

Original Article

The Local Tradition of Gorontalo and Health Anthropology: Gorontalo's Experience in Addressing the COVID-19 Pandemic

Funco Tanipu^{1*}

¹ Department of Sociology, Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, Gorontalo, Indonesia

(Correspondence author's email, funco@ung.ac.id)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the overlapping consensus between indigenous kinship practices and the spread of diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the community's way of life and behaviour, yet Gorontalo's indigenous kinship-based traditions contradict the implemented health protocols. Due to their foundation in the kinship system (ngala'a), these traditions necessitate everyday interactions among individuals. The clash between local traditions and health procedures leads to the widespread transmission of Covid-19. This research argues that relying on Gorontalo's traditions would increase the likelihood of community exposure to COVID-19, as shown by descriptive analysis. Therefore, it is fundamental to reassess the significance of traditions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Local Tradition, COVID-19, Culture, Pandemic, Gorontalo.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government reported the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 on March 2, 2020, two months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the epidemic a global concern on January 30, 2020. The rising number of cases has become alarming, with a daily increase reaching 2000¹. The data indicate that the pandemic is a health concern as it can spread to individuals of all age groups, with older individuals and those with preexisting health concerns being most vulnerable. In 2022, the Indonesian Ministry of Health declared that there were 6.04 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, resulting in 156,000 deaths, and the numbers continue to be rising. COVID-19 was declared to be eradicated between 2023 and 2024.

Tedros Adhanoaik Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the WHO, states that while the pandemic has ended, its humanitarian impacts continue to affect all sectors of humankind². Therefore, the pandemic cannot be viewed solely as a health issue but encompasses political, economic, cultural, and societal concerns. Widisuseno and Sudarsih (2021) contend that this argument underpins their findings that disease outbreaks and socio-cultural aspects are interconnected³. They believe that the emergence of epidemics arises due to particular human activities, which in turn impact the socio-cultural life of the community. For instance, cholera results from unsanitary living conditions, while H5N1 (avian flu) is linked to inadequate farm management^{3,4}. Furthermore, in the 17th century, disease outbreaks led to thousands of deaths in Italy due

to issues with sanitation laws and personal hygiene⁵. These facts indicate that pandemics are complex issues involving health concerns and cultural or human behavioural factors prevalent at the time.

These patterns are akin to the Covid-19 pandemic that occurred in recent years. Initially, people perceived it as a health issue, necessitating using masks, frequent handwashing, and avoiding close contact with others as preventive measures. However, the virus has since become uncontrollable and mutated into various forms. Žižek (2020), a Slovenian philosopher and Marxist, argues that the Covid-19 pandemic, initially considered to be a health issue, quickly generates worldwide panic and dread, resulting in widespread scepticism and the growth of conspiracy theories⁶. It demonstrates that the epidemic has not only impacted health but has also adversely affected economics, cultures, politics, and the traditional values of indigenous tribes globally, which have existed for a long time.

Understanding these interrelated phenomena is anchored by linking them to human culture and society life. Pillay (2021) asserts that human civilisation is defined by institutionalised communal activities rather than individual ones⁷. Pillay acknowledges that more than focusing on personal objectives and achievements is needed to meet the wider requirements of the community. He emphasises group efforts by referring to the African proverb “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which means ‘I am because we are.’ This proverb emphasises that human culture is defined by common ideals and connected through kinship systems, where individuals are assigned in particular circumstances and locations. It applies to everyday tasks and their interpretation and contemplation of specific occurrences, such as politics, economics, and society. Human culture influences every facet of human existence.

METHOD

This research method use a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, economic, and political factors influencing the spread and management of COVID-19, particularly within the context of the Gorontalo community in Indonesia.

Qualitative methods such as ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews would be essential for understanding the cultural norms, traditions, and practices within the Gorontalo community. Quantitative methods such as surveys and statistical analysis would complement qualitative findings by providing empirical data on the prevalence and impact of COVID-19 within the community. Comparative analysis could provide insights into how cultural traditions influence pandemic responses across different communities and regions

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Phrase of Corona Anthropology: An Approach to Understanding the Covid-19 Pandemic

However, in the earlier COVID-19 pandemic, customs that we thought were harmless contributed to the rise in case numbers. Therefore, since anthropology is about context, the author uses the phrase “Corona Anthropology” as terminology related to the relevance of anthropology in public health to explain the context of traditions during the pandemic⁸. This argument will be demonstrated inherently by examining the facts of the indigenous Gorontalo community, which heavily relies on communalism as its social principle. This principle is called *ungala’a* or “togetherness”. Pateda (1977) claims that *Ungala’a* was originally interpreted as a “whole family” or a kinship structure centred on kinship, indicating that this concept was exclusive to individual families⁹. As the population of Gorontalo grew, *ungala’a* expanded to encompass the entire community. *Ungala’a* manifests in communal practices such as conversations, sharing feelings, and evolving towards cooperation. These activities involve gatherings that could potentially worsen the spread of the epidemic, as previously stated. Consequently, it is worth reflecting on to what extent traditions are worth preserving in times of crisis. This paper is presented to reflect on the journey of the pandemic and its connection to Gorontalo’s local traditions.

