

DISRUPTING THE UNIVERSAL: KADAZANDUSUN WOMEN'S SACRED LEADERSHIP AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF FEMINIST THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT This work critiques the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from a Subaltern theoretical perspective, arguing that its application to women has been predominantly Eurocentric. The paper examines how Orientalism and Eurocentrism have shaped Western perceptions of human rights, historically positioning non-Western societies as backward or deficient. Within this framework, Southeast Asian women were doubly marginalized both by colonial patriarchy and by hierarchical structures within their own communities. The study challenges the hierarchical and binary worldview embedded in Western human rights discourse and mainstream feminism, in which the European West is privileged as the universal reference point while the rest of the world is relegated to a secondary status. To illustrate this critique, the paper turns to the egalitarian and bilateral social structure of the Kadazandusun community of Sabah, Malaysia, where women traditionally hold significant authority. The religious leadership of the *Bobohizan*, female ritual specialists, demonstrates the community's recognition of female power and social centrality. Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on previous scholarly work in anthropology, gender studies, and indigenous epistemologies related to the Kadazandusun. By synthesizing existing ethnographic studies, historical analyses, and feminist critiques, the paper situates indigenous Sabah women within broader debates on rights and representation. By examining the role of women within this indigenous society, the paper calls for a re-examination of feminist and human rights frameworks to incorporate more diverse, contextual, and culturally grounded understandings of women's agency across societies.

Keywords: Human Rights, Oppressed women, Eurocentrism, High Priestess, Women leadership

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) was conceptualized as a comprehensive charter of human equality and human dignity universal to all societies. But if we read the UDHR and Western discourse on human rights through the lens of Subaltern theories, it is apparent that the UDHR and Western human rights utilize an exclusivist Eurocentric voice that dismisses non-Western societies. This is particularly applicable to women's rights because the Western model of human rights has been exported into the East as conforming to it is to be modern and part of civilization and is against being 'backward' or 'lesser' (Said, 1978). The imposition of Western values on non-Western societies and Southeast Asia in particular has resulted in an exclusive and systematically stereotypical definition of women's roles and their rights in Southeast Asia (Chakravarti, 2003). Southeast Asian women were twice oppressed by colonial and patriarch power—the objects of local cultural norms as well as objects of colonial power. Both these dual powers pushed women to the lowest rung in the hierarchy with their oppression created as an inalienable cultural issue as well as one conferred upon them through their subordination to colonial power.

In deconstructing universal human rights, one has to spot the hierarchical binary world perception in Western human rights discourse and feminism. This has the effect of leaving the European West in the position of being the origin of progress and equality with the rest of the world acting in its shadow. This is similar to a child-parent equation in which the West takes the lead with the world in its wake. This has historically influenced feminist movements with their Western inclination suppressing the meaning of gender equality in indigenous non-West societies (Mohanty, 1988). This imposition disregards the richness and diversity in gender relations in societies. A reorientation of feminism and human rights is thus imperative in which one is open to indigenous models of gender equality such as the one in the Kadazandusun tribe of Sabah in Malaysia.

The Kadazandusuns are an indigenous people in Sabah who are a powerful example of an egalitarian system in which women are predominant in religious and social leadership. The paper argues through a discussion of women in leadership roles in the traditional religious system of the Kadazandusuns that Western conceptions of gender relations and human rights need to be reorganized. More precisely, it requires an enhanced and universalistic focus that critically analyzes the Eurocentric presuppositions of human rights thinking and insists on the strength of indigenous knowledge systems to construct gender equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship is guided by literature drawing on critical subaltern studies, postcolonial feminisms, and indigenous feminist theory. Timeless works such as Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* and Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000). *Provincializing Europe* illustrate that Western epistemologies have long represented non-Western societies as "backward" and requiring rescue and reform. This critique is particularly applicable when applied to global human rights discourses universalizing individualism, secular liberalism, and gender equality in terms of Euro-American values.

Mohanty's (1988, 2003) critique of the Western feminist homogenizing impulse to represent Third World women as victimized and passive highlights the need to resist such homogenizing representations. Her requirement that we privilege women's historical and cultural experiences in all their complexity is especially relevant in the case of Kadazandusun ritual leaders. In this case, the *Bobohizan*, far from being ostracized or oppressed, occupies a

central place in spiritual leadership, kinship regulation, and ritual decision-making authority. This discredits Western feminist measures of empowerment that emphasize formal political or economic participation.

