


**LIYAMIN (SECLUDED PRINCESS) VIS-A-VIS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE MERANAW  
SOCIETY: A MULTI CASE STUDY**

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study investigates the narratives surrounding *liyamin* (secluded princess) within Meranaw society, with a specific focus on its implications for women's empowerment. The term *liyamin*, derived from the Meranaw word *lumun*—meaning “to conceal” or “to keep hidden”—refers to the traditional seclusion of royal women for the purposes of education and personal development. Through this cultural lens, the research argues that Meranaw women exercised forms of empowerment well before the advent of Islam, occupying significant cultural, social, and proto-religious roles. Rather than a tool of oppression, seclusion was a mechanism for cultivating strength, wisdom, and leadership among elite women. Utilizing a historical qualitative methodology, this study draws on a combination of oral history and semi-structured interviews conducted both in person and online. The research was conducted in Lanao del Sur, Philippines, and involved fifty participants selected based on criteria such as age, ethnicity, and social status to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Data were collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions. This methodological approach enabled the exploration of the symbolic and practical significance of *liyamin*, including its historical role in shaping gender norms and the sociopolitical functions of women in Meranaw communities. Findings reveal that Meranaw women historically experienced forms of empowerment that preceded and, in some cases, coexisted with Islamic influences, which later transformed certain cultural practices. These women accessed comprehensive education, played influential roles in community affairs, and demonstrated leadership that contributed to a lasting legacy of female agency. The study further emphasizes the importance of continued discourse on women's empowerment across political, social, and educational spheres. Preserving traditional practices—such as conflict resolution led by women—not only safeguards cultural identity but also enhances women's leadership roles in society. Ultimately, the study calls for a balanced approach that respects cultural heritage while advancing gender equity, suggesting that tradition and progress need not be mutually exclusive but can be harmoniously integrated in the pursuit of an inclusive and forward-looking society.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There remain numerous untold stories surrounding the protective nature of Meranaw society toward its women, particularly those of royal descent. One such largely unexplored tradition is the construction of a secluded attic space known as the *lamin*, where the princess's private quarters were located. The *liyamin*, a princess residing in the *lamin*, lived in a fully furnished, self-contained space resembling a modern flat, attended by her ladies-in-waiting. The gradual decline of the *liyamin* tradition has attracted scholarly interest, prompting investigations into its relevance to contemporary notions of women's empowerment and the cultural meaning behind its fading practice. While some view the concept of *liyamin* as restrictive or even taboo, in Meranaw culture it is widely interpreted as an act of love and protection, underscoring the view of women—especially those of noble birth—as valuable treasures within society.

Although the physical structure of the *lamin* and the formal role of the *liyamin* no longer visibly exist, their symbolic essence endures. Today, a Meranaw woman who integrates education, Islamic teachings, and cultural heritage continues to uphold values of discretion, dignity, and balance as a form of self-preservation and empowerment. The *liyamin*'s character—shaped by cultural refinement, knowledge, and moral discipline—positioned her as an exemplar of virtue and leadership. Within the framework of cultural feminism, such inherent qualities are seen not as limitations but as sources of positive influence and transformative potential in society.

A deeper understanding of Meranaw society necessitates an engagement with its history and literature. As Tawagon (1990: 7) notes, “nobody seems to understand the Meranaw mentality, but to understand their literature which embodies their laws, norms, conduct and behavior, values, origins, beliefs, and practices and rituals which accordingly date back to the pre-Islamic period”. Meranaw literature functions as a repository of historical memory and cultural identity, encoding beliefs,

customary law, and ritual practices that continue to shape Meranaw consciousness.

In the Philippine context, while various national programs have been instituted to promote women's rights—such as the Gender and Development (GAD) Budget, which allocates 5% of government funds to gender-related initiatives—the intersection of Meranaw cultural practices with broader discourses on women's empowerment remains complex (Philippine Commission on Women [PCW], 2010). The scarcity of written sources on Meranaw traditions poses additional challenges to research, particularly where cultural norms conflict or converge with Western liberal feminist paradigms and Islamic gender frameworks. Thus, a culturally sensitive, historically grounded approach is essential in understanding and empowering Meranaw women within both local and national development agendas.

According to Nagasura T. Madale (1974), the study of Meranaw literature brings the reader one step closer to understanding Meranaw society. In this sense, such a study represents a modest yet meaningful contribution to comprehending the Meranaw people. Furthermore, revisiting the traditional or customary practices of their ancestors enhances one's appreciation of the values and cultural richness of the Meranaw community.

The focus of the research is the tradition of *Lamin* and *Liyamin* in Lanao del Sur—a tradition among Meranaw that hardly has remnants in the province. The practices, lifestyle, values, and etiquettes of *liyamin*, and its evolution are of prime emphasis of the study. It then connects to women empowerment—the seemingly model idea of Meranaw women of today in the social portrayal of women vis-à-vis the existing patriarchal society.

The study's coverage is only Lanao del Sur specifically the 15 Royal Houses or ‘Pagawidan a Panoroganan’, although there are Meranaw in Lanao del Norte and other parts of the Mindanao.

