

Research Article

Challenging Universalism: Contesting Global Gender Equality through Uang Japuik

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Abstract

This article investigates the Minangkabau matrilineal practice of uang japuik as a site of contestation against universalist international gender norms. Through a qualitative approach combining a literature review with discourse analysis of legal and cultural texts, this study employs norm contestation theory and postcolonial feminism to unpack the tensions between global values and local meanings. Findings show that *uang japuik*, a payment from the bride's family to the groom's, is not simply a form of commodifying women. Locally, it functions as a symbol of respect, reciprocity, and kinship, representing a distinct matrilineal logic of gender equality. The practice constitutes epistemic resistance or intellectual opposition to global narratives that monolithically condemn marriage payments without cultural context. Ultimately, this research argues that the diffusion of international norms is a complex arena of negotiation, demanding a more pluralistic and culturally sensitive approach to the diverse pathways of women's emancipation in the Global South.

Keywords: Feminism, Norm Contestation, Postcolonial, *Uang Japuik*

INTRODUCTION

In the modern socio-political landscape, norms play a crucial role in regulating individuals and states and have become a focus of continuous analysis in contemporary discourse. The study of international relations no longer exclusively discusses war, territorial power struggles, and global trade. It also examines identity, norms, and contestation as social practices to critically question the meaning, implementation, and existence of norms (Wiener, 2018). In this context, norm contestation is defined as a social practice of either rejecting or critically engaging with a norm, emphasizing that norms are not static but are continuously negotiated in social interactions. This approach allows us to understand that the international order is not merely an arena for the application of singular, homogeneous values, but a space where meanings and norms are actively contested, negotiated, and reimagined by various actors with different identities, interests, and cultural backgrounds.

One of the primary arenas of norm contestation in international relations is the issue of gender equality in marriage. Gender equality is generally understood as the substantive equality between men and women, with the same rights, opportunities, and responsibilities in all spheres of life. Furthermore, the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) emphasized that marriage equality is a fundamental human right, ensuring that women and men have equal rights to enter marriage, choose a spouse, and participate in marital decision-making. The structure of family life (General Recommendation No. 21). The norm of gender equality is often promoted as a universal value through international human rights instruments and national policies. However, its application frequently triggers tension with local values that possess their own cultural logic (Merry, 2005). This becomes important to study, as claims of a norm's universality often overlook the social, cultural, and historical contexts of local communities (Lichuma, 2022).

To understand how the norm of gender equality is contested in cultural practice, empirical studies are needed that not only document practices that explicitly violate human rights but also examine everyday practices that are often overlooked as "traditional" or "commonplace." It is precisely at this juncture that a crucial meeting point between global discourse and local dynamics occurs. This paper will use the concept of *uang japuik* to explore how global gender equality norms are negotiated and contested within local cultural practices in Indonesia. In the Indonesian context, the practice of *uang japuik* in the matrilineal Minangkabau society offers a highly relevant case study. Although it may not appear as an extreme human rights violation, its significance as an integral part of the marriage ritual cannot be ignored. On the contrary, this practice can serve as a critical lens for unpacking the complex encounters among national legal norms, international standards, and local wisdom.

Definitely, *uang japuik* is a payment from the woman's family to the man's family, the amount of which is determined by the prospective groom's social status and achievements, such as his honorary titles, education, and profession (Andriyansyah & Riza, 2022). Despite this specific cultural context, this practice is often superficially viewed as a "husband buying" an act perceived to contradict modern gender equality. Indeed, dominant international norms, shaped mainly by Western feminist frameworks and institutionalized through transnational bodies, tend to categorize all marriage-related wealth transfers as practices that degrade women's dignity, commodify them, and serve as a root cause of gender-based violence (Guterres et al., 2024). In other literature, the practice of marriage payments is also described as a way of reinforcing patriarchal structures in society (Anderson, 2007). However, some studies have indeed found practices of gender-based violence in these marriage payments, such as those occurring in India (Bloch & Rao, 2002).

Research on *uang japuik* can be grouped into several major clusters. First, descriptive anthropological studies meticulously outline the mechanisms, stages, and symbolic meanings within the Pariaman Minangkabau context, emphasizing *uang japuik* as a symbol of respect for the groom and as a reinforcement of kinship ties in a matrilineal system (Martha, 2020). Second, sociological works highlight how modernization and shifting social status increasingly transform *uang japuik* from a symbolic act into a more material and commercial form (Anggraini, 2016).

Third, legal scholarship discusses its tension with Islamic law, particularly the distinction between “*mahar*” and “*uang japuik*”, and situates it within Indonesia’s broader legal pluralism (Syah et al., 2025; Iffah & Fakhruddin, 2025).

Despite this diversity, most scholarship treats *uang japuik* as a self-contained cultural practice and rarely situates it within broader debates on global gender norms. Existing work has not examined how *uang japuik* engages, negotiates, or challenges international discourses on women’s rights and equality. This creates a conceptual gap in which the practice is seldom analyzed as a site of norm contestation where local matrilineal logics interact with, rather than diverge from, universalist gender frameworks.