Lugones (2007) builds upon this with the coloniality of gender, showing how Western gender configurations were imposed via colonial conquest. This is crucial to understanding how Kadazandusun women's ritual specialist roles, rooted in indigenous cosmology and mutual relationality, are rendered invisible or "non-modern" according to Eurocentric standards. The *Bobohizan*'s authority, rooted in holy knowledge and ancestor continuity, provides an alternate feminist ontology with an emphasis on relational power, community guardianship, and spiritual sovereignty. Expanding this decolonial critique, the study also draws on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2000), which maps the intersecting systems of oppression—colonialism, patriarchy, racialization—that organize indigenous women's lives. The study enriches local ethnographies tracking how gender intersects with spiritual and cultural duties in non-Western societies.

But alongside these global theoretical advances, recent ethnographies specific to the region also situate the research firmly in their local empirical context. For instance, Hanafi Hussin's (2003) ethnography of the *Bobohizan* of Penampang provides rich empirical data on ritual practice and gendered authority. Martin Potter's (2017) investigation of liminal spirits and storytelling among the Dusun lays out how sacred cosmologies influence indigenous leadership structures. Similarly, Low and Ishak's (2018) work on *komburongo* rituals illustrates how medicinal plants and sacred systems of belief are intertwined with women's work as spiritual mediators. These studies corroborate the argument that Kadazandusun spiritual leadership is not symbolic, but operational, informing both cosmological balance and communal governance. By synthesizing macro-theoretical critique with micro-level ethnographic evidence, this review contends the *Bobohizan* as a challenge to, rather than an exception of, Western feminism and its constitutive assumptions. It also illustrates that decolonial feminist theory must remain anchored in the local—in the spiritual, linguistic, and ontological particularity that makes up women's leadership in indigenous worlds such as Sabah.

METHODOLOGY

This project employed a qualitative, interpretive, decolonial research approach, informed by postcolonial feminist and indigenous knowledge systems theoretical frameworks, to research Kadazandusun women's cultural and spiritual leadership, particular the *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian*, practices. The research employed a case study approach, with ethnographic textual analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) employed to challenge how indigenous women's leadership is understood, enacted, and represented in and beyond Kadazandusun cosmology. The analytic framework for this research drew on the contributions of Fairclough (1995) and, Wodak and Meyer (2009), whose models of CDA provided a means of unearthing the tacit power relations in textual constructions of gender, spirituality, and community. The research focused exclusively on secondary data published academic reports, ritual texts, oral histories, and prior ethnographic reports. Among the main sources include Hussin (2003), in which the ritual roles of the *Bobohizan* priestesses among the Penampang are described; Potter (2017), in which spiritual narrative and heterotopic space among the Dusun are explored; and Low and Ishak (2018), in which the use of sacred plants and cosmological knowledge among the Dusunic peoples are outlined. These texts provided rich cultural, spiritual, and gendered data in the research subject area of interest.

Data collection involved meticulous desk research using scholarly databases and ethnographic literature. Content was inductively coded thematically to call forth patterns around indigenous gender leadership, communal government, and epistemic resistance to Eurocentricity. This was then followed by axial coding to ascertain broader conceptual relationships, for example, spiritual authority and relational equality. Coding was manual to permit space for interpretative depth and close text reading. There were no human subjects in this research. Instead, analysis was conducted on published ethnographic field data and textual materials, including cultural narratives, oral histories, and transcribed interviews. Although no fieldwork was carried out, research ethics were upheld by ensuring respectful representation of Indigenous knowledge systems. In line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), the study resists essentializing interpretations and safeguards the intellectual and cultural autonomy of Indigenous perspectives.

The analysis employs a qualitative interpretive technique, specifically thematic and discourse analysis, to examine how Kadazandusun women's roles, particularly the spiritual authority of the *Bobohizan* function as counter-epistemologies to Western-dominant feminist and human rights narratives. Themes were identified across ethnographic descriptions, oral traditions, and scholarly interpretations, while discourse analysis was used to interrogate the language, assumptions, and power dynamics embedded in existing literature on human rights, feminism, and Indigenous societies. This methodological approach enables a culturally sensitive and contextually grounded interpretation of feminist and human rights discourse by centering Kadazandusun women's spiritual leadership as an alternative framework to Eurocentric paradigms.

RESULTS

There are three prominent themes within the literature on Kadazandusun women's ritual leadership revealed through this research: spiritual mediation, communal governance, and gendered power-disruption. In terms of *spiritual mediation*, Kadazandusun female ritual specialists—*Bobohizan* or *Babalian*—share a central role as mediators between the human world and the spiritual realm. Across ethnographic narratives, their authority derives from mastery of ritual language (*rinait*), healing practices, and cosmological knowledge. Their mediating role situates them as guardians of spiritual balance and cosmic harmony, positioning women at the apex of religious leadership in ways that directly challenge Western assumptions that leadership must be secular, bureaucratic, or rational-legal.