Respondents of the study are also limited to the living *liyamin*, their relatives, traditional leaders

(Datu/Bai), and other respondents who know the subject. These three main groups are the main sources of data.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While numerous studies have examined the roles of Meranaw Muslim women, there remains a notable gap in the literature specifically addressing the *lamin* tradition. Existing writings tend to focus broadly on the traditional status of Meranaw women within society, often emphasizing their limitations within public and economic spheres. For instance, anthropologist Robert Fox (Sarip, 1985) observed that among the Meranaw:

. . . the activities and role of women are highly restricted. They do no agricultural work, nor do they participate in trade and business. Even household shopping is done by the husband. Thus, among the Maranao it is the men alone who achieve professional status and participate in the economic life of the community. . .

Such generalizations, however, have often overlooked the nuanced and symbolic roles women play in elite circles, particularly within the *lamin*, where cultural education and leadership training were imparted to royal women. This study addresses this scholarly gap by focusing on the *lamin* as a site of both protection and empowerment within Meranaw society. In the Holy Qur'an, women are accorded significant respect and protection, particularly in their roles as daughters, mothers, and wives. In contemporary society, however, many women have adopted more extroverted roles, actively participating in community affairs rather than focusing solely on domestic responsibilities.

In traditional Meranaw society, young women were often secluded in small chambers and appeared publicly only during significant events. During this period of seclusion, they were educated in reading the Qur'an, trained in the art of *bayok* (traditional lyrical chanting), played the *kulintang* gongs, and practiced weaving and embroidery. Women who acquired specialized skills were highly esteemed,

reflecting their elevated cultural status. In the Meranaw epic *Darangen*, as noted by Sister Delia Coronel, women were depicted as holding prominent roles — serving as equal partners in governance, convening assemblies, commanding guardian spirits, rejecting arranged marriages, maintaining noble status, and engaging in eloquent debates on matters such as marriage. This portrayal resonates with other ethnographic accounts of secluded women in Philippine indigenous communities. For example, Abrera (2008)'s study on the *binukot* among the Bukidnon in Central Panay was cited in Kelly Austria's (2015) feature article "Panay Bukidnon's last 'binukot'" in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* as well as in the documentary "Ang Huling Prinsesa" produced by Kara David in 2004 for GMA's I-Witness program. These representations were later expanded upon in Jessica Soho's (2016) documentary *Lola Felisa*, which aired on GMA on August 28, 2016, and focused on the lived experience of a *binukot* woman from the Tumandok community in Iloilo province (Camama, 2020). The sustained interest in the *binukot* tradition, both in academic and media narratives, reflects a broader engagement with indigenous identity and gendered cultural practices in the Philippines.

Bahadori and Pande (2017) have elaborated on the concept of seclusion in their research on women and *purdah*, a practice that predates Islam and originates from pre-Islamic traditions. The term *purdah* or *pardah*, derived from Persian, literally means "curtain." It refers to a religious and social practice of female seclusion observed in certain Muslim and Hindu communities across South Asia. In relation to women's rights, Elius (2011), in *Islamic View of Women Leadership as Head of the State: A Critical Analysis*, highlights the substantial rights and freedoms Islam grants to women—rights that marked a significant departure from the systemic subjugation they faced in earlier historical periods. Similarly, *Muslim Women in the UK and Beyond* by Jawad and Benn (2003) explores the multifaceted challenges Muslim women encounter, advocating

for critical reflection on prevailing societal attitudes and gender relations.

In the Philippine context, the study *Suwara o mga Bae: Exploring Narratives of Empowerment among Meranaw Women in Southern Philippines* by Professors Yasmira Moner and Queenie Pearl V. Tomaro provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of empowerment among Meranaw women. Through focus group discussions and interviews, the study reveals a departure from traditional norms, especially within socio-economic and political domains. It identifies key cultural and religiously grounded narratives of empowerment: *bilangataw* (wisdom), *kapamagadata* (respect), and *kapamagogopa* (cooperation).

Earlier scholarship also supports these findings. Maglangit's (1971) study, *The Role of Educated Meranao Muslim Women in Contemporary Meranaw Society*, notes that educated Meranaw women now serve as active and intelligent partners in family life, education, religion, politics, and community affairs. Lacar (1991) similarly emphasizes the evolving roles of Filipino Muslim women, while Maniri (2018) highlights the symbolic importance of the *lamin* in affirming women's value in Meranaw culture. Salolong (2018) focuses on the importance of family pride, and Abdul-Rakim (2018) draws attention to historical examples of female empowerment in Muslim Filipino communities.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed an unobtrusive research design, specifically historical ethnography and multi-case study, utilizing qualitative methods to analyze and interpret the gathered data. The study focused on empowered Meranaw women from municipalities with historical *lamin* structures. Using qualitative methods like Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants were selected based on age, ethnicity, and profession. An interview guide, developed by the researcher, was used to meet the study's objectives. Research questions were

translated into the participants' native language for cultural validation.

Primary data were collected using validated, self-developed instruments, including Key Informant Interviews—conducted via Facebook Messenger and phone calls during the pandemic—and Focus Group Discussions with *liyamin* key informants and empowered Meranaw women. Additionally, supplementary data on Islamic teachings concerning gender relations were gathered, alongside photo documentation.

### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the principles of Cultural Feminism as its analytical framework. Cultural feminism emphasizes female traits and celebrates the positive aspects of the feminine personality, providing a lens through which to understand and appreciate women's cultural roles and contributions. Thinkers such as Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that women's virtues are essential for effective governance and conflict resolution. This study applies the perspective of cultural feminism to explore the tradition of *liyamin* and its relation to women's empowerment in Meranaw society.

### 5. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 LIYAMIN AMONG THE MERANAWS: CONCEPT OF A LIYAMIN

*Liyamin* is a Meranaw term referring to a hidden or secluded princess who is kept apart from others in an attic-like space called the *lamin*. The term *lamin* is derived from the Meranaw word *lumun*, which, according to Babo Camona-an (109 years old, personal communication, July 13, 2016), means "something to be kept." The word later evolved into the commonly known term *lamin*. Camona -a recounted hearing expressions such as "Ino ka san lulumun dun?" which translates to "Why are you always hiding there?"

The *lamin* is a special chamber located on the roof of a *torogan* or *kalimodan*—traditional houses owned



by the Sultan. It serves as a symbol of rank and power. Functionally, the *lamin* acted as the residence of the *liyamin*, where these princesses' received education and were prepared for marriage.

Architecturally, the *lamin* is distinctively constructed with folk motifs, such as the *Sarimanok*, and adorned with tapestries, silver, and brass. It features plywood walls and a thatched roof. The interior contains no partitions, giving the impression of a large, open hall. As one informant described in an interview:

*Maco-consider talaga siya na lamin because yung structure niya is kakaiba talaga siya. Dodo-onon gyoto a sarimanok sa kilid iyan. [It can truly be considered a lamin because its structure is quite unique. There is even a sarimanok displayed on the wall.]*

In addition, *liyamin* Rawaten, 76, from Mulondo Lanao del Sur had also described the interior design of her *lamin* in which she said,

*Ana katri aknun a so galang ah. Adn pun a sala niyan. Mayto a kapkaylala run sa liyo na myakalala sa sold. [I have a brass bed and a spacious living room.]*



**Figure 1.** The old *lamin* of *liyamin* Rawaten in Mulondo, Lanao del Sur. (Photo taken by Ranyah A. Simon. Mulondo, Lanao del Sur. March 26, 2021).

*Kaplamin* can be traced to the fictional epic of the Meranaw, the *Darangen*. Several stories within the *Darangen* recount how the princesses—daughters of the Sultan (*Pasandalan a Morog*) of Bembaran—created *lamin* for their daughters, such as Lawanen,

Pindawadawa a Oray, and other princesses of that era.

The *liyamin* is regarded as distinct from ordinary people and treated as a precious lady within the Meranaw community. Modesty is a central value, limiting women's public movements and interactions with both men and women. While this norm upholds virtuous conduct, seclusion within the private sphere does not entirely restrict women's mobility and freedom. However, in some cases, the *liyamin* may appear on important occasions only if accompanied by her servants and immediate male relatives (Kodir, 2020).

*Liyamin* believe that seclusion enables them to become their best selves by preserving their chastity and well-being. Nonetheless, this tradition of protecting women is not unique to the Meranaw. The Tausugs of the Sulu Archipelago also maintained an ancient practice known as the *angkap*, a pedestal symbolizing how Tausug women are treasured and valued. Dr. Kamlian (2005) and Cooper (2021) have discussed traditions of women's seclusion, such as *harim* and *purdah*, which were practiced across various ancient civilizations.

The seclusion of women especially among the nomads can be traced to the warlike habits of the people. In times of war, the enemy would first carry away the women, children, and cattle of the tribe with whom they were fighting. To protect the helpless, they were kept in inner rooms. The richer and stronger the family the more secluded the women and it became a mark of caste to be kept within the women's quarters or protected. Thus, what was first originated as a necessity became afterward a matter of aristocracy, and the man who could keep his women strictly was looked upon as higher in the social scale than one who was compelled from economic reasons or otherwise to allow the female of his household to come and go freely in the world.

According to Sarip's (1985) study, Meranaw young ladies traditionally did not leave the house. The *liyamin* were secluded in a small room called the *lamin* and were seen only during important events.

They were taught to read the Qur'an, perform *bayok* singing, play musical instruments such as the *kulintang*, and practice weaving. While special talents were admired, the *liyamin* were not regarded as equal partners to men; their lives were largely shaped by tradition and parental decisions.



**Figure 2.** *Lamin* in Sandab, Butig Lanao del Sur. (Photo taken by the researchers. Butig, Lanao del Sur. January 23, 2021).

## 5.2 LIYAMIN'S WAY OF LIFE

Stories of the *liyamin* begin early, with girls placed in the *lamin* to learn virtues, intellect, and socio-cultural knowledge, preparing them to represent the Sultan as special and valued daughters. An informant, Tominatas, age 71, from Taraka, Lanao del Sur, described the *liyamin* by stating, “Ino mambo’ pkada-a ginawa o mga ngongoda ka di iran kailay” [This is why men lose their composure—they are unable to see her]. Having a *liyamin* in the family was considered an honor. Sultans often kept their daughters secluded in the *lamin* from birth or from around age five, maintaining their seclusion until marriage in order to preserve their status and virtue.