A postcolonial feminist lens helps address this gap by foregrounding the plurality of gender arrangements and questioning the dominance of Western epistemologies in defining emancipation (Mohanty, 1988). Scholarship on marriage payments generally assumes a patrilineal structure and often draws comparisons with dowry systems. Such comparisons are helpful only when consolidated into a single analytical contrast, because in many societies’ dowry is associated with female subordination, while in Minangkabau the cultural logic operates differently. The Minangkabau case challenges these assumptions and demonstrates that *uang japuik* functions within a distinct gender system. In this context, *uang japuik* offers an important example of epistemic resistance, namely practices through which marginalized communities challenge dominant, Western-centric knowledge that misrepresents or delegitimizes local gender norms (Medina, 2013; Brunner, 2021).

Thus, this phenomenon constitutes an arena of contestation between a global norm that claims universality and a rich local epistemology. The practice of *uang japuik* should not be seen as a cultural anomaly that needs to be “fixed” to align with international standards, but rather as a complex cultural text that must be read and understood in its context. Ignoring its internal logic risks perpetuating global knowledge dominance, where the Global North’s framework of understanding becomes the sole benchmark of truth. Therefore, this article will answer the research question: How does the practice of *uang japuik* in Minangkabau society negotiate and contest the universalist claims of international gender equality norms?

By exploring this research question, this article argues that understanding practices, such as *uang japuik*, require a more pluralistic, dialogic, and culturally sensitive approach to women’s emancipation in the Global South. This approach must recognize local agencies, reject the erasure of local voices and logic, and fully acknowledge the complexity of negotiating universal norms in diverse cultural contexts. This article frames *uang japuik* as a dynamic aspect of cultural expression and political identity and challenges the universalist principles underlying global gender norms. Drawing on theories of norm contestation and postcolonial feminism, this study offers an alternative perspective that centers local logics and diverse pathways to gender equality.

To bridge the theoretical discussion with the empirical context, this article positions the Minangkabau practice of *uang japuik* as a concrete site where global

gender norms interact with a deeply rooted matrilineal cultural logic. This case provides fertile ground for examining how negotiation, resistance, and norm reinterpretation occur in everyday social interactions. Accordingly, the following section outlines the methodological approach employed in this study to examine the dynamics of norm contestation systematically.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach with an interpretivist-critical methodological framework. The interpretivist approach was chosen because the primary objective of this study is not to measure or generalize a phenomenon, but rather to deeply understand (*verstehen*) the meanings, interpretations, and experiences that actors attach to the practice of *uang japuik* (Della Porta, D., & Keating, 2008). In social research studies, qualitative methods are often used to explore complex phenomena, especially to understand institutional dynamics and the construction of norms in international policy (Creswell, 2014). This approach is relevant to answering the research question of "how" norms are negotiated, as it allows the researcher to delve into the complexity of the meanings behind social practices. A critical approach aims not only to understand but also to deconstruct power relations, hegemonic knowledge, and dominant narratives that often marginalize local logic (Powner, 2015). Thus, the interpretivist-critical combination enables this research to simultaneously understand the local meaning of *uang japuik* and critique how global gender norms can potentially perpetuate global knowledge dominance.

The research strategy utilized is a case study. The practice of *uang japuik* within the Minangkabau matrilineal society was selected as an instrumental single-case study. This choice is based on the argument that a case study is highly effective for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its complex real-world context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2014). This case was purposively selected due to its uniqueness: a marriage payment practice carried out by the woman's side within a matrilineal system, which fundamentally challenges the patriarchal assumptions underlying many critiques of similar practices.

The data used in this research are text-based secondary data, grouped into two categories. First, texts of global discourse, which include policy and international legal documents relevant to gender equality and marriage. These include CEDAW General Recommendation No. 21 on equality in marriage, the Joint General Recommendation No. 31/18 of CEDAW and the CRC on harmful practices, UN Women policy briefs, and advocacy reports from international NGOs. Second, texts of local interpretation, which encompass academic literature from various disciplines (anthropology, sociology, customary law) that specifically discuss *uang japuik*, media articles, and Indonesian national legal documents (such as the Compilation of Islamic Law and the Marriage Law) that interact with the customary practice. The criteria for source selection were based on their relevance and authoritativeness in representing the two poles of the discourse being studied:

the global gender norm discourse and the local cultural discourse related to *uang japuik*.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and a literature review are employed to examine both categories of discourse. CDA is used to identify how language constructs meaning, naturalizes ideology, and legitimizes power relations (Fairclough, 2013). This technique helps uncover the hidden assumptions in global discourse that frame all marriage payments as inherently oppressive, while also revealing how local narratives construct *uang japuik* as a symbol of honor, reciprocity, and kinship. Beyond its deconstructive function, the interpretivist critical lens also facilitates a reconstructive Reading of Minangkabau matrilineality. Through discourse analysis, the study highlights how concepts such as autonomy, consent, kinship, obligation, and reciprocity are articulated differently in a matrilineal system, often in ways that challenge the liberal individualist assumptions that underlie global gender norms. This reconstructive dimension strengthens the study's contribution by showing that *uang japuik* not only contests dominant narratives but also offers a culturally grounded feminist logic rooted in collective belonging and negotiated relationality.

