

# Islam and Gender: Practicing Female Circumcision in Indigenous Communities (Case Study of Jepara Central Java)

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**How to Cite:** Alfaris, M.R. (2025). Islam and Gender: Practicing Female Circumcision in Indigenous Communities (case Study of Jepara Central Java). *JSEAIS*, 4(2), 37-48. <https://doi.org/10.30631/5rygax05>

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the response of the Kejawen indigenous community in Banjaran Village Bangsri Subdistrict Jepara Regency, to the decision of the KUPI (Kongres Ulama' Perempuan Indonesia) to ban the practice of female circumcision in Jepara, where they have traditionally practiced female circumcision since the time of their ancestors. In fact, this ban is based on an in-depth study that female circumcision has more harmful effects. The research method used is field research, with an empirical legal approach. After all the data is collected, it is then analyzed using 3 stages such as data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the Kejawen indigenous people of Banjaran Village Bangsri Subdistrict Jepara Regency responded casually to the prohibition of female circumcision practices that had been decided by KUPI (Kongres Ulama' Perempuan Indonesia). They insist on continuing the practice of female circumcision as a preservation of the traditions of their ancestors.

**Keywords:** Gender, Female Circumcision, Indigenous Peoples.

## Introduction

Khitan or known as circumcision is an act performed to remove the foreskin (prepuce) from the male/female reproductive organs. This practice is commonly performed on male children, but can also be performed on female children (Mundzir & Muthmainnah, 2022; Khodijah & Syamsudini, 2023; Pratiwi, 2024). Circumcision has various reasons, including religious, cultural, and medical reasons. In the Islamic view, circumcision is part of the sunnah and is believed to be an act that brings individuals closer to God and part of cultural and religious identity (Amin & Lendrawati, 2022; Ithnin et al., 2023; Mubarak et al., 2024).



Indigenous communities also have the custom of circumcising their children, both male and female. One of the indigenous communities referred to here is the Kejawen indigenous community in Banjaran Village, Bangsri Sub-district, Jepara Regency. Where they still preserve the circumcision of their female children. However, on the other hand, in 2022, the KUPI (Kongres Ulama' Perempuan Indonesia) held in Jepara, clearly decided to prohibit the circumcision of children (women) on the pretext that it could have a negative impact.

The basis for KUPI's decision to prohibit female circumcision is that the act includes injuring the female genitalia, which is harmful. In the decision, it is in the fifth point which reads: 1) The marginalization of women in protecting NKRI from the dangers of violence in the name of religion; 2) Waste management for environmental sustainability and women's safety; 3) Protection of women from the dangers of forced marriage; 4) Protection of women's lives from the dangers of pregnancy due to rape; and 5) Protection of women from harmful cutting and wounding of female genitalia without medical reasons (Sya'rani & Soetomo, 2022; Junaidi, 2023; Muflih, 2024).

With this, the formulation of the problem to be explored is how the response of the Kejawen indigenous community in Jepara to the KUPI (Kongres Ulama' Perempuan Indonesia) decision on the prohibition of circumcising children (women) on the pretext that it can have a negative impact.

The purpose of writing this article is to find out the response of the Kejawen indigenous community in Jepara to the KUPI ruling (Kongres Ulama' Perempuan Indonesia) on the prohibition of circumcising children (women) on the pretext that it can have a negative impact. With the purpose of this research, it brings out the novelty of the research when compared to some previous literature studies.

## Literature Review

### Past Research

In their research, Shaamash & Eskandar explained that in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan, rare cases have been found, namely cases where post-circumcision there is an increase in the size of the clitoral epidermal inclusion cyst. In this research, there are 2 aspects explored, namely to present a rare case of circumcision and review the practice of circumcision (Shaamash & Eskandar, 2025). The study concluded that the case could be treated, by performing surgical intervention. In addition, the practice of female circumcision is rare in Egypt. However, other Arab countries still preserve female circumcision.

Second, in the collective research of Basri's team explained that, until now in modern times, the Bugis Makassar community still preserves female circumcision as a form of ancestral tradition that must be preserved. In this research, there are two aspects explored, namely to examine the case of female circumcision in the perspective of Islamic law and cultural symbolism (Basri et al., 2024). This study concluded that female circumcision in the



perspective of Islamic law is carried out because it contains elements of benefit. In addition, in the perspective of cultural symbolism, it contains the meaning of welfare, nobleness, purity, harmony, and salvation in the world hereafter.

Third, in the collective research of the Ithnin team explained that there is a hadith that discusses female circumcision, this hadith is *hasan li ghairihi*. In their research, two aspects were explored, namely to evaluate and reassess the validity and authority of the hadith to affirm female circumcision (Ithnin et al., 2023). This study concludes that there are hadiths that support the practice of female circumcision, because the practice is part of the Islamic religious law.