Being a *liyamin* extends beyond the traditional roles of daughter, mother, and wife; it also encompasses influential political leadership. According to one respondent:

*Aya pmbtuwan sa Liyamin na bilangataw a babay, maongangun. Lango langon a pnggulawlaan na katawan iyan. Ino pn malamin so babay ka kompleto a babay. [Liyamin is a woman who had moral characters and good etiquette. When a woman was placed into lamin that only means she is well versed in all aspects of life.]*

In addition, another informant also reiterated that,

*The Liyamin is expected to console her father and maintain beauty, staying secluded and interacting minimally with the community.*

Being a *liyamin* is an honor for a Sultan, as she plays a vital role in managing the community, encompassing both family and political matters. The education of a *liyamin*, rooted in pre-Islamic teachings and Meranaw folk narratives, differs markedly from Western education. It emphasizes an understanding of societal conditions, making her an educated woman even before the advent of Islam. According to one informant:

*Ibarat na so kapkatadman ko mga occassion o mga Mëranaw. Dapat na matao sa kapmalo-malong, kataro sa lalag, matao discuss ko bangsa, so mga okit-okit o kakarumae. [Example you must be well informed about important occasions of Mëranaw. You should know how to do the kapmalo-malong, understand proverbs, genealogy, ways and process of marriage.]*

*Liyamin* education emphasizes cultural values. While some stay in *lamin*, others like Halima pursue education outside, feeling empowered by both experiences and decision-making lessons. As what the informant said.

*“...when it comes to decision-making, I have involved especially wala dito si papa. Until now, siguro it helped din kasi so mga lola akun na kataya a Liyamin ako iran na talagang paka boost so confidence ka ah.” [In decision-making, I was involved, boosting my self-confidence.]*

*But sinasabi ko ah mag consult din ako sa dalawang brothers ko... I still acknowledge that bapiya e kapasang ta mamimikiran a babay ogayd na may naiisip sila na ideas at scenario na di ta kapikir... siran a tlo ko bapa akun e pag final*

*decision o agree on siran ko decision aken. Maka decides kami na e present namin ki papa. [I always make consultations with my two brothers...I recognize that men sometimes make better decisions; my uncle and brothers help decide, then we consult my father.]*

Community development should include everyone, not just *Liyamin* or the Sultan. Collective effort strengthens relationships, enhances learning, and respects socio-cultural values (Travel Trilogy, 2008).

### 5.3 FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE PRACTICE OF LIYAMIN

The practice of *liyamin* has diminished over time due to modern trends. Meranaw culture represents a blend of Islam and tradition, commonly referred to as *adat*. *Kaplamen*, or female seclusion, is a key aspect of this *adat* that preserves cultural identity while simultaneously practicing Islam, reflecting the fusion of pre-Islamic culture and Islamic teachings. However, to fully understand this practice, it is essential to grasp the core of being a true Muslim: the affirmation of belief and complete submission to Allah. This understanding helps explain why certain traditional practices have faded over time.

Contemporary debates regarding women's status in Islam often focus on several key issues: the veil, polygamy, and specific Quranic verses perceived to prescribe female subordination to men. Among these, the most significant verse is found in Surah An-Nisa ("The Women"), the fourth chapter of the Quran. Verse 4:34 states:

*Al-rijal qawwamun 'ala nisa* — translated as "Men are the protectors of women."

This verse demonstrates that men are the maintainers and protectors of women because Allah has granted some of them greater responsibility than others and because they spend from their wealth for women's bridal money and livelihood. Therefore, an improved woman—one who purifies her soul—is devoutly obedient, guarding her chastity and the property of her husband in his absence, as Allah has instructed. In

this context, women are expected to preserve the unseen, upholding their husband's trust in both property and honor (Ali, 2003), this verse emphasizes female obedience, male authority, and men's financial responsibilities in marriage, reflecting a Quranic gender hierarchy.

Part of being a Muslim-Meranaw involves adherence to the commandments of Allah SWT as written in the Qur'an. The Qur'an, the central religious text of Islam, provides divine guidance and encompasses doctrine, social organization, and legislation. One of the fundamental principles of Islam is belief in the holy book (Basics of Islam, 2012). Learning and following the Qur'an is regarded as a noble act that Muslims are expected to perform regularly. Thus, one may be considered a true Muslim if they live in accordance with its teachings. The arrival of Islam in the 13th century brought significant cultural changes to the Meranaw community, particularly influencing women's roles and societal positions.

Islam places great value on modesty, especially for women, as seen in the requirement to cover their *aurah* to protect their dignity. The *hijab* serves to liberate women from vanity and societal expectations of physical appearance. With the *hijab*, a woman is not expected to use her beauty for recognition or acceptance. It also sends a clear message to men that the wearer is modest and chaste, and thus should be respected and not harassed. Despite Islam being well established within the Meranaw community, the full significance of safeguarding sacred parts of the body—such as the head—has not always been fully internalized (Arab News, 2012).

### 5.4 CALLING UNSEEN SPIRITS "TONONG"

The *liyamin* were known to invoke the *tonong* during times of community trouble, using chanting and dancing accompanied by traditional instruments such as the *kulintang*. This mystical practice—associated with polytheistic beliefs—involved communication with ancestors, guardian spirits, and nature spirits. One informant recounted

that some *liyamin* practiced calling on the *tonong* (unseen spirits), explaining:

Her power for example is that when she asks for your presence and then you can't attend, you have to make sure that you have a valid reason or else you will face consequences.