A critical reflection on the methodology acknowledges the reliance on secondary data as a primary limitation. While the textual analysis allows for a profound deconstruction of existing discourses (global and local), the absence of primary data collection (e.g., interviews or direct observation) means that the study cannot capture the nuances of contemporary, lived experiences and the complex, evolving nature of the practice as Minangkabau women and young couples currently interpret it. The available public and academic record, therefore, constrains the analysis of resistance. Future studies seeking to build on this theoretical critique could benefit significantly from incorporating primary fieldwork, which would allow for a more detailed understanding of how *uang japuik* is evolving in practice amid modernization and globalization.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Norm Contestation and Emancipation in the Global Order

This research employs Antje Wiener's framework of norm contestation to understand how the gap between global and local norms is contested. In international relations, the main argument of contestation theory is to understand and develop the substantial relationship between the "is" and the "ought" in global governance (Wiener, 2017). Within the framework of contestation theory, a norm is understood not merely as a passively accepted rule, but as an object that can be actively debated through social practice. Contestation refers to social practices involving objections to specific issues considered important by a community. Contestation encompasses various forms of social practice that discursively express disagreement with a norm. As a discursive practice, contestation is observable through the use of language and utterances. However, contestation theory emphasizes that the meaning of this concept transcends mere objection, as it also contains an emancipatory dimension (Wiener, 2017).

Wiener's approach fundamentally rejects simple norm diffusion models (e.g., the "norm cascade" model), which often depict norm dissemination as linear, moving from "norm makers" (usually Western states) to "norm takers" (usually states in the Global South). Instead, Wiener argues that this process is far more dynamic and rife with debate. Antje Wiener's framework of norm contestation emphasizes that international norms are not absolute but are always open to debate and the negotiation of meaning. Contestation is understood as a discursive practice—a series of argumentative acts in which actors question the validity, interpretation, and application of a norm. This contestation can take the form of rejecting a norm's claim to universality, debating its normative meaning in a local context, or negotiating its implementation to align with specific socio-cultural conditions. As a discursive practice, contestation occurs through the language, symbols, and public communication used by actors to voice their positions. Thus, a norm is not a static entity but an arena for active and dynamic political articulation.

In an increasingly connected global landscape, contestation has become a primary feature of relations between actors, both state and non-state. As international cooperation becomes more institutionalized, traditional concepts of sovereignty, power, and control undergo fundamental changes. This challenges the long-held view that the state is the sole political institution holding governmental authority. In this context, various actors, including local communities and transnational civil society, contest established norms, institutional structures, and power relations (Zimmermann, et al., 2018). It is important to note that contestation does not always entail resistance or defiance of the existing normative order; it can also trigger the emergence of new norms or even strengthen existing ones through public debate (Wiener, 2020).

A crucial dimension of Wiener's theory relevant to this research is the emancipatory potential of contestation. The meaning of contestation goes beyond mere objection, as it opens space for weaker or marginalized actors to challenge a norm's claim to universality and to voice alternative interpretations rooted in their own contexts. Consequently, contestation becomes a mechanism that enables political articulation from below, challenging imbalanced power relations and potentially producing a more inclusive and just normative order (Wiener, 2020). This aligns with Jose's (2018) view that norms are not uniformly applied precisely because of the differing interpretations championed by the various actors involved.

Therefore, the theory of Norm Contestation is relevant for analyzing the dynamics of international interaction in this research. By focusing on the practices of contestation, this framework allows us to understand why international norms are not always uniformly accepted and how actors with varying degrees of power can influence the process. This approach will be used to explain not only *whether* a norm is implemented, but also *how* and *why* it is debated in a local context, ultimately yielding outcomes that differ from global expectations.

While norm contestation provides a broad framework for understanding how global norms are debated and reinterpreted in local settings, it does not fully

explain the power asymmetries that shape these interactions. In particular, it does not clarify which interpretations become authoritative and whose knowledge is pushed aside. Postcolonial feminism fills this gap by focusing on the politics of representation and how local actors assert agency and challenge dominant narratives. This study combines macro-level dynamics of norm negotiation with micro-level processes of epistemic resistance, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of how practices such as uang japuik redefine global norms through local interpretation.

Postcolonialism and Feminism: A Critique of the Hegemony of Western Emancipation

In this context, the debate and contestation of norms are rooted in a critique of Western emancipation hegemony, which conflicts with traditional values. This framework is essential as a foundation for the debate, addressing the question of why norm contestation occurs. Postcolonial feminism emerges as a critical response to the dominance of mainstream discourse, which is rooted in the experiences of middle-class white women in the West. This perspective fundamentally challenges the narrative of universal emancipation, which often perpetuates power relations and epistemic biases inherited from colonialism. As demonstrated by Chandra T. Mohanty (1988), Western feminism often falls into the trap of discursive colonization by constructing a monolithic image of the "Third World Woman" as a passive, homogenous victim in need of "saving." This approach ignores the agency and historical and social complexities of non-Western women.