Fourth, Abbas & Rahmatiah's research said that the traditional practice of female circumcision has been going on for hundreds of years and is a custom of their ancestors. In this research, there are 3 aspects explored, namely to describe the practice of female circumcision, Islamic values, and to find out the attitudes and understanding of the Jeneponto community about female circumcision (Abbas & Rahmatiah, 2022). This study concludes that, first, the practice of female circumcision in Jeneponto society is carried out very lively like a wedding event. Second, the Islamic values reflected in the practice are mutual cooperation, religion, beauty, and solidarity. Third, the understanding and attitude of the Jeneponto community that traditionalizes female circumcision is part of the obligations that must be carried out for Muslims.

Fifth, Karaman's research says that surgeons in African countries who study several hadiths about female circumcision have not found any Qur'anic or hadith evidence that explains female circumcision. In this research, there is one aspect that is explored, namely to explore the study of female circumcision practices from several perspectives such as Islamic religion, ethics, medical, and sociocultural (Karaman, 2021). This study concludes that the understanding of Muslim surgeons in African countries, female circumcision in the Qur'an does not have a single verse that supports the argument about circumcising female children, nor is there any mention of justification in the Hadith. Thus, modern Islamic scholars are beginning to abandon female circumcision.

## Research Method

The researcher's research here uses a qualitative method based on field research or known as (field research) with a sociological empirical legal approach. This approach prioritizes the realistic state of the problem (problem) of the observed actors or informants, and combines legal studies with actual behavior (Ogbogu & Ahmed, 2022; Guo, 2023; Wardiono *et al.*, 2024). Empirical legal research is in line with positive law because of its position as a primary data source. However, the primary data source is based on real behavior taken from the research location, where the real behavior develops freely in social life.

This study discusses female circumcision in the traditional Kejawen community in Banjaran Village, Bangsri Sub-district, Jepara Regency. This study is based on the problem, where they preserve the custom of their ancestors, namely circumcising children (female gender) from an early age. Although at the KUPI (Kongres Ulama' Perempuan Indonesia) event which was held on Thursday to Saturday, precisely on November 24-26, 2022 at the Hasyim Asy'ari Islamic Boarding School in Bangsri Jepara, it was agreed and stated that female circumcision was proven to have a negative impact. The prohibition is based on the occurrence of health complications such as infection, bleeding, pain, and difficulty urinating and defecating.

Data collection techniques include direct observation, interviews, and reviewing some literature. Direct observation was conducted in Banjaran Jepara Village, then interviewing local elders, namely Mbah Tumijan and Mbah Tomo, each informant was interviewed for 30-40 minutes, with this duration being able to answer and explore information about female circumcision in their community. In addition, interviews were conducted with 8 other informants, in this case outsiders and indigenous people of Banjaran Jepara.

The selection of informants was based on several criteria, including: 1) Openly willing to be asked for information; 2) Have in-depth knowledge about female circumcision; 3) Directly involved with the problem under study; 4) Having diverse backgrounds; and 4) Having sufficient time. In addition, a review of some literature by gathering information about KUPI prohibiting female circumcision in Jepara.

After all the data is collected, then the data is analyzed, the analysis here uses 3 stages, including: 1) data reduction; 2) data display; 3) conclusion drawing (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; McMullin, 2023; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). First, data collected from direct observation, interviews, and review of several literatures, will be reduced by selecting the most relevant information to answer the research questions, as well as filtering out unnecessary information. Next, the reduced data will be displayed in the form of an organized descriptive narrative, making it easier to identify relationships. Finally, conclusion drawing is done by formulating research objectives and findings based on the analysis that has been done. By using these three stages, data that has been collected from the field can be directly drawn conclusions (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022; Thompson *et al.*, 2023; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

The limitation in this research lies in the interview period, where the informants were busy with their daily activities, resulting in a relatively long time for data collection. In addition, on certain days, the weather was not conducive, causing the number of informants to decrease. This caused obstacles in the data collection process.

## Analysis

### 1. Social Dynamics of Kejawen Indigenous Peoples

Social dynamics is a concept that describes how societies move, change and evolve over time as a result of the various social interactions that occur between individuals, groups and institutions in the context of the wider environment (Perryman *et al.*, 2022; Asman & Muda,



2023; Senis, 2024). It reflects how individuals and groups adapt and evolve in an ever-changing society.

One of the many communities affected by dynamics is the indigenous Kejawen community (Setianingsih *et al.*, 2022; Imron *et al.*, 2023; Zaimah *et al.*, 2024). Many of these communities experience rejection, friction and scorn by the majority-based community (Ummiroh *et al.*, 2022; Chalim *et al.*, 2023; Dewi *et al.*, 2024). This kind of thing does not happen a little in Indonesia, one of which is the kejawen indigenous community in Jepara, to be precise in Banjaran Jepara Village.

They coexist with various religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. This looks like a reflection of diversity that coexists and complements each other. However, this is not entirely justified. According to Mbah Tumijan and Mbah Tomo, they have had unfavorable experiences in the community during their lifetime. The experience was that they were considered lacking in terms of socializing in the community because they spent more time at home (Tumijan & Tomo, 2024).