These beliefs are clearly in conflict with Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*). Seeking help from entities other than Almighty Allah is considered a grave sin in Islam, as it undermines the recognition of the supremacy of the Creator by attributing power to other spirits believed to rival or surpass the authority of God.

### 5.5 CULTURAL EDUCATION (KAKULINTANG, KATARO SA LALAG, KASALSILA, KAPANGAWL)

Part of the training received by the *liyamin* while staying inside the *lamin* involves education in various cultural domains. These include *kakulintang* (playing the *kulintang* instrument), *kataro sa lalag* (delivering rhetorical speeches rich in proverbs), *kasalsilah* (genealogy tracing), and *kapang'awl* (weaving). According to the son of a *liyamin* from Madamba, this training was an integral part of her upbringing and preparation for leadership and social responsibility:

*Isako 10 years old ako na di'e rakun di panotolon e ina akun sangkoto a paparangayan iyan go so mga galubek iyan osako lalaminun o ama ami ah datu. Aya niyan miya pag istorya ah dadabi'atan niyan sa gioto a ka lalaminawon na paganay ron na kapang'awl. Gioto e mga katembangan iyan ro'o, miara'ot aken osako di mang awl. [When I was 10 years old, my mother told me that one of her hobbies inside the lamin is weaving.]*

As a *liyamin*, cultural education is essential for personal development and leadership within the Meranaw community. It nurtures self-confidence and active engagement in socio-political discourse, equipping *liyamin* to lead effectively and embody cultural values, thereby securing their influential role in shaping the community's future. Through this education, *liyamin* preserved rich traditions, mastering cultural instruments such as the gong

and *kulintang*, as well as traditional dances like *singkil*. When asked whether the *liyamin* are expected to be the most beautiful women in the community, one informant smiled gently and humbly responded:

*Di ta katawan ka o di ta maalong a ginawa ta na di ta maptaro pero, apiya e kataid ta o di ta bo mapia e parangay, aya pinakaimportante na mapiya ka e parangay. [I don't know. Unless we can't see ourselves in the mirror, we can't conclude, but beauty is useless without good manners. What matters most is having good manners.]*

Meranaw culture, once renowned for its authenticity and aesthetic richness, gradually diminished with the spread of Islam, which began to overshadow pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions. Furthermore, the rise of science and technology contributed to the decline of these traditional practices, as they came to be viewed by many as outdated or irrelevant. This shift has led to a significant loss of cultural heritage within the Meranaw community.

### 5.6 HAVING SERVANTS (OROBARANG)

In the Meranaw community, a groom is required to provide a dowry or bridal gift, which symbolizes the protection and love afforded to women in Islam. This dowry must hold significant value, whether in monetary form or in kind. Traditionally, it could even include servants, whose value varied depending on their specific duties and circumstances. As one informant noted:

My mother couldn't attend school, yet many datus in Ranao wanted to marry her. When someone proposed, at least 20 million (current value) was given to her father as her bridal gift. Servants were part of the dowry, and their value depended on a person's mental capacity.

The rich should give what they can afford, while the poor should offer what is within their means. A *liyamin*, born into a royal family, is traditionally given an exceedingly high dowry. Her suitor is expected to provide not only a substantial monetary dowry but also property and servants, who assist her with household responsibilities such as



cooking, laundry, and personal care. As one informant stated in an interview, this practice reflects the high social status and expectations associated with marrying a *liyamin*.

However, since Islam places great emphasis on the sanctity of human life, it is not permissible to offer a person as part of a bridal gift. This prohibition is grounded in Qur'anic principles of justice and the belief in human equality before God. As such, the inclusion of servants as dowry is contrary to Islamic teachings.

While sultans or *datu*s are typically educated and trained in making sound decisions, empowered women may often lack similar exposure or experience in leadership and governance. This gap in practical knowledge can increase the risk of errors and lead to unintended consequences in both family and community matters. One informant shared this observation, noting that:

*Miyada so kawan niyan ko kapagadapa niyan ko mga datu, nagu kiyadaan sa phanagandam nagu siyaregan niyan a ginawa niyan ko languwan taman. Isaon dn na and a mga galbek a diron dapat maaped na phangped run, isاون dn so kapolitika a sie bo oto papatoten ko mga datu. Ana kiyapakapiya niyan na ana kiyapakarata iyan. Aya kiyapakapiya niyan na sie ko olawla a aawedan o mga babay na ophoon niran die phananadmi so olawla o mga miyanga oona a taw na opoon paman dah a a aya iran siyaregan a a ginawa iran na maada oto ko kapiya niyan. [Excessive empowerment reduces visibility in relationships, making women overlook their limitations.]*

Excessive empowerment may lead women to overstep boundaries that, within the cultural and religious context, are not traditionally designated for them. When these boundaries are crossed, women may take risks and engage in roles or behaviors considered unfamiliar or inappropriate, potentially resulting in unintended consequences. Such actions are often seen as contrary to the moral framework established by Islam.

