

## The legend of Tolangohula: The forgotten female leader of Gorontalo before the European Colonial period

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### ABSTRACT

Folk tales, such as myths and legends, generally contain the wisdom of their people, which can serve as a reflection of constructing a society today. Generally, myths and legends in Indonesia feature women as important characters. In Indonesian myths and legends, women are often associated with the origin of places or the emergence of certain plants. The Gorontalo people have a legend about the first female leader in the region, *Tolangohula*. This female leader united small kingdoms under her authority. This research aims to reconstruct the existence of female leaders in Gorontalo in the past, which have been forgotten through the oral literature of the Gorontalo people. This reconstruction is expected to explore the role and values of female leadership in legends so that these leadership values can serve as a basic example for the formation of leadership character, especially in Gorontalo, through its rich oral literature. This reconstruction is also expected to demonstrate how Gorontalo society positioned women as leaders in the past. This study uses representation theory to demonstrate how female leaders are represented in Gorontalo's folk legends. The oral tradition as history was employed in this study's method. This method demonstrates that oral stories from the folk can serve as a benchmark for delving into the cultural history of a region that does not have a written tradition in their society culture. The findings demonstrate that the legends about female leaders were being forgotten from the interviews with some people in Gorontalo. The representation of female leaders through legends is positioned within the discourse after the colonial era. Despite this, the values of female leadership have left a legacy that aids in the development of a leader's character.

**Keywords:** legend; tolangohula; female leadership; oral tradition as history

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Myths and legends have long been cultural reservoirs that store social values, historical memory, and cultural identity in many communities. Oral traditions have served as a crucial mechanism in Indonesia for the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge, cultivation of cultural identity, and maintenance of communal cohesion (Braginsky, 2004). In this context, women frequently play important roles as fertility goddesses, rulers, and founders of dynasties. As exemplified by Dewi Sri, the rice goddess revered in Javanese and Sundanese traditions, and Dayang Sumbi from the Sundanese Sangkuriang cycle, female figures are profoundly integrated into agrarian, cosmological, and social conceptualizations (Fitrahayunitisna et al., 2022; Nurjannah et al., 2025; Zahro et al., 2020).

These depictions highlight the tendency of Indonesian oral traditions to encapsulate female agency and authority, offering viewpoints that contrast with those found in patriarchal written histories. Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the dual role of oral literature as both a source of mythological narratives and a means of sociocultural record-keeping (Reid 1988a, 1988b). In Southeast Asia, oral traditions maintain cosmological frameworks and embody specific historical events, including instances of female political authority (Andaya, 2023; Reid, 1988a). The existence of female rulers in premodern polities such as Aceh, Patani, and Java challenges the enduring notion of a homogeneous patriarchy in the region (Andaya, 2023). Various experts' research demonstrates that the legalization of women's positions of authority occurred both ritually and politically.

The oral traditions of Gorontalo in northern Sulawesi recount Tolangohula, a woman regarded as a uniting monarch whose story combines legendary origins with institutional power (Von Rosenberg, 1865). The documentation in colonial records still preserves this memory despite the legend's significant erosion within its society. In the larger Southeast Asian context, historical records and folk legends show that it was common for women to be rulers.

Tolangohula was considered as the first female ruler in Gorontalo based on oral stories and colonial records. She was the first woman to lead, and the first queen to unite the smaller kingdoms under one government. Based on Von Rosenberg's writing (1865), the legend told that local chiefs from nearby areas chose her as the supreme ruler, which gave her power in a consensual way. Nevertheless, in one version of the story, folktales tell that Tolangohula is linked to the stories of Lake Limboto (Baga, 2013). People say that Mbu'i Bungale was the ruler of the lake area at one time, and that she was the daughter of Mbu' i Bungale. The story says that Mbu'i Bungale made a spring that grew into a large body of water, which became the lake. According to native Gorontalo, Tolangohula came forth as a daughter from her precious diamond, *bimelula*, which she had placed near the spring to designate her territory. She then became the first king of Limboto, starting a line of monarchs in the area. In another version of this oral history, Tolangohula was an honorary title for Mbu'i Bungale, which means that the two names refer to the same person.

