he looked at the fish, it was still alive.*

Extract 10 – *He looked down inside there; down inside, winnowing and sorting rice was a beautiful young woman of perfect form.*

Extract 9 shows that Vegu was surprised to find the steaming rice and simmering meat in his place, but he found no one, except the alive fish. Extract 10 shows that Vegu was in his attempt to find out who cooked the food for him and he found out that it was a beautiful woman who was cooking for him. Extract 9 and 10 illustrate Penu's agency through the nature-derived power in transforming herself from a fish into a beautiful woman. Penu took control of her own actions in which she returned to her human form and prepared food for Vegu the orphan. This illustration resonates with Butler's (2011) concept of gender performativity that gender is constantly enacted through behavior, speech, and other acts. This concept is clearly seen in Penu's acts of preparing food and cooking, which conform to her role. However, this was done in a way that shifts the narrative by positioning her as a figure of power and autonomy. This was because she did all the cooking in an 'invisible' manner. This means that gender is performed in ways that can either disrupt or conform to societal norms.

As her identity was then revealed, Penu also had her agency by telling Vegu not to inform her presence to others. Penu also told Vegu to clean the garden and interestingly Vegu obeyed to do it without questioning.

Extract 11 – *“Yes, fine; provided you don't go about telling, don't just go about telling the people (of the village about me) yet. Now that you already know (about me) like this, every day you just go to work and return to the villages as (you do) every day. Just don't go about telling the people (about me) yet.”*

Extract 12 – *So, tomorrow you go down to work in the garden, but later tonight you sharpen your machete, good and sharp! You go down to work in the garden and fell all the trees and the lianas down around the garden. That is so that our garden will be spacious. He said, “Fine (I'll do as you have told me)”*



Extracts 11 and 12 underscore Penu's self-transformation as she actively engaged in constructing her own identity different from patriarchal expectations. By giving Vegu the man the orders (to keep her presence secret and to work in the garden), Penu asserted her agency. This situation challenges Ortner's (1972) structural subordination that situates women in passive roles. Penu even gave orders to Vegu to keep visiting the garden every two days. She also gave Vegu the command to dress up and dance.

Extract 13 – *She said, “So, the day after tomorrow go down and visit the garden again!”
Every second day, he kept visiting down there.*

Extract 14 – *She said, “Now we will get dressed and go forth to dance, our slaves there have already sounded the goo-laba (gongs and drums) ensemble”.*

Penu's agency in directing Vegu as the man to regularly visit the garden (Extract 13) and to prepare for a dance performance (Extract 14) implies her autonomy in orchestrating the involvement in both private (gardening) and public (dancing) spaces. Making her presence and role in both spaces transforms her identity beyond gender expectations. In this way, Penu asserts her ability to shape her own destiny. Pertaining to Ortner's (1972) concept of women subordination, Penu's acts appear to disrupt gender expectations, in particular the dichotomy between male-dominated public life and female-dominated private life.

Gendered Labor and Domestic Power

Gendered labor and domestic power emerge as significant findings because the legend contains the ways works within households are divided, valued and used to negotiate power according to gender expectations. Extracts 15 to 17 illustrate Vegu as the man working in the garden and Penu the woman doing domestic roles (Djawanai, 1983).

Extract 15 – *He went down to work in his garden.*

Extract 16 – *Winnowing the rice and sorting it (picking out the unhulled rice) done, she then poured the hulled rice down into the cooking pot. Down there, water was already boiling noisily. When she finished pouring the hulled rice (into the cooking pot), she took seasoned strips of water buffalo meat and cut them up. Finished cutting them, she then simmered them.*

Extract 17 – *The next morning, he went forth to fell all the big trees there.*

Extracts 15, 16 and 17 underscore gendered roles that women are expected to do the cooking and cleaning, while men are expected to work outside. These roles are socially



constructed. Although domestic labour tends to be devalued, women may gain power, authority and influence through domestic roles. It is evident in Penu's character that she could make decision and gave commands to Vegu the man (see Extracts 11, 12, 13, 14). While this dynamic challenges Ortner's (1972) view of women subordination, it follows Butler's (2011) idea that gender is not innate but socially constructed. Thereby, gender performativity can reconfigure power as revealed in this legend.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the gender relations portrayed in the Ngada Legend "Penu and Vegu the Orphan". This analysis demonstrates that Ngada gender ideology challenges simplistic binary notions of male dominance or female subordination by illustrating a culturally specific model where gender equality is relational and embedded in communal values. The legend not only preserves traditional gender roles but also provides a narrative space for negotiation and empowerment within established norms. The findings contribute to broader scholarship on gender in folklore, underscoring the importance of indigenous oral literature as a medium for understanding diverse gender constructions beyond Western contexts. Nevertheless, the findings rely on one particular legend and may not represent the full breadth of Ngada oral narratives. Future research could further explore the diversity of Ngada oral narratives and compare them with the ones from other indigenous communities to deepen insights into gender ideologies and their social functions. To deal with the interpretation that solely depends on the accuracy of published text (Djawanai, 1983), future research could also do triangulation, such as through member-checking to explore how the legend shapes gender dynamics in the present lives of Ngada society. By exploring Ngada legends, such as "Penu and Vegu the Orphan," researchers and practitioners can recognize the depth of gender ideas within society as well as its potential to shape the discussion and gender education that are more culturally sensitive.

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