

## *Saparuik* and *Moknehi*: Kinship-based Tensions in Providing Care for Older People

Jelly<sup>1\*</sup>, Benidiktus Delpada<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Care Network in Later Life in Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Local Linguist and Independent Researcher in Alor District, Indonesia

\* Corresponding Author: [jellyantropologi23@gmail.com](mailto:jellyantropologi23@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This article provides information on a comparison of elderly care systems in two regions in Indonesia with different ethnicities and cultures, namely the Minangkabau in West Sumatra and the Abui of Alor. This article shows how the *saparuik* kinship in the Minangkabau community which is matrilineal with different customary constellations and how the patrilineal *moknehi* kinship in the Abui community takes care of elderly women. This paper explains the influence of caregivers' life journey on their burdens of life. The burden of life perceived by caregivers arises from various factors. Among the various influencing factors are emotions, economy, knowledge, kinship and the right to manage inheritance. Kinship is a form of reciprocal relationship between various elements in both Minangkabau and Abui societies. In the Minangkabau ethnic group, the smallest kinship system in society is called *saparuik* kinship (Minang language), while the smallest kinship system in Abui is called *moknehi* (Abui language) which means "brother". *Paruik* can be interpreted as "stomach". While the word *moknehi*, which has variants in Abui such as *muknehi*, *mokneng* and *motneng*, likely derives from words *moku* "child" and *neng* "male", whose meaning is equivalent to "brother, sibling". Literally, *saparuik* are people who come from the same stomach or mother, while *moknehi* refers to people who come from the same mother and or father. People who are in *saparuik* are people who come from the same grandmother, while *moknehi* are male brothers who come from the same grandfather, who then develop into several extended families. Both extended families in *paruik* or *moknehi* consist of several nuclear families. Likewise, *saparuik* and *moknehi* consist of several extended families. The extended family in *saparuik* is formed in one grandmother (not a literal grandmother, the grandmother in this case is the mother of the grandmother or the grandmother of the grandmother), in one "rumah gadang", and sharing inheritance. Otherwise, *moknehi* are not only formed in one grandfather, but also male great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather (male great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather in this case are father of grandfather and grandfather of grandfather), in one clan, and sharing inheritance.

**Keywords:** *elderly care systems; Minangkabau; Abui; kinship; family*



## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to compare our field findings on how families with opposite kinships in Indonesia provide care for older people. We conducted a comparison between the matrilineal kinship systems of the Minangkabau community, inheritance from the mother's bloodline, and the patrilineal systems of the Abui community, inheritance from the father's bloodline, in which care responsibilities for dependent members remain predominantly female.

In the Minangkabau community in West Sumatra, men with the role of uncle (*datuak* or *penghulu*) for their sister daughters still have significant obligations to their family's sister, including decision-making and inheritance management for women (Jelly, 2019; Hidayat et al., 2021). Women inherit the *rumah gadang* and agricultural land, and in return, they are to take the role of caregiver in the extended family (herein called *saparuik*), including caring for the older parents (Hidayat et al., 2021). Minangkabau men also play roles to safeguard properties and provide care for the older people in their community (Meiyenti, 2018). In Minangkabau, *saparuik* becomes the main social network for providing care for older people, with overseas family members serving as support systems (Yeni, 2016; Sumawati, 2019). In this network, the tensions arising from family property control have a significant impact on the care network for older members (Yeni, 2019; Fitriana, 2021).

In contrast, the Abui community on Alor Island upholds patrilineal kinship, viewing female members as guardians of the male's domain and descendants of the husband's family, thereby delegating decision-making tasks to men (Radja, 2018). Abui men have roles as successors of extended family (herein called *moknehi*) and carry the clan names, including duties and functions as family leaders. In patrilineal families, the wife carries out the gendered role of caring for older parents and dependent children (Meiyenti, 2018). Sometimes, conflicts over marital relations or family property tensions within *moknehi* members may disrupt the provision of care for older people (Mataradja & Wibowo, 2022; Simanjuntak et al., 2012).