Von Rosenberg (1865, 69-70) narrated a variation of this oral tradition that altogether excludes Mbu'i Bungale, concentrating exclusively on Tolangohula. In his version, the mythology is about how the Kingdom of Limboto was founded. At the time, it was thought to have come before the Kingdom of Gorontalo, even though both kingdoms existed simultaneously. At that time, four main Limboto settlements—Tilawa, Donggala, Boetayo, and Timilito—came together on their own and tried to find a leader. Since there was no good choice, a ceremonial basket (*mand*/in Dutch) was honored as the king, and gifts were placed on either side of it. The sequence of offerings determined which leaders held power. The order of the offerings decided which rulers were in charge of the ceremony. The main villages were split into "Right Kimelaha" and "Left Kimelaha" based on their proximity to the basket. People were unhappy with this arrangement, which led to a new mythology.

In Von Rosenberg notes, one old ruler found a very big egg near the lake, and when it hatched, it revealed a beautiful woman, and the folk named her *Talanggoboelan*. People saw her miraculous birth as proof that she was chosen by God, and she became the highest ruler. After her, the leadership of Limboto and Gorontalo was passed down to her descendants. Von Rosenberg noted that "*Talanggoboelan*" means "moonlight" in the local language, and that she held the title of *vorst*, or king. In Dutch, *vorst* usually means

"male ruler," and *vorstin* means "queen." However, Von Rosenberg seems to have translated the Gorontalo word *olongia* (*raja*) into Dutch. It is important to note that in Von Rosenberg's version, he referred to the *vorst* with the subject pronoun "ze" (it means "she" in English).

In Gorontalo's ancient times, *olongia* may have referred to both male and female rulers, indicating a cultural context where leadership was not confined by gender. This linguistic distinction indicates that Gorontalo society, from its initial cultural development, adopted a democratic ethos (Haga, 1981) and did not display gender bias in leadership. The Gorontalo language divides things into two groups: male and female ones. However, the word *olongia* might be used more generally to refer to female rulers. Oral legends also state that Tolangohula was not the only female ruler in Gorontalo.

According to the oral histories of the people (Riedel, 1870, 104), several additional women wielded political power in different regions during the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Riedel's records, which are based on oral history, even list the names of the queens and the places they ruled over. In his notes, he referred to them as "*vorstin*," using the Dutch term. There was only a five-year gap between Riedel and Von Rosenberg. Von Rosenberg's records go back to 1863 and 1864, while Riedel's account was from about 1866 to 1867. However, Riedel provides a more complete and in-depth description of Gorontalo's oral history. Von Rosenberg's work was mostly about the natural environment of Gorontalo, whereas Riedel's work was more about the region's history and culture.

The main point of the Tolangohula tale is that the first monarch of Gorontalo was a woman who brought together several small kingdoms and started a royal lineage. Nevertheless, leadership in Gorontalo was not hereditary; it was established by a consensual selection procedure. This incident demonstrates that women can be elected in Gorontalo based on their abilities. However, the Tolangohula descendants maintained their legitimacy as kings. This story shows that women can be in charge and that Gorontalo's political culture is based on democratic principles.

Even though these kinds of people were well-known in oral history, colonial and postcolonial histories have often hidden stories about women leaders in Indonesia, because colonial records usually wrote only the legends, but folk stories spread various versions of the same. Since they are spread orally, they are vulnerable to being forgotten. Colonial chroniclers frequently reinterpreted and adapted Indigenous terminology in their accounts, often through a Eurocentric lens, thereby masculinizing or altering its original meaning (Reid, 1988a). For example, the Gorontalo term *olongia*, which denotes "ruler" irrespective of gender, was translated in colonial reports as "king," thus obscuring the gender-neutral nature of power inherent in its indigenous context. This translation not only obscured the existence of female rulers but also reinforced the imposition of patriarchal authority within indigenous political structures. Furthermore, in the postcolonial period, nationalist discourses often emphasized male heroism and leadership, further marginalizing women's roles in the reconstruction of cultural and political history (Amini, 2018; Blackburn & Ting, 2013).

The current research has two main goals: to explore how oral traditions can help us understand the historical importance of women's leadership in Gorontalo and to investigate why these stories are often missing from later historical records. The Tolangohula legend provides a focal point for analyzing the content of oral literature and the processes that have contributed to the marginalization of women's authority in the literature. This inquiry is situated within the broader debates concerning memory politics, gender dynamics, and cultural representation within postcolonial frameworks. Consequently, this prompts questions regarding the methodologies for recovering cultural history and its impact on contemporary Indonesian leadership values.