In *communal governance*, which extends beyond ritual practice, female priestesses function simultaneously as community decision-makers. Ethnographic accounts describe them adjudicating conflicts, advising agricultural cycles, overseeing initiation rites, and shaping communal ethics. These responsibilities operate within a bilateral kinship system that affirms women's participation in domestic, lineage-based, and sub-village authority structures. Thus, female religious leadership in Kadazandusun culture is not merely symbolic but structurally embedded in social organization.

The third theme, *gendered power-disruption*, highlights how the *Bobohizan* role contradicts dominant Western and colonial gender discourses that often portray Indigenous women as passive, oppressed, or peripheral. Female ritual leadership resists patriarchal expectations by placing women in hegemonic positions within spiritual and cosmological

orders. These culturally grounded models of authority resist Western feminist and human rights frameworks that equate women's empowerment solely with political citizenship, secular public participation, or democratic representation. Instead, they offer alternative epistemologies rooted in Indigenous cosmology and relational forms of power.

These themes were derived through inductive thematic coding of secondary ethnographic texts and further examined using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Together, they demonstrate that *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* leadership articulates culturally embedded forms of authority that subvert hegemonic feminist and human rights discourses.

As cosmological intermediaries, *Bobohizan* engages in ritual chanting (*rinait*), offering oblations, and employing sacred flora such as *komburongo* to maintain cosmic harmony. Their authority is typically inherited matrilineally or acquired through spiritual apprenticeship, and it is legitimized cosmologically rather than bureaucratically. This model of leadership rooted in ritual expertise and ancestral mandates, differs fundamentally from Western notions of political authority.

Beyond spiritual duties, *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* women contribute to village governance and moral arbitration. In times of illness, interpersonal conflict, or agricultural uncertainty, they are invoked as custodians of wisdom and spiritual veracity. Their ritual responsibilities also function as a form of local jurisprudence, affirming their dual status as spiritual experts and community authorities. Scholars such as Lambert (2013) and Rani (2014) note that women ritualists often mediate land disputes and enforce agricultural taboos—roles that lie outside Western conceptions of leadership but are integral to indigenous governance. These forms of ritual and relational power challenge assumptions that authority must be visible, institutional, or formal. Instead, leadership is grounded in cosmological responsibility, ancestral care-taking, and collective well-being. Such forms of authority resist liberal feminist models that prioritize economic autonomy or political enfranchisement and instead foreground culturally specific expressions of women's empowerment.

Collectively, these insights position Kadazandusun ritual leadership as a decolonial feminist potential—shared, sacred, and epistemologically situated within indigenous worldviews. They enrich global understandings of gender, leadership, and rights by centering plural, cosmologically grounded models of authority rather than universalizing Western frameworks.

DISCUSSION

Kadazandusun Women's Ritual Leadership as Decolonial Feminist Praxis

The findings of this research complicate dominant feminist and human rights stories by demonstrating how Kadazandusun women's ritual leadership offers an alternative model of power, equality, and communal governance. Rather than rehearsing a reductionist binary of "Western" and "indigenous," this analysis locates the importance of each of the theme's spiritual mediation, communal governance, and gendered disruption of power within the decolonial feminist possibility in which they occur. The Kadazandusun female ritual practitioner, the *Bobohizan*, is not merely a religious functionary but exercises a culturally authoritative political leadership grounded in sacred cosmologies. Her practice disrupts mainstream liberal feminist presumptions that identify empowerment with formal

representation in institutions and secular individual rights. Rather, this article argues that indigenous ritual leadership needs to be recognized as a legitimate political practice, one that reconfigures power in a relational, ecological, and ancestral imaginary.

Ritual as Legitimate Political Practice

The spiritual mediation motif makes explicit that the ritual practice of the *Bobohizan* is political and not merely religious or symbolic. The *Bobohizan* performs sovereign acts of reasserting cultural survival and communal integrity through ritual language, plant calling, and ancestor work. Her leadership is not based on visibility in state institutions or economic productivity, but epistemic legitimacy based on ritual expertise, land-based knowledge, and sacred temporality. This is precisely the opposite of liberal feminist norms of prioritizing access to state power, wage labor, or legal reforms as the standards of women's advancement (Mohanty, 2003).