Covid-19 first emerged in Wuhan, China, when someone consumed a certain food from a seafood restaurant. However, Covid-19 has precedence throughout history. It pertains to the history of humanity, both social and biological, ancient and modern times¹⁰.

Throughout history, the evolution of viruses has been closely linked to human interactions, spanning from the Justinian Plague (541-543) to the Black Death (1347-1351), the Spanish and Asian Flu (1918-1959), and the ongoing pandemic in 2019¹¹. The transmission of infectious diseases originated during the shift from hunter-gatherer communities to agrarian societies approximately 12,000 years ago¹¹. The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2, state that the virus came from animals and was passed to humans due to the widespread domestication of animals. Thus, in this process, there is a strong connection between the mode of production and the spread of the pandemic¹².

Communities' responses also play a role in influencing the cause of outbreaks. Communities' response to pandemics at this stage is influenced by the specific culture and traditions they adhere to. Humans are inherently sociable creatures. They engage in social interactions, forming groups, exchanging emotions, physical contact, and establishing relationships in daily activities. Socialising is currently viewed as advantageous. However, as Fuentes (2020) acknowledges, during the COVID-19 outbreak, "our sociality becomes the perfect pathway for virus invasion"¹⁰. The COVID-19 pandemic is influenced by the level of human contact in a particular moment and context. Global and national advisors prioritise policies aimed at 'flattening the curve' by enhancing the implementation of public health measures to prevent and control infections. In doing so, the governments propose measures such as vaccinations, isolation, quarantine, and lockdowns to restrict non-essential commercial activities.

However, traditions might present difficulties as well. In Gorontalo, traditions like *ungala'a* symbolise a traditional value of the community. *Ungala'a* refers to a system of familial relationships that establish kinship, as described by Pateda in 1977. This practice has not only been acknowledged but has been there since the beginning of Gorontalo's history. Its originality is derived from male and female ancestry, resulting in individuals being affiliated with multiple descent groups rather than one lineage or clan¹³. Once they discover common ground, these families construct *ngala'a*, or close-knit families, to build ties and sustain livelihoods¹⁴. Each *ngala'a* is headed by a male family leader who resides in traditional dwellings known as *layihe*. The family head is

called *Polulayihe*.

Over time, *Ngala'a* gradually transformed into *lembo'o*, which were neighbourhood associations referred to as *Linula* or little kingdoms, as documented^{13,15,16}. Each *Linula* is governed by an *olongia*, the leader, linked to bigger kingdoms known as *lipu*¹⁷. Nur (1979) stated that the creation of *lipu* was not a result of conquest but rather stemmed from each clan's realisation of the need to join and move away from tribalism¹³. Levi-Strauss (1969) argues that this awareness is a fundamental aspect of indigenous communities and existed before the field of anthropology¹⁸. Malinowski (1922) suggests that domestic institutions can adopt kinship if it helps meet the needs of society and govern social rights¹⁹.

Ungala'a as a Challenge in Pandemic Prevention: Gorontalo's Experience

In practice, *Ungala'a* as a cultural practice is carried out in two types of interactions that require physical and social contact since its inception. Firstly, *Ungala'a* serves as the foundation for personal interaction among individuals. This entails every time two people meet in daily life through actions such as *teteyapuwa* (showing concern), *titiliya* (being close), *tata'apa* (patting), *kukubinga* (gentle pinching). These interactions can occur in everyday life, even within very small communities. Secondly, *Ungala'a* extends to communal practices within the community. In this sense, *Ungala'a* becomes a form of social interaction conducted through activities such as *dedepita* (sharing food), *bilohe* (visiting, especially to the sick), *huyula* (collaboration), *tayade* (sharing), and so forth²⁰.

However, the kinship-based system during this pandemic may need to be reevaluated. There is an overlapping consensus between *ungala'a* traditions and the recommendations of protocols in pandemic management. Although physical contact is required for *ungala'a*, this contradicts the primary recommendations of global and national guidelines regarding the pandemic: avoiding physical gatherings. Referring to data from the UNG COVID-19 Crisis Centre during the Large-Scale Social Restrictions, there are three districts and cities with positive COVID-19 cases: Gorontalo Regency, Bone Bolango, and Gorontalo City²¹. When viewed from an epidemiological perspective at the village level, large local clusters formed in three areas:

Tumbihe, Padebuolo, and Bu'a.

These three areas are *kampung* (villages), which, in Gorontalo's context, are administrative regions and socio-cultural spaces. In this sense, these three areas are snapshots of the pandemic spread caused by the practice of *ungala'a*, manifested in the form of *despite* (food sharing) and *love* (visiting), which are the main characteristics of the communities in these areas. This is compared to other areas, such as Tomolobutao, Libuo, and Dulalowo, which are categorized administratively as villages but cannot be considered *kampung*. The main reason is that the cultural practices of *ngala'a* and *mohuyula* are less applied due to urbanization altering the social landscape of these areas. Therefore, these areas have lower social interactions. However, in Tumbihe, Padebuolo, and Bu'a, where *ngala'a* and *mohuyula* are practiced well, it tends to create higher social interactions, ultimately leading to a larger pandemic spread.