To find a general solution to these research inquiries, we need to examine both the folk stories themselves and trace their presence in colonial historical documents to reconstruct the perspective that women's leadership has always been present. Researchers have established strategies for interpreting oral traditions as historically significant texts capable of safeguarding political memory with mythological symbolism (Finnegan, 2012; Vansina, 1985). Conversely, postcolonial and women's studies highlight the importance of a thorough examination of colonial translations and nationalist narratives, which have significantly reshaped the understanding of these traditions (Loomba, 2005; Spivak, 1999). These

viewpoints suggest that a thorough reassessment framed within wider socio-historical contexts is crucial for comprehending women's leadership in oral traditions, extending beyond simple transcription.

Within the Indonesian and Southeast Asian contexts, previous research has demonstrated how oral narratives and chronicles serve as repositories for the histories of female leaders, particularly the queens of Aceh during the seventeenth century and the queens of Patani from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries (Andaya, 2023). These examples demonstrate that female leadership was not unusual but represented a recognized political structure within the cultural and historical contexts. Examinations of Javanese and Balinese traditions also highlight the integration of female authority into cosmological and dynastic structures (Sastrawan, 2017; Wiyatmi, 2023). These findings offer valuable comparative evidence, thereby demonstrating the significance and relevance of Gorontalo's Tolangohula within the wider Southeast Asian framework of gender-inclusive leadership.

Conversely, unlike Aceh or Patani, Gorontalo lacks substantial official documents or inscriptions to substantiate its claims. The legacy of Tolangohula and other female leaders is mainly preserved through oral tradition, along with colonial records and linguistic studies. This difference in available sources has led to academic discussions of Gorontalo's women leaders. Consequently, a substantial gap persists regarding the historical role of female authority in northern Sulawesi, its relationship with wider Southeast Asian patterns, and its significance for modern interpretations of gender and leadership. This study endeavors to rectify this deficiency by reconstructing the Tolangohula legend and contextualizing it within the social, political, and cultural history of Gorontalo. Through oral narratives, colonial records, and textual analysis, this study argues that Gorontalo's oral traditions validate the legitimacy of female rulers and the inclusivity of leadership positions.

By reconstructing the legend of Tolangohula and placing it in the context of Gorontalo's social, political, and cultural history, this study closes the gap. Using oral stories, colonial records, and word analysis, the study states that Gorontalo oral traditions demonstrate that women were legitimate rulers and that leadership was open to all. The analysis further posits that colonial and postcolonial interpretations, which imposed patriarchal structures instead of Indigenous cultural paradigms, contributed to the weakening of narratives about women's agency. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on memory, cultural identity, and gender in postcolonial settings. It also offers culturally relevant ideas that can be used in modern leadership programs in Indonesia. By recovering and reinterpreting Tolangohula's story, this study serves as both a revisiting of the exclusion of women in historical narratives and material for envisioning inclusive leadership models in contemporary contexts.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs oral history methods, representation theory, and postcolonial critique to explore the historical significance of women's leadership in Gorontalo, particularly through the Tolangohula legend. This research begins with the idea that oral traditions are more than just cultural artifacts; they also contain historical information. Based on Vansina's work on oral tradition (Vansina, 1985), oral narratives are seen as both evidence and cultural texts. Therefore, these narratives must be carefully examined, their sources verified, and compared with existing archival documents. This approach combines historical analysis with cultural insights, offering a more profound understanding of the subject. It is also aware of the risks of misinterpretation, translation bias, and selective memory.

Primary data were obtained from contemporary oral tales gathered from members of the Gorontalo community, including elders, village heads, and local storytellers. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were used to document narrative performance, linguistic usage, and community context. These narratives were subsequently augmented by archival research, particularly Von Rosenberg's (1865) colonial travel records, which preserve early variants of the Tolangohula legend. Other sources include ethnographic records, regional histories, and comparative studies on female leadership in Southeast Asia (Reid 1988a, 1988b). These materials helped the study place Gorontalo in a larger political and cultural context.



Oral sources were examined using Vansina's criteria for source criticism, which required tracking the variants of the stories and evaluating their internal consistency and chronological plausibility. Finnegan (2012) focused on performance and mnemonic techniques, enriching the approach and acknowledging that oral traditions are influenced by context and delivery. Different versions of the Tolangohula narrative were combined to find stable themes, such as her coming from a magical pearl or egg and being considered the first unifying ruler. These thematic elements are central to the essence of the collective memory. This comparative methodology maintains the symbolic richness inherent in oral traditions while mitigating their inherent unpredictability.