This paper investigates tensions between members of an extended family, *Saparuik* and *Moknehi*, that affect care patterns. It attempts to answer some questions about the relationship between caregivers and older people. How do tensions arise from the so-called gendered division in demonstrating care for older parents between family members in both kinships? This research makes use of the ethnography method, focusing on in-depth interviews and participatory observations in both field sites, Tanah Datar District in West Sumatra and North Central Alor District in Alor Island. The research project was part of 'Care Networks in Later Life: A Comparative Study of Indonesia' by the University of Southampton and the University of Atmadjaya. We collected the data over a two-year period, from 2020 to 2022. Close attachment with the informants and a participatory approach through a live-in project (Suwandi, 2008) are necessary to understand tensions in providing care for older people (Hardani et al., 2020; Bungin, 2017).

## FINDINGS

Minangkabau and Abui communities have contrasting kinship systems, with the smallest unit of extended family named *saparuik* and *moknehi*. *Saparuik* refers to family members from the same womb, while *moknehi*, which means "brother" or "one blood," refers to family members from the same grandfather. Family members within a *saparuik* and *moknehi* span at least three generations,

coming from the same grandmother or grandfather, and then the family grows into a wider family.

Both kinships rely on women as the primary caregivers for older family members. In the Minangkabau community, men are capable of caring for their older parents during emergencies, but they still hold onto the hope that their female relatives will take the caretaking roles instead. When inevitable tensions arise between family members in *saparuik* or *moknehi*, they are still required to provide care for the older members and often channel dissatisfaction through satires. We explain that the burden felt by female caregivers comes from extended families' expectations of providing care for older people.

## CASE STUDIES IN MATRILINEAL KINSHIP

### **Saparuik: The Extended Family**

*Saparuik* relations expect both male and female relatives to play roles in caring for older family members. However, when expectations fail, tensions arise, as demonstrated in Manda's *saparuik*, whose family lives outside the region, and Ananda's *saparuik*, whose family lives nearby. This section will provide a preliminary explanation of how the *saparuik* relations create tensions.

In Minangkabau, the kinship begins with the nuclear family, which consists of the mother, father, and children, and then extends to the grandmother's line, known as *saparuik*. In *saparuik*, the mother's older brother (*mamak*) significantly influences his sisters and their sisters' daughters (*kemenakan*). The position of female siblings is equal; for instance, the mother's older sisters (*mak uwo*) actually have the same roles as the mother and receive inheritances from the grandmother. In this context, the cousins of the mother's sisters have an equal relationship with their biological siblings. Because they belong to the same *saparuik*, marriage restrictions apply to them. This relationship differs from cousins descended from either the mother's brothers (*anak mamak*) or the father's sisters (*bako*), for whom marriage is permissible. The marriage preference is known as cross-cousins; it is possible for the *anak mamak* and *bako* to marry the relatives who are not considered the same *saparuik*.

Manda, a migrant family from Lintau—an hour's drive from her current place in Rao-rao—lives and cares for her mother and mother's sister (*mak uwo*). Manda's mother is paralysed and has limited mobility aside from moving her limbs, while her *mak uwo* suffers from dementia. Manda sometimes complains about her inability to control her bladder, which makes it difficult for her to do daily chores. After her husband abandoned her, Manda has been forced to care for her elderly relatives and work to earn a small income as an agriculture worker and sharecropper from her mother's inherited rice field. However, she has issues with her cousins due to the access to 2 hectares of shared rice fields, which used to belong to her mother and mother's sister.

In contrast to Manda, Ananda is a Rao-rao native, living with her *saparuik* family and owner of a *rumah gadang*. She used to live in Solok, where she followed her husband and sold onion cakes in the big market. Her cousin, on the other hand, lives in the neighboring village. However, Ananda was called by her cousins who did not want to take care of, and felt uneasy with, her mother, who suffers from asthma. Recently, she has been living in a *rumah gadang* with her mother, her husband, and their three children. Since Ananda and her cousin from her mother's sister are expected to inherit a *rumah gadang*, their relationship becomes more distant and tense due to unmet expectations towards cousins and inheritance issues, causing satire in daily communication

and a lack of emotional attachment. Ananda admitted to helping her mother's sister, but her cousin has never shown the same concern for her mother.

### Tensions in *Saparuik*

The Minangkabau society uses the term *cabiak-cabiak bulu ayam* (tearing chicken feathers) to describe a fragile relationship between kins that family members are forced to mend. The philosophy of tearing chicken feathers suggests that quarrels between members are inevitable, and the feathers will eventually grow back. The story of *cabiak-cabiak bulu ayam* depicts Ananda's experience caring for her mother, but she also feels dissatisfied due to the lack of sincere support she receives from her *saparuik* brother. Other relatives often criticise caregivers for their perceived lack of performance. Once upon a time, when Ananda and her husband would return home late, she called her male cousin to assist her dependent mother with walking difficulties. Occasionally, Ananda's request for help could lead to gossip among her relatives. However, since they came from the same *rumah gadang*, they could not argue for long.