To avoid such representational traps, Mohanty proposes several guiding questions that help analyze the representation of non-Western women. First, she highlights the danger of homogenization—the tendency to treat the experiences of women from a particular region or culture as identical, without regard for class, religious, educational, or life-choice diversity. Second, she critiques victimization, where women are depicted solely as victims of their culture, religion, or local men, with no room to demonstrate their agency, strength, or strategies of resistance. Third, Mohanty warns against the dominance of the Western gaze, which uses Western values and standards of empowerment as the sole measure of progress, implicitly positioning local cultures as backward. Lastly, she cautions against the risk of discursive colonization, in which interventions or analyses, however well-intentioned, end up reinforcing stereotypes and old power relations between the West and the non-West. In this context, a cultural practice like *uang japuik* must be analyzed not merely through a universal lens, but as an alternative space of articulation where female agency and local values of emancipation can be understood contextually and on their own terms (Mohanty, 1988).

Complementing this critique, Gayatri C. Spivak's (1999) conception of the subaltern and the problem of representation radically questions whether groups silenced by dominant structures can authentically speak. Spivak warns of the risk of epistemic violence, where the local meaning of a practice is erased or distorted by more powerful external interpretations. The fundamental question, "can the

subaltern speak?", is not about the physical ability to speak, but rather whether there is a space for their voices to be heard without being filtered through the dominant framework (Spivak, 1999). Spivak shows that power over citationality, who is cited, within what framework, and for whose purposes, is a key dimension of epistemic hegemony. In this regard, Spivak not only critiques the system of representation but also engages in the continuous practice of "remaking oneself" as a form of resistance against dominant structures. This process of negotiating identity and agency can be understood as part of norm contestation in the epistemic realm, where subordinate actors do not merely reject dominant norms, but also form new articulations of meaning and legitimacy that stem from their own experiences and contexts (Chakraborty, 2010).

By combining Mohanty's and Spivak lenses, this postcolonial feminist framework operates in dual ways. First, it works deconstructively to dismantle the hegemony of the Western emancipation narrative and to highlight the biases inherent in judgments against local practices like *uang japuik*. Second, it works reconstructively to read the practice not as an anomaly to be "fixed" by external norms, but as a counter-discourse with its own internal logic and emancipatory value within its matrilineal socio-cultural context. Through this approach, the research aims not only to understand the norm contestation surrounding *uang japuik*, but also to contribute to the broader debate on the need to decolonize the meaning of emancipation and to recognize the diverse paths toward gender justice.

In the context of this research, Wiener's theory of norm contestation provides the foundation for understanding how a global norm—in this case, gender equality—is not simply adopted but also debated and reinterpreted locally. However, to delve deeper into the aspects of representation, agency, and power within this contestation process, the postcolonial feminist approach serves as a crucial complement. While Wiener highlights the discursive and political processes in norm negotiation, postcolonial feminism helps reveal how dominant narratives of emancipation often carry epistemic biases and colonial power relations that persist in "progressive" global projects. Thus, these two frameworks are mutually reinforcing, allowing for a Reading of *uang japuik* not just as a local practice, but also as an expression of contestation against the hegemony of global narratives.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This analysis examines a central analytical puzzle: the encounter between seemingly universal gender equality norms, rooted in liberal-individualism and codified in international human rights law, and the highly particularistic, communal, and matrilineal practice of *uang japuik* in Pariaman, Minangkabau. This interaction is not a simple case of a "backward" local tradition resisting a "progressive" global norm. Instead, it is a rich and complex arena of political and social contestation that reveals the workings of norm dynamics in global international relations. The practice becomes a focal point where local identities are negotiated, cultural power is contested, and the validity of universal norms is put to the test.

To unpack this complexity, this analytical section employs Antje Wiener's norm contestation theory as the primary analytical lens. Key concepts such as co-constitution, normative friction, and the crucial question, "Whose practices count?" will guide the analysis (Wiener, 2018). Furthermore, to provide a critical layer that questions the power dynamics inherent in global norms, a postcolonial feminist framework will be introduced. Concepts such as epistemic violence and epistemic resistance will be used to analyze this struggle not merely as a clash of values, but also as a struggle over knowledge and the right to self-definition (Brunner, 2021). Together, these frameworks illuminate how the Minangkabau contest, reinterpret, and appropriate global gender equality norms on their own terms.

The Meaning of *Uang Japuik* within the Minangkabau Matrilineal Structure

The practice of *uang japuik* in Minangkabau predominantly flourishes in the city of Pariaman, West Sumatra. While several ethnic groups in Indonesia adhere to a matrilineal kinship system, the Minangkabau are among the largest such groups in the country (Nofrizon, 2025). The Minangkabau matrilineal system has existed since antiquity and persists at the time of this writing. Fundamentally, this kinship system grants women a favorable position and status, particularly in relation to gender equality.

It is crucial to distinguish this system from a matriarchy, which implies that women hold absolute power. Minangkabau custom does not practice matriarchy, but rather a system of balanced power-sharing (Munir, 2015). A child's lineage automatically follows the mother from birth. Furthermore, rights and inheritance are passed down through the maternal line (Sukmawati, 2019). The primary function of high ancestral property (*harta pusaka tinggi*) is not for individual wealth but as an economic and social guarantee for the survival of all clan members, especially to protect the welfare of women and their children. Consequently, women are the primary heirs who hold authority over these vital assets, while sons have no claim to them. This ownership is not for the accumulation of personal wealth but is a trust to ensure collective well-being. This constitutes a form of female-centric social security, ensuring that every woman within the clan has access to resources to sustain her life and her offspring (Shafira et al., 2025).