To examine the representation of leadership and gender within oral and written narratives, Stuart Hall's (1997) constructionist model of representation was employed. This perspective views myths and legends as sites for the construction, negotiation, and contestation of meanings pertaining to gender and authority. Consequently, Tolangohula's representation is not understood as a mere reflection of social reality, but rather as a discursive construction that encompasses cultural values, cosmology, and legal frameworks. The colonial translation and interpretation of *olongia* as *vorst* ("king") in Von Rosenberg's notes (1865) exemplifies how patriarchal discourse redefined indigenous categories, thus obscuring women's authority. This study uses feminist folkloristics (Kousaleos, 1999) to examine the encoding, erasure, or reassertion of gendered authority across many versions of the story.

However, this interpretive approach was inherently subject to methodological difficulties. Oral traditions are susceptible to alterations stemming from memory, performance, and the political context. The absence of chronological markers presents a challenge in dating events, while symbolic components such as divine approval or miraculous origins can obscure historical veracity. Furthermore, colonial translations introduced external frameworks that reshaped Indigenous understandings, thereby introducing interpretive bias (Finnegan, 2012; Vansina, 1985). To mitigate these constraints, triangulation was employed as the primary methodological strategy, interpreting discrepancies not merely as inaccuracies but as manifestations of cultural negotiations and power relations.

It was particularly effective to compare oral traditions with provincial chronicles and colonial archives to reconstruct the past. Von Rosenberg's travel account, notwithstanding its inherent prejudices, contains initial mentions of Limboto genealogy and ceremonial practices that align with present-day accounts. A comparative analysis of oral traditions and these written documents reveals both the continuities and transformations in the representation of women's leadership. This study, in line with Reid's (1988a) emphasis on the necessity of incorporating both indigenous and external perspectives in Southeast Asian historical analysis, utilized material culture, toponyms, and linguistic evidence, including the application of *olongia*, to support its claims. The apparent inconsistencies between oral and colonial sources were, therefore, examined not as shortcomings, but rather as indicators of discursive shifts brought about by colonial and nationalist reinterpretations of the past.

The analytical methodology entailed the documentation and translation of oral narratives, a process that was validated through repeated consultations with Gorontalo speakers to ensure both accuracy and cultural sensitivity. Textual analysis facilitated the identification of key motifs and genealogical assertions, whereas performance analysis focused on narrative presentation, audience interaction, and mnemonic cues. Representation analysis illuminated the evolving construction of female roles and leadership authority. Furthermore, the comparative examination of oral and archival sources enabled the reconstruction of Tolangohula's leadership, achieving both historical accuracy and cultural relevance.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. All participants provided informed consent, and the principles of co-ownership and openness informed the data collection and interpretation processes. Sensitive or restricted narratives were documented only with explicit permission; in many cases, they were summarized rather than directly transcribed. To respect local authority and shared memories, a participatory method was used. This involved giving community members the chance to review and confirm the transcripts and interpretations.

This study presents a methodological framework for uncovering the overlooked histories of women's leadership in postcolonial settings, integrating oral tradition analysis, representation theory, and archival triangulation. Oral literature, when subjected to thorough examination and contextual

understanding, proves to be a reliable historical source, while representation theory clarifies the ways in which discursive power has suppressed female agency. This methodology, by situating oral narratives within the broader framework of colonial archives and regional cultural practices, not only reconstructs a more complete historical account but also contributes to wider academic endeavours in folklore, gender history, and political anthropology. These endeavours are focused on challenging cultural homogenization and fostering the revitalization of local historical identities.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Result

##### 3.1.1 Tolangohula's Leadership in Oral Traditions: Historical and Cultural Evidence of Female Rulership

The oral cultural history of Gorontalo contains clear stories about Tolangohula (also rendered as *Talanggoboelan*) as a founding ruler. Local versions from the Limboto area say that she was not only the first person to bring minor kingdoms together, but also a progenitor of successive rulers (Baga & Usu, 2023; Von Rosenberg, 1865). She became a part of Gorontalo society's genealogical and political memory. These oral narratives indicate that the Gorontalo polity recognized women in the highest positions of leadership within the community.