Islamic morality encompasses righteousness, good character, and a set of ethical qualities rooted in the

Qur'an and Hadith. Any act that violates these principles is regarded as a sin. One informant, sharing her perspective on women's empowerment within the Meranaw community, remarked that:

*I don't think it's too much empowerment, but rather the misuse of it. As highlighted by the Asia Foundation study, one common source of rido (conflict) in Lanao is women. Misusing liberty in ways that harm society reflects misplaced empowerment, not too much empowerment. Empowerment is still a process.*

Over time, tensions rise, creating a hostile environment, which negatively impacts both the woman and her relationships. This is evident from what one of the informants said,

*Isa ron gioto ah so babay na di makipagagaw sa decision si'e ko pamilya niyan. Ka upama na o so babay na agawon niyan so authority ko mama na bapiya so Islam na miyasogok ta. Aya pkisambi na tiyoba. Benar dun ah so babay na bigun sa gya'ah empowerment, na bigun sa kapa'ar na malo niyan pag analysan so antonai pakasopak sa agama. Sa Islam na aya pagonotan na so mama bapiya ari sa taw. Although upama na kiabugan ka sa power na pipikirang kabu ah adun a agama nga. [Women's empowerment grants decision-making power, but some women may create power struggles by overstepping men's responsibilities; limitations ensure authority stability.]*

Islam acknowledges women's rights in socio-economic development while emphasizing distinct and complementary gender roles within the family and community. This delineation provides clear expectations for each gender's responsibilities. Western feminist frameworks, which often advocate for egalitarianism, are generally seen as incompatible with Islamic teachings. Accordingly, Meranaw women's experiences and challenges in family relations are shaped by the principle that women follow men's guidance, provided it aligns with Islamic principles.

## 5.7 ASPECTS OF TODAY'S WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE LIFE OF LIYAMIN

Before the advent of Islam, women were often treated unfairly, expected to focus solely on

household duties while men worked in the fields. Today, women are breaking these barriers; however, the rise of "women's empowerment" has introduced new challenges within cultural, religious, political, economic, educational, and family contexts.

Both men and women—including the *liyamin*—are entitled to education. As representatives of the Sultan, *liyamin* must be well-versed in their community's socio-cultural practices. Cultural education and etiquette training are valuable gifts from parents that enable them to uphold traditions and contribute meaningfully to the community's cultural and social life. When *liyamin* engage with people and build relationships, they gain perspective and a deeper understanding of their own culture (Langco, 2023).

Because *liyamin* are traditionally secluded, personal tutors visit their homes to provide religious and cultural education. The Sultan typically pays for these tutors, who are usually community religious leaders, thus fostering Islamic knowledge. This education aims to promote peacebuilding, enhance political and social relations, and prepare *liyamin* to assume key roles within their communities. As one informant shared:

The Liyamin is protected and provided for, with tutors, food, and finances managed by her parents. Social relations are handled by assistants, not her concern.

According to Alim Abdulrauf,

Liyamin, when not attending school or Madrasah, receives private tutoring. Her mother ensures she learns, especially in reciting the Qur'an. A Maranao family trains daughters to be wise, ideal Muslim women, encouraging integrity and societal contributions for both genders.

In Muslim-Meranaw society, women's empowerment emphasizes the integration of Western and Madrasah education, fostering holistic development by combining scientific literacy with Islamic knowledge for practical application. A woman who attains exceptional education is

considered obliged to engage in *da'wah*—the preaching and sharing of knowledge. This responsibility is not merely a societal expectation but a religious obligation mandated by Allah (SWT). Accordingly, in Islam, anyone who has acquired knowledge is required to teach others to eradicate ignorance within society. This principle is reflected in a Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), who said, "Seek knowledge from cradle to grave." Learning is a duty incumbent upon all, and teachers bear the responsibility of fulfilling this obligation (Tempura, 2016). However, challenges arise when women are required to protect their *aurah*—which includes the face, voice, and even the sound of their footsteps—especially when exposed to crowds. These aspects must be concealed from men outside their immediate family. Within the family structure, men are tasked with providing and protecting, while women focus on caretaking, education, and serving as role models.

## 5.8 ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Born into royalty, a *liyamin* is inherently empowered economically. As a woman, she receives a bridal gift, or dowry, and has the authority to set the standard for this gift according to the economic status of her prospective groom. Abdulkader also stated that:

She was gifted ten (10) servants. Upon her marriage, her husband gave her twelve (12) female servants, thirteen (13) male servants, and fifty (50) carabaos.

The *liyamin* holds an independent share in property, which she may acquire through personal effort, inheritance, or gifts. Her economic empowerment encompasses equal participation in both market activities and family decision-making processes. By actively contributing to community development, the *liyamin* enhances productivity and elevates the overall economic status of her community, reflecting her hardworking and goal-oriented nature.

## 5.9 SECURITY ASPECT

The security of the *liyamin* in Meranaw society is of particular importance. For example, when a *liyamin* travels, she must be accompanied by a male relative to ensure her safety throughout the journey. In situations of danger or trouble, the *liyamin* is expected to remain confined within the four walls of her home and be treated with the utmost care and protection. As the *liyamin* of Mulondo noted:

*Di ako pakalalakaw, da kasunguwan akn, di ako mrungaw gyoto ah makokontrol ako. Ibarat pn na igira ana panganakan rakn na di kapakay oba skami e makambitiyarae ka so mga loks ami. Kay opama na para di ka pka expose ah. Ino pn bituwan sa liyamen ka di ka exposes sa madakul a taw. Apya ko mga oras a ana mga sundaro saya na plidasan iran aya ka tig iran a ana prinsesa saya. Da iran dn paniki a walay aya. [I'm restricted from going out, interacting, or being exposed. My parents handle suitors, and even soldiers respect my seclusion, knowing a princess resides here'.]*

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She has ten (10) servants. When she got married, her husband gifted her twelve (12) female servants, thirteen (13) male servants, and fifty (50) carabaos.