The esteemed position of women in Minangkabau custom is embodied in the figure of the *Bundo Kanduang*. Literally meaning "true mother" or "birth mother," this title symbolizes an elder woman who is wise and respected as a non-formal leader within her clan (Wahida, 2024). Her role is not confined to the domestic sphere; in customary deliberations, a strategic decision concerning the clan cannot be ratified without the consent of the *Bundo Kanduang*. In contrast to many patrilineal cultures that restrict women's public engagement, Minangkabau custom explicitly permits women to enter the public domain. They are not confined to the home and can actively participate in political decision-making and hold public office.

It is in this context that the practice of *uang japuik* can be understood not as a paradox, but as a sophisticated balancing mechanism. In a system where women already hold economic power and a man "moves into" his wife's clan environment, *uang japuik* serves as a symbolic appreciation or compensation to the man's family for having raised and "released" one of its members (Martha, 2020). This practice symbolically elevates the man's status in his new environment, where he is structurally an outsider (Karmilah & Bakri, 2024). Rather than signaling female subordination, *uang japuik* is a cultural mechanism for balancing gendered positions within a matrilineal system, elevating the groom's status and ensuring harmony within asymmetric kinship roles.

As an integral part of the Minangkabau matrilineal system, the practice of *uang japuik* cannot be understood separately from the social structure and cultural values that govern interpersonal relationships within that society. *Uang japuik* is a form of appreciation given by the woman's family to the man's family during the wedding procession. This practice, however, should not be interpreted superficially as "buying the man," as such interpretation would be stigmatizing and contradict the spirit of reverence for women within the matrilineal system.

The "man-buying" stigma collapses when the symbolic meanings behind the tradition are unveiled. Within the practice of *uang japuik*, there is a multi-layered manifestation of respect that cannot be reduced to a unidirectional power relation. *Uang japuik* is, first and foremost, an honor bestowed upon the man's family—a form of gratitude for their success in raising a son who will become a *sumando* (in-marrying husband) in the matrilineal structure (Karmilah & Bakri, 2024). Second, *uang japuik* holds value as a recognition of the man's social status and lineage, historically rooted in his position as a descendant of the *orang asa* (founders of the *nagari*, or village-state) (Ramayanti, 2025). Third, the funds often serve as initial capital for the new couple's household, indicating a constructive and mutually beneficial intent, rather than an exploitative one (Aulia et al., 2023). In this respect, *uang japuik* grants the bride an active role in her own marriage, allowing her to be consciously involved rather than being merely a passive object.

The objective of the following comparison is to highlight the cultural differences underlying *uang japuik* and dowry, rather than suggesting they are equivalent. This distinction is essential to the overall argument presented in this article. In Wiener's framework, such divergences represent points of *normative friction*, where global gender equality norms—built largely upon patriarchal cases—encounter alternative meaning systems embedded in matrilineal societies. Evaluating diverse cultural practices through a single, patriarchal perspective can lead to epistemic misrecognition, as universal interpretations may overlook and overwrite local knowledge (citation). Considering this point, the table below serves as a heuristic to illustrate why the Minangkabau custom cannot be effectively evaluated using the same normative principles that govern dowry systems.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis: The Opposing Logics of *Uang Japuik* and Dowry

Analytical Dimension	<i>Uang Japuik</i> (Minangkabau Matrilineal Context)	<i>Dowry</i> (Patriarchal Context & Western Feminist Critique)
Kinship System	Matrilineal: Lineage, family name, and ancestral inheritance are passed down through the female line. The husband is an "outsider" or "guest" (<i>sumando</i>) who joins the wife's clan, reflecting a gendered redistribution of structural power.	Patriarchal: Lineage and inheritance are passed down through the male line. The wife "marries into" the husband's family, often losing formal ties to her own clan.
Direction of Transaction	From the woman's family to the man's family, but it is essentially reciprocal with a counter-practice that is often of higher value.	From the woman's family to the man's family. Often, a unidirectional, continuous, and exploitative demand post-marriage.
Philosophical Meaning	Appreciation and Honor. The meaning is social and symbolic, not commodifying.	Burden & Compensation: Regarded as compensation for the economic "burden" the husband's family will bear.
Agency and Position of Women	Women are active agents who initiate, negotiate, and retain control over lineage assets. Reflecting localized forms of gendered power.	Women become passive objects
Economic Purpose	Symbolic & Initial Capital: Enhances the prestige and social status of both families.	Wealth Accumulation & Exploitation: Becomes a source of wealth accumulation for the man's family. Often becomes a tool for financial extortion against the woman's family
Implications for Gender Equality	Reflects contextual gender balance rooted in matrilineal authority.	Reinforces inequality by being subordinate economically and socially, legitimizing.
Theoretical Implication	Represents epistemic resistance to universalist interpretations	reflects patriarchal power consolidation and aligns with the type of "harmful practices" categorized in global gender norms.