Another local term is *patah tumbuhan hilang baganti*, meaning that what is lost will be replaced by something better. The term has the potential to cause tensions because it is associated with the interchangeable roles of a caregiver among members of an extended family. The assumption that someone will easily replace the role of a less-performing member could lead to the main caregiver developing negative sentiments, raising tensions between relatives. This could also result in a lack of preparedness when it comes to caring for dependent older people, as demonstrated by Manda's personal experience. Manda's family, living alone on her mother's land and separated from their *saparuik* kin, is unable to provide proper care for her paralysed mother, who also experiences dementia. When she left for work, Manda acknowledged that she needed help from her *saparuik* relatives to look after her paralyzed mother. However, this presents a challenge because Manda's mother is no longer able to communicate; at times, she even managed to crawl out of the house.

In Minangkabau, the perceived unfairness of managing *harto pusako* (heirloom property) intertwines with the conflict over caring for the elderly. The *saparuik* kin potentially experiences latent tensions when a single daughter uses the *rumah gadang*. Expectations for Manda or Ananda to manage *harto pusako* and live in the *rumah gadang* sparked jealousy and tension among other relatives, including suspicions about hidden rice yields in Manda's case. One of the acts of jealousy against Manda was an accusation of black magic that could potentially jeopardise the kin relationship. Manda's mother was particularly depressed, given that her son had also been a victim of black magic, which her sibling had perpetrated. Her asthma exacerbated her anxiety, and she was unable to cease her medication intake.

Manda, as a migrant, resides on land that her late grandmother once passed down to her two children. While her cousins are away, Manda takes care of her mother and uncle, and in return, she lives in the *rumah gadang*. However, when her cousins come to visit their father in the *rumah gadang*, Manda frequently used satires to express her disappointment and anger. She believed that her cousins were not interested in caring for their father or providing financial support, but were solely interested in Manda's agricultural outputs from inherited rice fields. The satire goes, "You (referring to Manda herself) are the same as a buffalo; you used to plough the fields, but for bathing, you make a hole in the ground, and there are no other people who want to help you with the soil for the hole." Following this tension, she compared herself to a buffalo, constantly employed by others

(specifically her *saparuik* family) to break bones, yet when she requires assistance, no one is willing to provide it, forcing her to rely on her own efforts.

Manda expressed her dissatisfaction by comparing herself to a hunchbacked cucumber that is still in a sack but not counted. She used the metaphor of the hunchbacked cucumber to convey her sense of isolation within the *saparuik* kinship, as none of her family members are willing to assist her or even consider her viewpoint. She perceives herself as solely responsible for managing the rice fields, but other relatives decide how to distribute the harvest. She expressed her disappointment by saying, “*When you deal with him, the water you drink feels like thorns, and the rice you eat feels like chaff.*” The metaphor implies that as a member of the *saparuik*, Manda perceives herself as an amethyst flower that loses its usefulness once it blooms. “*Once the magpie begins to chirp, the life within the house concludes, yet the significance endures.*” The metaphor implies that Manda’s words, originating from negative emotions, remain stifled.

## CASE STUDIES IN PATRILINEAL KINSHIP

### **Moknehi: The Extended Family**

Three generations make up the *Moknehi*: *maama* (father) and *-yaa* (mother), *-kuta* (grandfather/grandmother/grandparent), and *tuung-tuung* (great grandfather/great grandmother/great grandparent). In the *Moknehi* kinship, the relationship with cousins plays a crucial role, distinguishing between *neeng fala*, which refers to descendants of the mother’s brother and the grandmother’s brother, and *mayool fala*, which refers to descendants of the father’s sister and the grandfather’s sister. Cousins could care for older people when the daughters or daughters-in-law are unavailable. However, male cousins are less expected to take on the role of caregiver, raising conflict due to the uneven distribution of care and inheritance issues.