The *liyamin* holds an independent share in property, which she may acquire through personal effort, inheritance, or gifts. Her economic empowerment extends to equal participation in market activities and family decision-making. By contributing to community development, the *liyamin* enhances productivity and elevates the economic status of her community, reflecting her hardworking and goal-oriented nature.

Since time immemorial, women have been cherished and protected in Meranaw society. According to Hadja Sittie Rocaya,

My parents discouraged school, valuing character over education. They believed status mattered more. Despite this, I met high-status suitors, unlike today's norms.

In Islam, a Muslim woman must be accompanied by her *mahram*—immediate male family members or her husband—when traveling to distant places, serving as her protector in case of trouble. Disobedience to this commandment is considered a grave sin before Allah (SWT).

Wearing the *hijab* serves to protect women from harassment, signaling devotion and modesty. It helps prevent *fitnah* (temptation) and upholds Islamic principles of modest dress. This commandment is derived not only from the Qur'an and Hadith but also functions as a social safeguard against harm and malice within society (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2008).

According to Dr. Matuan (69) from Tamparan, who stated:

The challenge of women's empowerment lies in societal expectations, where women are often confined to household duties. Despite their progress, empowered women struggle to gain respect in politics, economics, education, and family, as many men still believe they should dominate these areas due to traditional beliefs about gender roles.

Today, women have attained significant representation in economic advancement, with some assuming the role of family breadwinners. Many *liyamin*, empowered through a combination of cultural, religious, and Western education, have transcended traditional roles. Their education equips them to strengthen families, communities, and local economies, thereby contributing to society with diverse skills and knowledge.

## 5.10 RELIGIOUS ASPECT

There is no “women empowerment” in Islam because women are already given high regard in Muslim society. The concept of women empowerment in Western countries comes from the political ideology of feminism which rose due to the gender inequality that existed during the 1990s and

even reached its level of maturity through the advancement of technology (Simply Psychology, 2024). While in Islam, the kind of women empowerment had already existed upon the advent of Islam as early as the 7th century. Before that time, women were ill-treated, and infanticide was rampant. With this, Islam has become the main proponent in abolishing that kind of treatment of women and placing them in high status in society.

Conflict arises when a wife earns more than her husband, sometimes leading to divorce. Some Meranaw women, managing income disparity, have the final say on household matters. Another informant has also given his opinion on this matter by stating that,

*Di kapakay o ba pag insist so babay sa equal authority ko pamilya. Gianan upama eh isa ko miaka estorbo ko power relation ngoto ah authority si-e ko soled a walay. Aya rarad igira ah miadowa so authority sa walay na pkabinasa'an so mga wata. Ka di'e ran katawan antay authority kiran, si ama o si ina? [In family decision-making, a woman should not demand equal authority, as it disrupts power dynamics. Without clear authority, children may become confused about whom to follow—the father or mother.]*

In Meranaw society, which is traditionally patriarchal, women have exerted significant influence in politics, often on par with men, particularly because many women have been more educationally progressive than their male counterparts. According to Professor Yasmira,

Many women still face political and economic challenges, struggling to find their place due to restrictive laws and societal views. Although progress, such as the Magna Carta for Women, has been made, change takes time. Islam offers a comprehensive system, influencing religion, politics, and economics, driving societal transformation.

Meranaw society was traditionally patriarchal, with the father responsible for finances and decision-making, while the mother focused on household duties and obedience. However, contemporary women have adapted to new roles, embracing

change and increasing their involvement in various aspects of society. The once obedient daughter and mother have evolved into assertive women who participate actively in public life and serve as matriarchs of their families. In relation to this perspective, Professor Yasmira stated in a personal interview (April 9, 2021):

Our culture is very much male-dominated, male-centric and so in terms of women now trying to push for a more assertive role in public life. I think there are also adverse effects on the family, now there is a common observation, modern families are dysfunctional, there are broken families, more and more cases of divorce and juvenile delinquency, and children feel insecure because they don't feel that they have a family, or there is a lot of parenting modeling that applies to both mother and father.

However, some conservative families continue to uphold traditional family structures, where women primarily assume the roles of daughters, mothers, and wives. One significant factor that has challenged and disrupted these traditional family dynamics is the advent of Western feminism. Professor Moner also stated that:

The shift towards embracing Western views of empowerment is causing women to neglect their natural roles in family care and decision-making, weakening societal fabric, particularly the family.

## 5.11 PARTICIPATION IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Research on *liyamin* examines their significance in family and community development, emphasizing their important role in Meranaw society despite the scarcity of written documentation on their contributions. Being born into a royal family does not guarantee leadership; rather, leadership is cultivated through experience, not solely through formal education. Through seclusion, *liyamin* develop skills by taking initiative and addressing family and societal challenges, demonstrating the courage and commitment necessary for effective leadership.