Source: Compiled by the author from various sources

The table should be understood as a heuristic device that clarifies why the Minangkabau practice cannot be evaluated through the same normative lens used for patriarchal dowry systems. Misreading *uang japuik* as dowry illustrates an epistemic misrecognition that postcolonial feminism and norm contestation theory warn against, involving external frameworks that override local meanings and lead to normative conflict. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, misreading *uang japuik* as dowry constitutes a form of epistemic erasure in which external evaluative frameworks overwrite local interpretations of agency and power. It is important to note that the comparative interpretation presented above relies solely on secondary textual sources. The absence of primary fieldwork means the analysis cannot fully capture contemporary variations in practice or the lived experiences of

Minangkabau women and families as they negotiate *uang japuik* today. Thus, the comparison should be read as an interpretation of cultural logics as represented in available texts, rather than a definitive account of all current practices. Future research incorporating interviews or ethnographic observation could further clarify how these meanings evolve in everyday negotiations.

Epistemic Resistance and the Decolonization of Emancipatory Meaning

Despite this deeply rooted and complex cultural logic, the unique meaning and function of *uang japuik* are frequently misunderstood by external observers applying universalist frameworks. This pervasive misinterpretation, often viewing the practice through a lens of commodification rather than appreciation, sets the stage for problematic calls for intervention and raises critical questions about whose knowledge and values truly count. The most perilous consequence of this misreading is the emergence of calls for external intervention. The argument that global norms must be enforced to prohibit practices like *uang japuik* in order to "save" Minang women is a clear example of cultural imperialism. Such efforts, though well-intentioned, are predicated on a flawed understanding and assume the superiority of Western value frameworks. It overlooks the capacity of local communities to debate, adapt, and reform their traditions from within—a tangible process, as evidenced by internal critiques and discourses of simplification (Spivak, 1999).

In response to this problematic universalism, postcolonial feminism advocates for an analytical methodology that is deeply contextual, historical, and intersectional. Oppression is not a monolithic, universal experience; somewhat, it is invariably shaped by the complex intersections of multiple axes of power, including gender, class, race, colonialism, sexuality, and local cultural logics. The concept of "double colonization" (Berenstain et al., 2021) is pertinent here. In the Minangkabau context, the common assumption that women are oppressed by both external colonial forces and internal patriarchal structures becomes nuanced, even inverted. Here, women are not simply passive victims. Paradoxically, global norms intended to be liberating can undermine a system in which women wield significant structural power (through lineage and property) by misinterpreting a key social ritual.

Therefore, a practice like *uang japuik* cannot be adequately understood by merely applying a universal template of "patriarchy" or "commodification." It must be analyzed within its specific cultural, economic, and historical matrix. To ignore this context is to ignore the possibility that the practice may hold a different—even emancipatory—meaning and function within its own logical framework. The struggle for gender equality, according to this perspective, must be rooted in the material realities and lived experiences of women in diverse locations, not in generalized theoretical abstractions. This critique of a universalist feminism argues that it fails to comprehend the lived realities of many women (Mohanty, 1988).

Furthermore, the designation of *Bajapuik* as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2022 is a highly significant act of identity politics. This designation functions as a strategy for the Pariaman community to assert their unique local cultural identity, counter negative external narratives and misconceptions, and legitimize and secure their cultural heritage amidst the currents of globalization and homogenization (Masrizal, 2025).

However, this formalization process can also be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a counter-hegemonic act in which a local community employs the state apparatus to protect its practice from judgment by global discourse. On the other hand, this process risks "freezing" a tradition that is, in reality, living and constantly negotiated. The authority to define the "original" or "authentic" version of *Bajapuik* registered as ICH would likely fall to the customary elders, the *ninik mamak*, who are predominantly male. This could silence the voices of women or younger generations who may hold different views or wish to adapt the tradition further. Ironically, the tool used to assert local identity against global hegemony could in turn create a new form of hegemony by standardizing the practice and limiting space for future evolution—a dilemma that echoes Spivak's concern about who is ultimately entitled to represent a group.

Nevertheless, the agency of Minangkabau women continues to operate actively within this structure. Evidence shows negotiations over the amount of *uang japuik* and even a practice of "camouflage," where the money is merely "sounded out" or ceremonially announced to uphold dignity, but in reality, is not paid, or the amount is much smaller. This is a brilliant example of subversive agency—the ability to navigate, negotiate, and even subvert rules from within to achieve strategic goals, without resorting to overt resistance.

This analysis is not intended to romanticize the practice of *uang japuik*, but rather to acknowledge its inherent complexities and tensions, including the internal conflicts that arise within Minangkabau society itself. Findings show that this practice is also an arena of local contestation over meaning, where the narrative of *uang japuik* as a form of reverence for women has experienced a degradation of meaning over time (Rahmadhani, 2024). When the stipulated amount of *uang japuik* is perceived as burdensome, particularly for the woman's side, the tradition can be perceived as an obstacle to marriage rather than a symbol of kinship and equality.