Ritual leadership offers a new ontology of power—one that is neither hierarchical nor anthropocentric, but founded upon interrelation among human, spirit, and land. Decolonization, Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, requires a radical unsettling of settler assumptions about land, governance, and identity. The *Bobohizan* is not merely mediating material and spiritual worlds; she sustains a kind of governance that is deeply ethical, cosmological, and place based. Invocation of the land or calling upon rice spirits is not an anachronistic or marginal practice—it is a political act that reclaims Kadazandusun sovereignty and disrupts settler-colonial temporalities that frame Indigenous cultures as “pre-modern” (Smith, 2012).

This position resonates with María Lugones' (2007) decolonial theory of the *coloniality of gender*, which critiques how colonialism imposed binary and Eurocentric understandings of gender that erased Indigenous spiritual and gender complexity. The secular state and colonial gender regimes undermined the epistemic authority of women like the *Bobohizan*. Decolonially recognizing her leadership as political labour, anchored in ancestral knowledge and cosmological responsibility, disrupts this erasure. Ritual, thus, is not the opposite of politics but a decolonial site of power, memory, and resistance (Lugones, 2007; Simpson, 2014).

This paper submits that the feminist and human rights movements should reconsider their strategies in an appreciation of the viability of indigenous models of leadership and gender equality. The models are not grounded in Western notions of gender equality but are effective in their cultural context in an empowering sense and in meaningfulness. The indigenous models of leadership such as those in the Kadazandusun tribe paint a different picture of gender equality one based not on Western standards or on formalistic ways but one that acknowledges the spiritual, communal and cultural roles of women (Alcoff, 2014). In appreciating and respecting the diversity of gender systems in different societies, the feminist and human rights movements can go on to an even better appreciation of gender equality one based on context, difference in culture and women's agency in their own societies. This would not only challenge Western dominant paradigms but would also allow the marginalized voices to be heard and create space in which to discuss gender, rights, and equality in a complex and nuanced way (Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2003).

Reimagining Human Rights and Feminism: A Call for Reinterpretation

The idea that the West has an exclusive monopoly on universal human rights has also been criticized by theorists and activists who presume that human rights are dynamic and evolving set of principles adaptive to the universal character of human diversity and not a static Western-based norm (Baxi, 2002). Postcolonial feminist theorists specifically refer to the way in which Western feminism's equating of women's equality has had the effect of ignoring or distorting women's leadership and roles of agency in non-West societies. Application of Western notions of gender equality to non-West societies has the effect of distorting or undermining indigenous gender systems based on other values or an alternative focus on collective well-being or balance (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003). For example, in most indigenous societies, roles played by women in the past were leadership-based, spiritual guidance-based, or based on communal decision-making. Contrary to the individualistic and formalistic concerns of Western feminism, these societies might be based on collective well-being, balance, and respect to tradition. Indigenous societies might place high value on the role played by women as decision-makers, spiritual guides, and leadership roles but these roles might not be based on the leadership models in Western feminist discourse based on individual rights, formal equality, and political representation (Narayan, 2000; Delgado, 2013).

One such example can be seen in the Kadazandusun tribe in Sabah, Malaysia. In their religion, the Bobohizan priestesses are a class of priestesses who are powerful and lead their people. The Bobohizan are not mediators or ceremony figures but are in charge of the spiritual and communal leadership in the tribe. Leadership is based on the tribe's worldview of balance and mutually beneficial relationship between human beings and nature and the world of spirits. This leadership pattern based on equality with women in the dominant or central position is contrasted with Western descriptions of gender oppression and exclusion. For the Kadazandusun people, gender equality is framed in the context of their spirit world and worldviews of their world and not in the context of Western feminism (Borneo Post, 2021; Muecke, 2002).

Communal Leadership and Relational Power

Community governance exhibits how the *Bobohizan* functions within a relational and distributed leadership model. Her authority is not coercive but built upon trust, accountability, and deep knowledge of spiritual and natural cycles. Her practice refuses to dichotomize the social and sacred; instead, it manifests a holistic system in which healing, land care, and conflict resolution are inseparable (Battiste, 2000).

This governance model finds theoretical support in Leela Gandhi's (1998) postcolonial critique of Western individualism and liberal legalism. The *Bobohizan* enacts an alternative model of leadership that dissolves the rigid distinctions between private and public, sacred and political. Her decision-making is not institutional but communal, rooted in her perceived ethical and spiritual authority.

Moreover, the relationality of the *Bobohizan*'s governance corresponds with indigenous feminist critiques that emphasize responsibility over rights. Glen Coulthard (2014) contends that settler-state legalism tends to prioritize individual rights while neglecting land-based relational ethics. The *Bobohizan*'s governance is based on reciprocity, not only among humans,

but also with spirits, ancestors, and non-human beings. This ethics of interconnection introduces a broader, posthuman sense of political accountability (TallBear, 2011).