In Abui, *moknehi* determines each member’s roles, requiring married female members from different clans to care for the dependent member in the family. Culturally, women view their responsibilities as caring for their husband’s family, and their absence is considered regrettable. Gendered expectations towards female members in care provision create numerous burdens, as illustrated by Melati, who provides care for her mother, Bunga, and her older male cousin’s mother, Mawar. Mawar and Bunga live in the same house and receive care from Melati, yet they consume their meals from separate fireplaces or stoves. Mawar is an elderly person who was left to die, but still lives and cared for in her own home, while Bunga is an elderly person who was divorced and lives as a migrant in the recent house. In this context, Melati found it difficult to ask for help from her male cousin, a son of Mawar, who actually lives in the same house. In the *moknehi* kinship system, the relationship between Melati and her male cousin should be similar to the position of Bunga and Mawar. However, in reality, this relationship pattern does not work as it should. Melati is more concerned with her mother and older male cousin’s mother than her male cousin.

### **Tensions in Moknehi**

In the Abui patrilineal kinship, the equivalent term for a fragile relationship is *tik balei peitaluuk*, which refers to arguments over breast milk and ripe bananas. The term describes a conflict between two siblings who fight over mother’s breast milk and the same ripe bananas, but they eventually manage to share a meal together. This cultural term acknowledges the inevitable nature of some



arguments and serves to uphold kinship relationships. Melati, an unmarried and hardworking woman in Abui, received a request from her older sister to care for her isolated tuberculosis-stricken mother. Melati and her older sister used to have arguments because she didn't marry soon enough. Despite continuous disagreements, Melati and her sister remained siblings, coming from the same parents and having the same lineage of grandparents/grandfathers.

The cultural term “*bataa hataang wohoma di faq maaiye hesiyefi di mingmaraang*,” which refers to interchangeable caregivers for older people, also appears in the patrilineal kinship of Abui. This term significantly resonates with Tio's personal experience – a son of Mawar and male cousin of Melati. Tio, his wife, children, and mother used to live together until he moved to the piece of land he bought in another village. Tio's nuclear family no longer lives with his mother and *moknehi* relatives. He sometimes expected his *moknehi* relatives to provide care for his mother while he is away from home, resulting in inadequate care for her dependent mother, Mawar, who suffers from dementia. Tio acknowledges that he requires support from his extended family to ensure his mother's wellbeing and health. However, to provide care for people with dementia is to encounter challenges in communication that resulted in neglect towards the older mother, who needed assistance to walk due to her unsteady legs.

Recently, Mawar has been living with Bunga, Melati's mother, who suffered from acute tuberculosis and did not receive adequate treatment for her illness. Tuberculosis caused her to move multiple times in search of an isolation place. Mawar used to live alone, allowing her relatives Bunga and Melati to stay with her. Tio's family only occasionally visits their previous home, where Mawar, Bunga, and Melati currently lives. During his visits, other relatives were reluctant to stay at Mawar's home because of the ongoing tensions between the majority Catholic and minority Catholic churches, which have persisted for approximately 34 years. Therefore, Tio's family frequently faces challenges from his own siblings (Mawar's children), the children of his father-in-law's younger brother, and his cousins (Bunga's children other than Melati).

On the other hand, Tio felt uneasy due to a lack of both financial and moral support from other children of the dependent older individuals. Tio used satire to highlight the tensions and communication barriers within the *moknehi* kinship, stating: “*Although the children of the dependent older parents perceive us as adversaries, their elder parents consistently remember us as their relatives. And since they sought us out here, we want to treat these older parents well as part of our responsibility for the rest of their short lives. It doesn't matter if the children arrive to collect the corpse after the parents have passed away for burial. At least they have experienced our kindness and sincerity. God takes into account all of our sincerity and the children's treatment of them.*”

## REFLECTIONS

In providing care for older people within matrilineal and patrilineal kinship, tensions are inevitable, affecting older people's emotions. On the one hand, older people expect to maintain kin relationships while sometimes blaming themselves for being the causes of tensions among their children. When older people experience depressive feelings, they often cry, leaving their daughter or daughter-in-law to suppress emotions, thereby perpetuating the tensions. However, if tensions persist, older individuals may become resistant to receiving care. The division of roles in care work dominates the tensions that arise in *saparuik* and *moknehi*'s extended family, where

each member is required to have roles. However, when members fail to uphold expectations from other relatives' roles and sacrifices, it can lead to tensions that disrupt the care provided to the dependent older people.

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