Nonetheless, it is crucial not to fall into the simplistic dichotomy of "oppressive tradition" versus "liberating modernity." It is precisely in this space that norm contestation actively occurs, as Antje Wiener, describes: global norms are not passively accepted but are negotiated and reinterpreted by local actors within their respective social and cultural contexts. Within this framework, Minangkabau women are not passive subjects of global norms, but agents who actively navigate, defend, and critique the external values being introduced. This articulation is a form of producing and reinforcing a local epistemology against the dominant global one. Even the internal debates about reform are part of this process of epistemic clarification. Therefore, this conflict, while disruptive, is also a politically and

culturally productive moment for asserting different ways of knowing and being in the world (Fauzi, 2024).

The paradox of liberation emerges when global gender equality norms—often born from patriarchal contexts and assumed to be universal—are unilaterally applied as the sole benchmark for judging local practices like *uang japuik*. Far from liberating, this normative approach actually risks undermining the very social foundations that grant Minangkabau women a strategic position within their matrilineal structure. Condemning *uang japuik* without considering its unique cultural logic can lead to epistemic violence: the negation of local knowledge and meanings that redefine power relations in ways not always compatible with a Western framework (Chakraborty, 2010). In this context, norm contestation is not merely about acceptance or rejection, but about defending a space for local articulation within an increasingly normative global order.

The Arena of *Uang Japuik* Contestation in Global Discourse

The practice of *uang japuik* within Minangkabau society is not static; rather, it is a living arena where meaning is negotiated, identity is asserted, and global norms are challenged. Global norms on gender equality in marriage do not emerge in a vacuum; they are built on the foundation of human rights principles codified over several decades. An analysis of these norms begins with the fundamental principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR affirms the principle of inherent equality and dignity for all individuals regardless of sex, as well as the right to marry only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses (OHCHR, 1962).

Externally, a conflict arises between this local practice and homogeneous global gender equality norms. The international human rights framework, spearheaded by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), provides the primary normative basis for evaluating marital practices worldwide. The stance of the CEDAW Committee, as the Convention's interpretive body, is unequivocal in prioritizing substantive equality between men and women in all aspects of life, including marriage and family relations. General Recommendation No. 21 from the CEDAW Committee explicitly states marriage equality is a fundamental human right (United Nations, 1994). This recommendation underscores that any custom or practice that undermines a woman's legal capacity—such as her ability to enter into contracts, manage property, or choose her residence without male consent—is discriminatory and must be abolished.

The critical stance on marriage payments becomes more explicit in the Joint General Recommendation No. 31 of the CEDAW Committee and No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This document identifies several forms of marriage payment explicitly as "harmful practices." It states that harmful practices are based on discrimination on grounds of sex, gender, and age, one of which is dowry-related violence. The document also notes that dowry and bride-price payments can be linked to practices tantamount to trafficking in persons. The

placement of "dowry-related violence" on a list of harmful practices equivalent to female genital mutilation and forced marriage indicates an unequivocal position from major human rights treaty bodies, framing such payments within a discourse of violence, discrimination, and human rights violations (CEDAW, 2014). At its core, this global norm is based on a universalist and liberal-individualist ontological assumption. It presupposes a universal subject and a universal understanding of marriage, consent, and gender relations. It is this assumption that sets the stage for normative friction when confronted with a local normative order built on an entirely different logic.

The global norm against marriage payments is a clear example of the discursive practice Mohanty (1988) critiques. The process begins by identifying a very real problem in a specific context, such as dowry-related violence in South Asia, as documented by UN Women reports. However, as it becomes a global norm, this issue is abstracted into a general principle: all forms of marriage payments are detrimental to women. This, as explained by Mohanty, disregards the unique matrilineal logic, imposes a foreign meaning on a local practice, silences local understanding, and discursively positions Minangkabau women as victims in need of being saved from their own culture. This is a tangible manifestation of the "discursive colonization" Mohanty warned against, where the diversity of women's experiences is reduced to a single narrative of oppression. This, in turn, raises another critical question: whether women are not inherently powerless but are disempowered by an unjust universalism.

In contrast to the universal nature of global norms, the *bajapuik* tradition is a geographically specific practice, primarily prevalent in the Pariaman region of Minangkabau. Understanding this contestation demands a careful deconstruction of the practice itself, which is often misunderstood due to its complexity. *Uang Japuik* is not a simple inversion of patriarchy. It is a hybrid system where matrilineal and patriarchal logics collide. The practice simultaneously elevates the importance of the female lineage while reinforcing the social and economic value of men, ultimately placing a significant financial burden on the woman's family to secure a "high value" prospective son-in-law.

Within Antje Wiener's theory of norm contestation, the interaction between the global CEDAW norm and the practice of *uang japuik* constitutes a "normative collision" that triggers a process of meaning negotiation. Wiener argues that international norms are not passively accepted but undergo a process of "localization" in which local actors interpret, challenge, and adapt them to their cultural and political contexts. The Minangkabau people, in this case, do not outright reject the norm of gender equality, as this principle has, in fact, long been present in their matrilineal kinship system. They frame *uang japuik* not as a transaction for a woman, but as a symbol of appreciation for the man who will join the wife's clan and as a mechanism to strengthen the matrilineal structure. This contestation is not mere resistance, but a dialogue in which the validity and relevance of global norms are tested and negotiated at the local level. This also

demonstrates that norms do not always originate from the top down but can also emerge from the smallest spheres of society.