By doing so, the *Bobohizan* resists neoliberal and NGO-centric paradigms that reduce women's empowerment to economic productivity or legislative inclusion. Her practice embodies what Audra Simpson (2014) describes as "refusal"—an intentional disengagement from settler-state logics in favor of sovereign Indigenous ways of life. Such governance should not be dismissed as "non-modern" but understood as a complex, ethical, and culturally legitimate political formation

The Kadazandusun Tribe: Rethinking Indigenous Gender Equality Through a Cultural Lens

The Malaysian Sabah Kadazandusun is an interesting and striking example of an indigenous group in which gender equality is not simply the case but is enacted through leadership roles in opposition to the dominant discourse of patriarchy that so strongly influences non-Western societies in Western discourse. The Kadazandusun is one of the Sabah's largest of the indigenous people and constitute approximately 18% of the state's population. Their social structure is bilateral and egalitarian in which women and men are involved in decision-making and roles are not defined along gendered lines. Their social structure revolves on men and women being in respect with one another and with each other in a cooperative association and with each other in an interdependent status and emphasizes that gender roles are not structurally hierarchical or oppressive in character but complementary and equal in a specified cultural environment (Sukumar, 2007; Rani, 2014).

At the heart of Kadazandusun society is their religious system based on tradition and led by women religious heads known as the *Bobohizan*, *Bobolian*, that take care of *Tantagas* (rules). Female religious heads are highly respected in their society and are tasked with functions such as acting as mediators between the world and the spirit world to bestow well-being upon people through rituals and spiritual guidance. The *Bobohizan* has significant political, social, and cultural power and bases her power on her huge knowledge of spirits and the mediating functions in terms of significant cultural and religious rituals. Far from representative or ceremonial in character, their functions are characterized by significant decision-making power with far-reaching effects on the people's lives (Schoenfelder, 2009; Pung, 2004).

The *Bobohizan* is the senior woman spiritual leader within Kadazandusun society and has the key role to perform fertility, harvest, and curing rituals. Women perform the key roles in the people's spiritual life while also exerting considerable power over social and political matters. They basically inherit leadership through lineage and their power does not end there, they also exercise power over communal life and decision-making to the extent of exhibiting a kind of gender equality that openly defies the Western construction of indigenous societies as male-gendered (Brettell, 2000; Panak, 2010).

While the senior spiritual practitioner is referred to using the term *Bobohizan* or *Bobolian* are also referred to in the context of women in leadership but with different connotations and roles. While also a spiritual practitioner, the *Bobolian* has in contrast to the *Bobohizan* the specialist role. The *Bobolian* would specialize in specific rituals of protection or curing and would wield influence in local or smaller spaces in the local community. In some

cases, the *Bobolian* would not wield the expansive communal power wielded by the *Bobohizan* but is none the less an important element in the people's religion (Lambert, 2013; McCall, 2017). Both is respected through knowledge and spiritual leadership but perhaps has her power in localized customs or local rituals compared to communal rituals wielded by the *Bobohizan* (Schoenfelder, 2009; Sukumar, 2007).

The Kadazandusun High Priestess Leadership

Bobohizan's and *Bobolian's* leadership defies the Western stereotype of indigenous societies as oppressive and patriarchal. Gender equality can be found to be embedded in traditional customs and these women exercise powerful leadership roles that defy the perception that women in indigenous societies are marginalized or powerless. The power and respect accorded these women to exercise roles of spiritual and cultural leadership are glaring evidence of indigenous leadership structures perhaps offering alternative models of gender equality, independent of the Western feminist model (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). Western feminism, particularly in its mainstream and historical constructions, presumes a universal model of gender equality developed along Western ideals such as rights as an individual, participation in political processes, and empowerment through participation in Western processes of commerce, jurisprudence, and education (Tong, 2009; Walby, 1990). The Kadazandusun model of gender equality is an alternative construction of women's leadership and power that defies the Western feminist model.

Western feminism has maintained its focus on individual autonomy and rights as the vehicles to achieving gender equality. It sees women's participation in political life, business life, and the bench as measures of empowerment. This resonates with the individualistic character of Western societies in which individual freedom and autonomy are primary (Molyneux, 1985). This is in contrast to the Kadazandusun approach to achieving gender equality as one centred on communal and network leadership in which women's power and influence stem from their place in the community, in the household, and in the spiritual world. The *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian*, take leadership based on religious leadership and communal leadership and not on individual freedom or political power in the Western sense. This is in contrast to the Western feminist perception that empowerment has to be some kind of independent mechanism of individual success and entry into the public realm such as into political life or professional life. Rather, the Kadazandusun example shows women can be powerful and influential even if they do not conform to the Western standards of individual autonomy and professional success in public life (Mohanty, 2003). It shows leadership can be described in religious and communal terms and not in individualistic and political terms.