Colonial travel narratives offer corroborating evidence as well. Von Rosenberg's 1865 observations, for instance, identify Tolangohula as a significant individual within Limboto genealogies. Although these accounts are subject to distortions stemming from translation and European interpretive biases, they nevertheless confirm the enduring presence of a female ruler figure in Gorontalo's historical memory (Baga & Usu, 2023; Von Rosenberg, 1865). Linguistic evidence further substantiates this reading: the Gorontalo leadership term *olongia* carried no inherent gender markers, reflecting a flexible conception of authority that allowed women to be recognized as rulers.

Historical records also prove that female leaders were usual in time before the arriving of European, as we can refer to the report of Padtbrugge (Leupe, 1867). He visited Gorontalo region in the year of 1677 to meet the reign of Limboto, who was a female ruler. The report as follows in Dutch:

*Zaterdag 25 September. Kwamen met den dag de gevolmagtigden van Gorontale, bestaande uit de Goegoegoes, Kapitein-Laut, enz. Den Gouverneur werd hunne komst bekend gemaakt en met eene hunnen last, om namelijk met de Koningin van Limbotto te mogen vergaderen en aanhooren zoodanige voorstellen als den Gouverneur mogt komen te doen (Leupe, 1867, 150)*

The quote says that on Saturday, September 25th, Padtbrugge met the Gorontalo plenipotentiaries, who were the *Goegoegoes*, *Captain Laut*, and others who came that day. The Governor received word of their arrival and their purpose: to confer with the Queen of Limbotto and discuss any proposals the Governor wished to put forth.

Padtbrugge's account indicates that Gorontalo had a queen in the 1600s. This monarch was the ruler; she participated in official government sessions alongside the Governor of the Moluccas and Ternate. The text further notes that Limboto, mirroring Gorontalo's structure, was governed by a dual kingship during that period, comprising an "old king" and a "young king." It is important to note that the younger king was a queen.

Padtbrugge's report, written in 1677, is more than a hundred years older than Von Rosenberg's work from 1865. Padtbrugge uses the Dutch word "*koningin*," meaning "queen," to describe the queen. In contrast, Von Rosenberg uses the term "*vorst*," which translates to "sovereign" or "monarch," in his description. By the time Von Rosenberg lived, the queen was no longer remembered as a real person who ruled, but simply as a tale. Unfortunately, Padtbrugge did not disclose the name of the queen. However, his account of the two rulers, one of whom was a woman, is almost exactly like the legend written down by Von Rosenberg

At that time, it wasn't unusual for women to hold positions of power in Sulawesi. Padtbrugge also met the Queen of Boelang-Itan (now Bolangitan in North Sulawesi) on his long trip around the island (Leupe, 1867). This observation corresponds with broader historical analyses of female leadership in Southeast Asia, which demonstrate that since the sixteenth century—prior to the colonial era—women rulers were a recurrent phenomenon across the region (Amirell, 2011; Andaya, 2023; Ozay, 2011; Sastrawan, 2017). These oral, textual, and linguistic elements collectively substantiate the conclusion that Gorontalo's political tradition historically permitted female leadership. The story of Tolangohula strongly goes against the idea that all pre-modern Southeast Asian nations kept women out of political authority.

### 3.1.2 Representations in Different Oral Forms

In many versions of the legend, Tolangohula always comes back in strange and magical ways. In one common account, she was born from a magical jewel (*bimelula* or *mustika*) (Baga, 2013), and in another, she hatches from a huge egg. Both images stand for divine or supernatural legitimacy (Von Rosenberg, 1865). This version also cited by Riedel (1870), but in Riedel version, Mbui Bungale who found the egg, not the old king. Regardless of the differences, both accounts agree on her ritual recognition by community leaders, confirming her as the unifying authority of the Gorontalo polities. Additionally, she is strongly linked to sacred geography, particularly to Mbu'i Bungale, a goddess associated with Lake Limboto.

This connection highlights the connection between political power and the ritual control of land and water resources (Baga, 2013; Baga & Usu, 2023). A different interpretation of the legend suggests that Mbu'i Bungale and Tolangohula are, in essence, the same figure, with Tolangohula representing an honorific title for Mbu'i Bungale. The designation "Tolangohula," translating to "moonlight," strengthens the notion of her rule as both triumphant and illustrious, mirroring the moon's luminosity. Moreover, the term "Mbu'i" frequently appears in Gorontalo folk narratives to signify a queen or princess, thereby accentuating her elevated position within the cultural framework.