Furthermore, a postcolonial feminist perspective deepens this analysis by highlighting the power dynamics inherent in the contestation. What global human rights discourse deems "universal oppression" is, in practice, experienced differently by Minangkabau women. Their agency lies not in a total rejection of tradition, but in their ability to navigate and negotiate its complexities. Minangkabau women are actively involved in determining the amount of *japuik*, its use, and its symbolic meaning. To ignore this agency and impose the label of "victim" is a form of "epistemic violence"—a negation of the knowledge and subjective experiences of women from the Global South, which ultimately disempowers rather than empowers them (Spivak, 1999). Thus, postcolonial feminism demands that we move beyond the simple binary of tradition (bad) versus modernity (good) and instead examine how women themselves interpret and reshape their cultural practices in the face of global pressures.

The fundamental difference in normative language between the two frameworks is the root of the friction. The global framework uses the language of "rights," "harm," and "violence," while the local framework uses the language of "honor," "appreciation," and "prestige." This is not merely a difference of opinion, but a difference in the ontology of social relations. One is individualistic and universalist, the other communal and particularistic. Consequently, any dialogue between the two sides risks becoming a "dialogue of the deaf" unless this fundamental epistemic gap is acknowledged. The conflict is not just about the practice itself, but about the frame of reference used to judge it.

Ultimately, the arena of *uang japuik* contestation demonstrates that global discourse does not provide the analytical tools to understand the mechanisms of this contestation—how norms are debated and reconfigured. Meanwhile, postcolonial feminism operates in a vacuum. It always intersects, collides with, and negotiates complex local realities. Wiener offers a critical lens for understanding the implications of this contestation, particularly regarding the politics of representation and women's agency. The case study of *Uang japuik* is thus not just about a marriage tradition, but a microcosm of the larger struggle over who has the right to define progress, equality, and oppression in an increasingly connected yet fundamentally diverse world order.

This in-depth analysis of the *uang japuik* tradition through a postcolonial feminist lens yields a powerful and nuanced conclusion. Far from its image as an archaic, oppressive, or anti-gender equality custom, *uang japuik* is revealed to be a sophisticated and living social practice. Within the context of the Minangkabau matrilineal system, this tradition has long embodied principles of power balance, female agency, and mutual respect that in many ways predate the modern global discourse on equality. It is tangible proof that emancipation can take diverse forms rooted in specific cultural and historical contexts.

Finally, this case study offers a broader lesson. It affirms that "emancipation" and "gender equality" are not monolithic concepts with a single, fixed universal

definition. Non-Western societies have been and continue to develop their own pathways toward gender equilibrium that may not always resemble the liberal individualistic model dominant in the West but are no less valid or effective in their own contexts. Acknowledging this plurality of paths to emancipation is the core of a genuinely global and decolonial feminist project. Therefore, any attempt to understand or intervene in gender practices globally must be based on a nuanced, culturally sensitive, and historically informed framework. Only with this approach can we authentically appreciate the diversity of women's struggles and achievements worldwide, while avoiding the perils of a universalism that simplifies and, ultimately, oppresses.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the practice of *uang japuik* within the matrilineal society of Minangkabau as an arena of contestation, where local gender equality norms confront the universalist claims of global gender norms. Framed by norm contestation theory and postcolonial feminism, the analysis demonstrates that *uang japuik* is not a practice that demeans women, nor is it a mere form of commodification. Conversely, from a local perspective, it is a symbol of reverence for the man who will join his wife's matrilineal family, while also serving as a mechanism for reciprocity and the strengthening of kinship ties. As such, the practice functions as a form of epistemic resistance against global feminist narratives that tend to judge all forms of marriage payment as patriarchal practices without considering their cultural context.

The primary contributions of this research are threefold. First, theoretically, it enriches the literature on norm contestation by providing an empirical case study from the Global South. Second, substantively, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of *uang japuik*, liberating it from common misconceptions and situating it within the framework of a Minangkabau matrilineal version of gender equality. Third, by employing a postcolonial feminist lens, this research underscores the importance of recognizing the plurality of definitions and pathways to women's emancipation, challenging the hegemony of Western feminist discourse. More broadly, this study challenges the simplistic view that all forms of marriage payments are inherently oppressive and demonstrates that gender equality can be expressed through diverse cultural logics that differ from dominant Western models. Ultimately, this research contributes to postcolonial feminist discourse by illustrating how local practices can resist, reinterpret, and reframe global gender norms to affirm local agency and cultural knowledge.

The primary strength of this study is its use of a robust theoretical framework to deconstruct the power dynamics behind gender discourse. However, its limitation lies in its focus on discourse analysis and literature review, which may not fully capture how individuals—particularly young Minangkabau men and women today—negotiate the meaning of *uang japuik* in their daily lives amid the currents of modernization and social media. Therefore, this study opens several avenues for future research. How is the younger Minangkabau generation

reinterpreting the *uang japuik* tradition in the digital age and global economy? Are there shifts in meaning or practice occurring with increased interaction with external cultures? Furthermore, how do similar dynamics of contestation occur in other gender-related cultural practices in Indonesia in relation to international human rights norms? Answering these questions will further deepen our understanding of how gender equality can be negotiated in a dialogical, culturally sensitive manner rather than monolithically imposed.

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