Western feminism aims to establish material and secular grounds on which the equality of the sexes should be based such as economic autonomy, political representation and rights in the law (Scott, 1986). However, in the Kadazandusun civilization religious leadership is paramount and the *Bobohizan* and other women religious world-views sit in leadership over public ritual and cultural life. The women are in leadership in a religious context in which women draw their power from religious understanding and cultural custom and not in political or secular contexts. This reverses the Western feminist hypothesis that secular formal power in the areas of politics and economics represents the apogee of women's empowerment. It shows that religious and cultural power can be as legitimate and perhaps more culturally relevant to its environment in some situations. By locating women's leadership in the foreground of indigenous faith and custom-based belief and rituals the Kadazandusun model shows that

women's leadership can thrive in non-secular contexts to the contrary to Western feminist idea that religion or customary power forms are either reactionary or suppressive (Chakrabarty, 2000; Spivak, 1988).

Western feminism has also been criticized on its so-called "universal" approach in assuming that the Western experience of gender inequality represents a universal one applicable to all women everywhere (Mohanty, 1988). This approach has the unintended consequence of imposing European-American ideals and values on other societies in disregard of alternative historical, social, and cultural context (Chakrabarty, 2000). The case of the Kadazandusun has defied this presupposition of one universal path to gender equality. The *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* are culturally specific representations of gender equality based on indigenous values and tradition that do not fit into Western feminist ideals but are themselves effective and empowering in their own right in the local context.

This defies the idea of Western feminism as the universal standard on gender equality. It invites a pluralist approach to feminism that responds to the diversity of experience and means of empowerment between societies (Spivak, 1988). The case of the Kadazandusun shows that gender equality is not required to follow Western ideals on empowerment but can take different forms in proportion to the cultural context.

In Western feminist ideology, equality between men and women has traditionally existed in terms of countering patriarch forces to allow women to gain power and influence. While such an analysis has some truth to it in some situations, it fails to accommodate the possibility that some roles can be power-enhancing. The leadership roles of the *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* show that women can wield power and influence in their societies in a way that does not undermine or suborn the gender roles in such societies. The roles themselves are neither considered constricting nor oppressive but are integral to the social and religious life in Kadazandusun people. Women's power is complementary to men's power but integral to the greater social order (Schoenfelder, 2009; Brettell, 2000).

The leadership of all the *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* serves to prove the socially and spiritually driven element such societies require. All these women possess an alternative complementary leadership role to exercise in the social, religious and political lives of the Kadazandusuns people.

The *Bobohizan* is the senior woman religious specialist among people in the Kadazandusun. She is held in esteem due to knowledge of the spirit and leadership in important rituals such as the fertility ceremonies, harvest festivals, and communal rituals of healing. Her power comes from her deep spirituality in the corporeal and spiritual world such that she can guide the people in matters regarding the spirit and lead them through rituals critical to the well-being of people (Schoenfelder, 2009). Her position is critical to people's spirit and cultural identification in that it indicates people's respect for balance and equality of men and women roles. The *Bobolian* is also a religious specialist but tends to perform specialized spiritual functions as a contrast to the *Bobohizan*. She can be responsible to perform curing or protection rituals of the people against evil spirits. While missing the all-encompassing religious power of the *Bobohizan*, her position in the people is also critical. She can conduct small rituals, advise people or families or assist in local ceremonies. Her power goes beyond ceremonial roles and is a result of her power to protect, cure and guide the people through more individualistic spiritual activities (McCall, 2017; Pung, 2004).

These two roles in aggregate *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* richly testify to the exercise of leadership by women in Kadazandusun society. These roles complicate the Western stereotype that indigenous societies are patriarchalism or that women in non-West societies are monolithically oppressed. Nowhere are these women passive or subordinated; on the contrary, these women are agents in themselves in their own societies, mediating the ritual, offering spiritual leadership, and influencing social life. Their power is rooted in their knowledge of the world of spirits, their mediating function between the spirit and physical world, and their function in giving life and wealth to their society (Brettell, 2000; Rani, 2014).