Oral traditions, despite preserving indigenous categorization, underwent colonial reinterpretation, wherein European counterparts were imposed; for example, indigenous leadership titles frequently gave way to "king" or "queen," thereby masking gender-neutral characteristics. This comparative examination demonstrates that Tolangohula's portrayal consistently integrated religious and political facets, notwithstanding the patriarchal distortions introduced by European influence. Her narrative of leadership, characterized by both supernatural endorsement and political acumen, solidified her significance within Gorontalo's political identity.

### 3.1.3 Symbolic components and strengthening of authority

Symbolic elements surrounding Tolangohula's birth, whether a diamond, an egg, or the child of a lake goddess, serve important legitimizing functions. Vansina (1985) and Finnegan (2012) have shown that legendary elements in oral traditions act as memory aids, linking political claims to a larger cosmic or divine context. In Gorontalo, Tolangohula's extraordinary origins served to legitimize her governance by situating it within a framework of cosmological beliefs, thereby affirming her leadership as divinely sanctioned. These symbolic components also functioned as rhetorical tools. Narrators and later leaders could utilize Tolangohula's exceptional beginnings to validate their authority, especially during times of village unification or conflicts concerning resource allocation. Notwithstanding the potential obscuring of ceremonial language in colonial translations, the enduring presence of motifs such as jewel-birth or lake-goddess descent highlights the indigenous rationale that supported female power (Finnegan, 2012; Vansina, 1985). Consequently, these components illustrate that symbolic birth transcended mere myth, operating as a proactive political mechanism that reinforced women's claims to rulership.

### **3.1.4 Socio-political Context of Gorontalo Leadership: Political Frameworks Facilitating Female Sovereigns**

Gorontalo's political structure during the 14th to 16th centuries combined lineage-based claims with deliberative councils, creating a system of shared power. The *olongia* was not an absolute ruler; instead, they were a leader chosen by agreement among the *Bantayo Poboide*, a council of chiefs from different communities (Haga, 1981). This system allowed exceptional individuals, including women, to gain leadership through legitimacy based on consensus and ceremonial authority, rather than just through inheritance. Comparative studies of Sulawesi show that this flexibility was not unique to Gorontalo.

In the region, leadership structures emerged through alliances, kinship networks, and the management of sacred sites, where legitimacy was subject to negotiation rather than being exclusively determined by male ancestry (Andaya, 2023; Haga, 1981; Leupe, 1867). Within this context, oral histories suggest that Tolangohula could ascend to a position of legitimate authority, implying that Gorontalo society established mechanisms for female leadership.

Furthermore, Gorontalo's advantageous position along Tomini Bay placed it at the nexus of active maritime networks connecting Sulawesi and its surrounding regions. Archaeological and historical investigations reveal that these networks facilitated the exchange of goods, people, and ideas, including political practices. Gorontalo's ruling elite, through commercial and diplomatic activities with adjacent territories, frequently cemented alliances via matrimonial alliances or ceremonial exchanges; this fostered the integration of diverse legitimacy models, including matrilineal and sacred queenship traditions (Hasanuddin, 2019; Sekarningrum & Hasanuddin, 2023). Consequently, these inter-island engagements influenced Gorontalo's leadership models by introducing regional customs that allowed for female leadership within local governance frameworks. The similarities between Gorontalo's Tolangohula story and accounts of female leaders in Southeast Asia suggest that cultural exchanges helped women gain leadership roles in northern Sulawesi.

### **3.1.5 The Vanishing of Women Leaders' Narratives: Colonial Interpretations and Translation Bias**

The colonial authorities' documentation of Gorontalo's oral traditions, which involved translation, precipitated a shift in the local classification systems. The substitution of indigenous terms with their masculine European counterparts by colonial writers obscured the historical presence of female leadership. Consequently, this practice facilitated the marginalization of women's perspectives within the archival records. Studies of Oral Tradition have shown that this translational bias systematically altered indigenous political categories, imposing European gendered frameworks that rendered female rulers historically invisible. For example, Von Rosenberg's translations of "*olongia*" as "king" not only masculinized the character but also diminished the narrative's inherent flexibility. Consequently, later historians, drawing upon these translated materials, continued to propagate this patriarchal perspective, thus omitting women from Gorontalo's political narrative. The term "*olongia*" serves as a prime illustration of Gorontalo's non-gendered understanding of political power. Unlike European titles such as "king" or "queen," which clearly indicate gender, the term "*olongia*" was used as a gender-neutral title for the highest-ranking leader. Colonial powers, by equating the term with Dutch equivalents such as "*vorst*," effectively masculinized it, thus masking its original neutrality. Contemporary linguistic investigations corroborate that "*olongia*" was employed without distinction to denote both male and female rulers, implying a political structure characterized by egalitarian principles. In this system, legitimacy derived from consensus and ceremonial validation, rather than from gender. The semantic breadth of "*olongia*" corroborates the historical existence of female leadership, thereby reinforcing the claim that Gorontalo culture recognized women as both capable and legitimate leaders.