Alim Abdulraufh, 47, from Marawi City, stated that:

Being Liyamin symbolizes reverence, modesty, and adherence to Islam. She is shielded from harmful influences, gossip, and inappropriate exposure. Liyamin is respected for her wisdom, exemplary behavior, and dedication to maintaining honor, in contrast to modern women's experiences.

As Liyamin matures, she participates in family and community development, as well as peace-building activities. Her intellect, actions, and strong moral standing serve as inspiration for women to succeed. As a Liyamin, she works to improve the community's socio-economic conditions, directly impacting its members' quality of life. While community development plans may not solve all problems, they foster camaraderie, encouraging collective action and stronger relationships among community members to address common challenges. Unfortunately, their importance has been overlooked for so many years due to the lack of existing write-ups. Another important role of women in community development is that of keepers (Stache, 2024).

According to the son of Liyamin, Abdulkader, 47 from Tamparan said,

She emphasized respecting all living creatures, never killing unnecessarily, and always following the law, even if it meant facing consequences personally.

Liyamin serves as a role model for children, younger women, and men in the community, inspiring them with her example. This leadership instills hope and appreciation among Meranaw women, fostering a brighter future for the younger generation. They are also advocating for peace as peacekeepers and mediators of "rido".

## 5.12 MERANAW SOCIAL VALUES VIS-A-VIS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THAT CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE LIYAMIN

The values embodied by the *liyamin*, much like corporate culture, shape societal behavior within

the Meranaw community. Over time, these values establish boundaries that define what is considered right, wrong, permissible, or prohibited. Positive social functioning arises through collective agreement, ensuring clarity and mutual understanding of societal rules and expectations (Petit, n.d.).

Challenges faced by the *liyamin* serve as character-building moments, enabling her to demonstrate sound decision-making aligned with social values and etiquette. According to Abdulkader from Tamparan, who stated:

Liyamin was trained in kirim writing, salsilah, kulintang playing, and eloquent speaking, showcasing her manners, even understanding her father (Sultan) through mere eye contact.

The good character of *Liyamin*, reflected in her actions and opinions, became the standard for how every member of the Meranaw community should behave. Protecting one's chastity has also been mentioned by Halima in her stories,

My childhood was unpredictable, with my father being a soldier and my mother a teacher. She taught us respect, the value of virginity, and trust. While my father was strict, emphasizing proper behavior and fighting for our rights, he also taught us to surrender when we're in the wrong.

The practice of decency, modesty, and respect in speech, behavior, and attire serves to protect chastity and uphold personal dignity, particularly for the *liyamin*.

## 5.13 EMPOWERMENT

The prevailing idea of women's place in Islam is that women are deprived of freedom and equality. However, the fact is just the opposite as Islam gives importance to women in which they have their rights and privileges. In the Meranaw community, *Liyamin* was emancipated in all respects. One informant, Abdulkader added in his statement that:

Placing her inside the *lamin* is a way of showing respect. She's being respected so much in a way that you will be inspired by her good character.

The Meranaw community holds the *liyamin* in high esteem, with great respect and dignity. Since the arrival of Islam in Lanao, the status of women has markedly improved. Chairman Macalawan, 68, from Butig, remarked:

*Badun basa' so women empowerment ka isako dapen anan na adun den a women empowerment ko mga bae rektanu datar o kapangimasad sa rido.* [Even before the concept of women empowerment, Meranaw women were already empowered, particularly in roles like settling disputes].

The *liyamin* were empowered even more through the teachings of Islam. They were able to demonstrate flair to achieve and contribute to their well-being, family, community, and others, thus being empowered. Furthermore, Islam gives credence to women certifying them respect, honor, dignity, and equality (Köse, 2024.).

This study reveals that key elements of women's empowerment—such as the “capacity to do” and “capacity to be”—are strongly exemplified by the *liyamin*. The following principles of women's empowerment are evident in their traits and roles:

- 1- The *liyamin* actively engage in negotiating, mediating, and resolving conflicts effectively. Their words command respect, reflecting the wisdom and leadership instilled by their parents.
- 2- The *liyamin* promote gender-responsive governance by encouraging consultative decision-making and active participation in peacebuilding and development initiatives.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Meranaw people's tradition of protecting their women, particularly those of royal lineage, offers valuable insights into the

complexities of cultural feminism and women's empowerment. The *Liyamin* concept, though misunderstood by some, represents a loving and protective expression of the Meranaw culture's high regard for women. Despite the decline of the *Liyamin* tradition, its essence remains, influencing the lives of Meranaw women who balance education, Islam, and cultural values to ensure their security and well-being. the practice of *kaplamin* has significantly contributed to the development of Meranaw culture, empowering women of royalty to play a vital role in shaping the community's cultural, social, economic, educational, and religious landscape. Through the example of *liyamin*, it is evident that these women have been instrumental in fostering growth and progress in their communities. Further, this study also introduces an alternative version of empowerment thru seclusion as demonstrated by a *liyamin* of having played multifaceted roles in the society challenging traditional notions of empowerment and highlighting the complexity of women's roles in society.

This study highlights the importance of understanding the Meranaw culture through its literature and history, which embody the laws, norms, values, and practices of the people. By revisiting the traditional ways of their ancestors, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the goodness and richness of Meranaw society. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's empowerment and cultural feminism, emphasizing the need to consider diverse perspectives, including Islamic and indigenous viewpoints.

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