This leadership goes against the Western myth that indigenous societies are patriarchally oppressed and introduces an alternative history in which women had considerable power. The women who held these roles are not metaphorical, and their power was practical and real and was found in social, religious, and political domains. The roles present alternative models of gender relations in which women held leadership roles grounded in indigenous tradition and cultural practice. This goes against the conventional Western myth that indigenous societies can be described as enabling or progressive only if we can fit them into Western models of gender equality. In seeing the roles of the *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian*, it can lead to an appreciation the diversity of gender relations between societies and recognize that indigenous models of leadership such as that in Kadazandusun society left us with much to learn in terms of non-Western models of gender equality. The roles emphasize that gender relations do not need to manifest in a Western idealized way in order to be enabling. Instead, it emphasizes that cultural context, spiritual power, and community-based models of leadership are all valid means to gender equality.

In summary, the leadership of the *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* is a powerful example of women's empowerment in Kadazandusun society. Their roles demonstrate a richer conceptualization of gender equality based on local custom and practice and an alternative to Western models of feminism. By recognizing and validating these patterns of leadership, we can construct a broader and richer concept of gender equality that prioritizes multiple cultural practice and empowers women in multiple contexts. The example of the Kadazandusun tribe resists the Eurocentric presuppositions of feminist discourse as well as Western human rights discourse. By examining the roles of the women in the Kadazandusun religious practice, we can observe that the non-Western societies had long had a positive appreciation of women's leadership and participation in different forms but none the less valid. The *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* demonstrate the different ways gender equality can be exercised in different forms based on the local custom, spirituality, and social structures. This paper is an argument in favour of a richer conception of human rights and feminism that recognizes the pluralism of gender roles and patterns of leadership in indigenous societies and resists the presupposition that the Western ideals are the universal norm of equality and justice.

The imposition of Western models of human rights as universal and objective models to be exported to all societies overlooks the vast variability in gender arrangements in societies. The Western human rights model is normally based on a linear evolutionary model of social development in terms of individual rights, political participation and economic autonomy. Most indigenous societies such as the Kadazandusun are rooted in systems that emphasize communal welfare, religious unity, as well as communal responsibility. There are alternative yet no less valuable means of gender equality in these systems in which women exercise spiritual, political, and social power. For example, the *Bobohizan* is not only revered as a healer in the religious context, but also one who can exercise power in communal decision-making, an

indicator of a leadership model with gender equality as an inherent component of communal spirituality and societal life (Schoenfelder, 2009).

The Kadazandusun example forces one to question feminist and Western human rights assumptions. Both models are open to perceiving non-Western practice in terms of victim or oppression models and neglecting women's leadership and agency in indigenous societies. Western feminism traditionally has had its focus on the concept of individual empowerment to the point of ignoring that women in the majority of indigenous societies gain power and influence through communal roles, familial roles, or spiritual roles. The leadership roles played by Kadazandusun women as *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian* demonstrate that to command, to cure, and to influence do not necessarily rely on the concept of individualism in Western thinking but on communal roles that the Western feminist model is not familiar with (Pung, 2004).

This piece calls on the human rights platform to be decolonized and requires thinkers, policymakers, and activists to take indigenous knowledge systems seriously and to break away from the one-size-fits-all approach to gender equality. This means that human rights are not Eurocentric by default and that applying Western conceptions of what "gender equality" entails has a tendency to disregard the cultural context in which these are being embedded. By considering indigenous knowledge systems, we are able to create human rights instruments that take into consideration the everyday lives of other people and are compatible with the broader principles of equality and fairness.

In this respect here, the global discourse on human rights and gender equality has to go beyond the limits of a binary-hierarchic world with Western values as the norm to be emulated. Instead, it has to be one in which equality and fairness are in no way a one-size-fits-all formula but one perceived within the context of cultural values, tradition, and history. The Kadazandusun example is precisely such a powerful instance of gender equality in a context so rooted in values of spirituality, of communal care, and of respect between persons with respect to each other. The Kadazan concept of *filosofia* is rooted in the richness of local experience and in communal values of respect and spirituality. This is not one to be exported to other societies or forced upon other people but one which can be replicated if other societies are willing to accept its spirit.

Decolonizing Feminist Frameworks: Empowering Indigenous Voices and Reimagining Gender Equality

The intersectionality of power, gender, and culture is traditionally explained with language grounded in human rights theory and Western feminist thought, both with their basis in Eurocentric values. Both of these dominant discourse systems in global claims-making on gender equality are likely to overlook the diversity in leadership roles and gender arrangements in non-Western societies. The Kadazandusun people, an indigenous Malaysian people whose indigenous knowledge systems are based on alternative conceptualizations of leadership, spirituality, and gender equality, are a case in point. Examining women's roles in the Kadazandusun religious and cultural systems of the *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian*, this paper attempts to subvert the constraints of Western feminist thought and human rights approaches. This paper argues in favour of an expanded feminist theory and human rights approach based on indigenous knowledge systems and ultimately calls for the process of decolonizing gender equality frameworks globally.