It is argued that the community's limited understanding and awareness of pandemic protocols still challenges the government. Therefore, how the country handles the pandemic faces significant threats from economic and political turmoil and the socio-cultural practices of the Gorontalo community that still maintain *ungala'a*. In this regard, *ungala'a* as the traditional basis of Gorontalo society will likely accelerate the spread to become massive. In line with this, Novry Susan argues that the responsiveness system in dealing with the pandemic relies on the workings of the state system and the reciprocity with the community^{3,22}. Therefore, it is also necessary to consider how the community responds to these regulations compared to implementing them unilaterally.

Another issue arises when the government implements the Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) policy to slow the outbreak through Governor Regulation Number 15 of 2020, dated May 5, 2021. The government's policy through the village is to provide direct cash assistance (BLT) to rural communities to cope with the economic crisis at the village level while also disciplining residents to comply with protocols. However, this does not reduce the activities and mobility of residents. Even though the government provides them with food assistance for several days, some of their problems still need to be solved. The government should have better interpreted the

assistance by distributing food in urban centres, causing crowds. This happened on April 7, 2020, when the Gorontalo Government tried to help drivers by distributing food in the city centre. However, they violated health protocols because the event caused crowds.

Compared to similar incidents in West Java, the distribution went very well because the government utilized online drivers to deliver assistance to those entitled to receive it²³. From this reality, the Gorontalo government faced limitations in managing how food supplies should be distributed. Ultimately, the government then apologized even though many criticized its inconsistency. However, on the other hand, even though we consider it an achievement in times of crisis, food assistance is temporary, so they still have to work and go to fields, gardens, seas, or lakes to meet their daily needs. In other words, no matter how sensible the government's regulations regarding pandemic prevention may seem, they will only be beneficial when considering the socioeconomic conditions of the community.

Rethinking Ungala'a: The Need for Local Solidarity

Zizek (2020) argues that only by strengthening global solidarity and increasing communal awareness can humanity confront the current threat⁶. He views global solidarity as the consciousness of being "together" by overcoming individualism, as individuals cannot face this pandemic alone. While Zizek's idea may seem utopian, as there is currently little concern for global cooperation, he cites America as a supposedly sovereign nation that still relies on China for various protective equipment such as masks and test kits. Therefore, the task is to ensure this solidarity network expands and reaches the most marginalized countries on earth struggling against this pandemic. Zizek's "global solidarity" notion can be extracted and elaborated into "regional solidarity" and even in a local context. In this regard, there is a need for cooperation and the fostering of solidarity among governments at every level through concrete steps to ensure the successful implementation of this idea.

Ungala'a and *Mohuyula* can be maintained if our trust in the government remains intact. This is certainly not easy, but it is also not utopian. The need for cultural engineering should be considered as one

alternative to instill in the community the understanding that COVID-19 is a pandemic and, as such, can only be addressed by maintaining the people's trust. Many economic and political issues can also be addressed as long as this cooperation (huyula) is strengthened by giving opportunities to every authority figure in the community, especially at the village level, to function effectively. Therefore, it does not mean that intervention against Covid-19 cannot be done. There is a way to reinterpret ngala'a to be adaptive in everyday community life. The government can make ngala'a a local mitigation strategy by conducting various studies and analyses.

First, it is advisable to offer an alternative understanding of ngala'a during crises. Everyone should now believe that because we are in a pandemic, health advice must be trusted for the sake of humanity. This advice should be consistent with Islam and Gorontalo customs because both have advocated for everyone to continue their lives. Ngala'a, built for hundreds of years, stands on the same boat. Secondly, Gorontalo has many influential figures (both in Islam and custom/bate), such as Qadhi, bate, and Imamu Kambungu (local preachers). These actors have a special position in society based on the knowledge and institutions that are listened to and obeyed by the community. In a pandemic situation, they are needed to support the government's advice regarding the pandemic. These actors need to be empowered and even given special authority in the village to increase awareness of the pandemic. This is the only way to survive this pandemic without disrupting cultural practices but reinterpreting them. Thirdly, customary institutions need to reconsider formulating ad hoc regulations for situations like pandemics requiring social interactions to be reduced or even restricted so that transformative formulations like these can be prepared for conditions such as during future pandemics.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the global pandemic in recent years transcends mere health concerns, entwining itself with society's political, economic, social, and cultural fabric. Despite concerted efforts, particularly in addressing mitigation challenges, navigating these

complexities is hindered by overlapping policies emanating from governmental and communal spheres. It is imperative to acknowledge that the fundamental issue lies in sustained cooperation. Hence, a pressing need arises to bolster solidarity and channel it towards local initiatives as the primary endeavour in confronting this pandemic.

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