In addition, they are also considered not to carry out obligations that reflect Islam, where residents who are predominantly Muslim say that Mbah Tumijan and Mbah Tomo never pray because they spend more time in the busy world of farming, herding cows, going to the fields, and many more.

When Friday night comes, Mbah Tumijan and Mbah Tomo will usually light the fire of incense. Mbah Tumijan and Mbah Tomo light the fire because they believe that this activity is a reflection of respect for their ancestors, and they also believe that every Friday night their ancestors will return home (Tumijan & Tomo, 2024). The activities carried out by the two of them are of course positive things, because they include the kesunnahan recommended by the Prophet Muhammad. However, according to the community members of Banjaran Village, these activities are considered a form of God's fellowship, on the grounds that the Kejawen indigenous people never worship (pray).

## **2. Philosophy of Life of Kejawen Indigenous People**

Social life can be defined as a condition in which a group of people, consisting of individuals with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and values, live together in an integrated community, where they interact, communicate, and build close social relationships (Japutra *et al.*, 2022; Ramkissoon, 2023; Alfaris & Rosyid, 2024).

Everyone who lives in a society must have a philosophy in carrying out every activity they do every day. A philosophy of life is a view of life held by an individual or group that reflects the basic concept of a desirable life (Ong *et al.*, 2022; Prayitno *et al.*, 2023; Sawitri *et al.*, 2024). This philosophy serves as a guide in living daily life, influences the way individuals make decisions, and determines their attitude and behavior towards various situations in life.

In carrying out worldly life, the Kejawen Jepara indigenous people adhere to a philosophy of life that has been taught from generation to generation, the philosophy is

named “Gemi, Setiti, Ati-Ati” (Tumijan & Tomo, 2024). According to their community, this philosophy must be held firmly in order to always live in the abundance of God the creator.

The meanings of the philosophy of “Gemi, Setiti, Ati-Ati” are: 1) Gemi, means frugality. This means that if you want to live well and have long-lasting possessions, then you must be frugal (refrain from all lusts). For them it is important to instill the philosophy of Gemi starting from childhood, because the times continue to develop, all the needs of clothing, shelter and food prices continue to soar. So the philosophy of Gemi must be embedded from an early age; 2) Setiti, which means thorough. This means that in doing work, humans are required to be careful in every step. Because in society we never know, which of our steps will succeed and which of our steps will fail. So, this Setiti philosophy teaches accuracy in every step (decision); 3) Ati-Ati, means being careful. This means that in carrying out all activities and interacting with other people, it is required to be careful. Because we never know which people will do harm and bring us down. If we apply this Setiti philosophy, then indirectly we will always be careful and not easily believe in other people's invitations.

### **3. Jepara Kejawen Indigenous People's Response to the KUPI Decision (Prohibition of Female Circumcision)**

At the KUPI (Kongres Ulama’ Perempuan Indonesia) event which was held on November 24-26, 2022 at the Hasyim Asy'ari Islamic Boarding School in Bangsri Jepara, it was agreed and stated that female circumcision was proven to have a negative impact (Sya’rani & Soetomo, 2022; Junaidi, 2023; Muflih, 2024). The prohibition is based on the occurrence of health complications such as infection, bleeding, pain, and difficulty urinating and defecating.

Seeing the news circulation, the Kejawen Jepara indigenous people responded that the ban was normal (Tumijan & Tomo, 2024). Because according to them, they have other views, and remain firm in continuing to circumcise children (female genitalia) in infancy.

The basis for their insistence on circumcising their children is several reasons, including: 1) Following the message conveyed by their ancestors, that if a child is born female, it must be circumcised after birth. They feel and hope that the child will become a strong woman and not give up easily; 2) As a fortress of protection, meaning that by circumcising their children, this is a real step in an effort to reject (early prevention) of various venereal diseases; 3) Concern about the outside world, meaning this concern, parents are worried that if they are not circumcised, then their children do not have a sense of shame towards the opposite sex. Because currently there are rampant events of promiscuity (cohabitation). With the circumcision of their daughters, the children will have a sense of shame if they associate freely with the opposite sex.

From this explanation, we as citizens who love tolerance should be able to hear and accept their voices, even though they do not comply with the decision of KUPI. However, they have reasons that have been explained above.



## Conclusions

After explaining some of these explanations, this research concludes that even though the KUPI (Kongres Ulama' Perempuan Indonesia) event that has been held at the Hasyim Asy'ari Islamic Boarding School in Bangsri Jepara, decided and stated about the prohibition of circumcising female children. However, the Jepara Kejawen traditional community responded normally with several excuses, namely: following the message of the ancestors to continue to preserve the circumcision of female children, as a form of protection, and a sense of concern about falling into promiscuity. In addition, we must be able to accept and respect them as a form of tolerance.

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