Indigenous knowledge systems are also a powerful counter-discourse to dominant Eurocentric paradigms in mainstream feminist discourse. Mohanty (2003) argues that Western feminist theories tend to impose upon women in non-Western societies a homogeneous model of gender equality that does not capture the diversity of women's lived lives. Indigenous knowledge systems cut through such paradigms with their recognition of pluralities in women's roles and identities in different societies. The Kadazandusun example shows that women's roles as religious practitioners such as the Bobohizan can be read centrally as such in their societies with power and influence rooted in spirituality and not in formal political or economic roles. This is different from the Western tendency to confine empowerment to political participation and individual freedom (Lugones, 2007).

Gendered Power-Disruption and Epistemic Reclamation

The gendered power-disruption emphasizes how the *Bobohizan* challenges normative gendered expectations in both Indigenous and colonial contexts. While patriarchal elements exist in Kadazandusun society, the *Bobohizan's* continued centrality reveals the persistence of gender egalitarian or matriarchal traditions that colonialism failed to fully erase (Sodhy, 2004). Rather than interpreting these through Western feminist frameworks that assume universal patriarchy, they must be understood as culturally specific articulations of gendered authority.

The *Bobohizan* enacts what Kim TallBear (2011) calls “relational belonging”—a form of authority rooted in interdependence, ancestral wisdom, and care. Her power does not derive from domination or control but from stewardship, healing, and the ethical transmission of spiritual knowledge. This mode of power challenges Eurocentric categories like “female leadership” or “feminist activism” and instead calls for epistemologies that honor Indigenous worldviews (Simpson, 2017).

Her work also destabilizes the epistemic hierarchy that privileges written law and formal institutions over oral tradition and ritual knowledge. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that decolonizing research requires a fundamental transformation of knowledge validation. Valuing the *Bobohizan's* ritual labor as both intellectual and political subverts the dichotomies of politics/religion and reason/myth. Her role is not one of heritage preservation alone—it is an act of epistemic reclamation in a world that has historically silenced Indigenous women's voices (Grande, 2004). This is not a romantic return to a mythic past, but an affirmation of a living indigenous futurity—one grounded in ancestral principles yet responsive to contemporary realities. The *Bobohizan's* leadership is simultaneously historical and future-oriented, presenting a vision of feminist politics that is land-based, ecological, and spiritually engaged.

CONCLUSION

This paper has engaged critically with the limitations of dominant feminist theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by bringing to the fore the lived lives and leadership of Kadazandusun women leaders—the *Bobohizan* and *Bobolian*, of Sabah, Malaysia. These leaders embody a form of spiritual and collective power that offers a compelling counterpoint to Eurocentric definitions of gender equality and empowerment. Rather than measuring progress in terms of formal political enfranchisement or abstract individual rights, Kadazandusun ritual leadership is in collective flourishing, sacred duty, and ecological balance. *Bobohizan's* ritual labour, relational leadership, and subversion of colonial

gender binaries articulate a decolonial feminist ethics in opposition to liberal individualism. Not only is she a rightful leader, but leadership from her is needed in reimagining what feminist power can do when grounded in land, cosmology, and ancestral knowledges. Towards this end, this research affirms that ritual is not separate from politics but is a kind of political practice in and of itself, one based on epistemic legitimacy, relational accountability, and intergenerational reciprocity.

These findings require a pluralistic and culturally sensitive formulation of human rights and feminist theory that not only recognizes indigenous systems of gender equity not as exceptions, but as worthwhile and legitimate paradigms in themselves. Rather than press for inclusion into colonial systems, decolonial feminist practice sets alternative modes of being, of knowing, and of leading. The policy and research implications for the future are substantial. Perhaps we will have to go back and reinterpret human rights texts in a language that includes non-Western ontologies, namely those that prioritize collective and spiritual bases of power. Scholars, activists, and policymakers must move toward indigenous knowledge systems not as add-on but integral to an expanded and more inclusive conception of gender justice. Last, this study urges a shift from prescriptive feminist theories of empowerment toward a richly situated, culturally located understanding of gender equality that honours women's everyday lives in diverse contexts. As we open ourselves up to epistemic difference and decolonize our theoretical and political vocabularies, we move toward achieving justice that is truly global, inclusive, and transformative.

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