Moreover, throughout the twentieth century, accounts of women in positions of authority were persistently sidelined. Modernization, which included formal education, migration, and the spread of print media, replaced oral traditions as the main way culture was passed down. As a result, the decline of oral traditions led to a decrease in the oral sharing and collective memory of female rulers, like Tolangohula.



Furthermore, nationalist historiography intensified this marginalization by prioritizing male political figures as the nation's founders and heroes. Consequently, state-sponsored educational initiatives institutionalized historical interpretations that favoured patriarchal perspectives, thus undermining the acknowledgment of women's accomplishments. Simultaneously, reformist religious factions propagated gender norms that exalted male authority, which further diminished the likelihood of preserving accounts of female monarchs.

### **3.1.6 Patriarchal Discourse and Narrative Obliteration**

Colonialism, the establishment of formal education systems, and the subsequent formation of postcolonial governments contributed to the entrenchment of patriarchal ideologies, thereby reinforcing historical narratives that privileged male viewpoints. As a result, the dominance of written documentation as the primary vehicle for historical comprehension favoured accounts that either minimized or distorted the significance of women's contributions. This institutional bias, in turn, resulted in the omission of women from the collective historical narrative. Conversely, current research within women's studies and heritage initiatives has initiated measures to counteract this historical omission. Initiatives focused on documenting oral traditions, community archiving, and intangible heritage have contributed to the recovery of previously obscured narratives. These efforts highlight the importance of oral traditions in preserving diverse memories, and they also show how women can reclaim leadership roles within the historical context of Gorontalo society.

## **3.2 Discussion**

This study's findings highlight the importance of the Tolangohula story in preserving Gorontalo's cultural memory. Furthermore, the study illuminates the representation of women within the oral traditions of Southeast Asia. The consistent portrayal of a female ruler in Gorontalo's oral traditions challenges the dominant assumption of a uniformly patriarchal structure in pre-modern regional societies. Conversely, data derived from oral traditions, colonial records, and linguistic analyses suggest a more intricate political landscape, one that both accommodated and validated female leadership.

Historical and cultural data extracted from oral traditions supports the significance of Tolangohula in Gorontalo's genealogical narratives. These spoken narratives act as living documents, preserving memories while also explaining the cultural reasons that supported leadership, with a particular focus on female leaders. This observation resonates with prevailing patterns observed in Indonesian oral traditions, where women frequently occupy symbolic positions of significance within social frameworks, embodying roles such as ancestors, moral paragons, or supernatural beings, as demonstrated by figures like Dewi Sri and Dayang Sumbi. Consequently, Tolangohula reflects a wider Southeast Asian phenomenon, wherein women are integral to the interconnectedness of cosmology, societal organization, and political authority.

Colonial accounts, despite the inherent bias introduced by translation, nonetheless provide indications of Gorontalo's recognition of female leadership. Von Rosenberg's 1865 documentation highlights the ancestral recollection of Tolangohula, while simultaneously reframing it within European paradigms that often-associated leadership with masculinity. This misrepresentation exemplifies a broader colonial pattern, wherein indigenous political structures were inaccurately transposed onto European gendered hierarchies, resulting in the historical erasure of female rulers. Similar patterns of historical erasure have been documented throughout Southeast Asia, where colonial and nationalist accounts have often overlooked women's roles, despite their significance in oral histories.

The symbolic elements of Tolangohula's creation myth—originating from a diamond, an egg, or a lake goddess—exemplify the literary techniques employed to validate political power. These mythic components align with the perspectives of Vansina (1985) and Finnegan (2012) who contend that oral traditions embed political assertions within cosmological frameworks. These recurring themes served to normalize authority by placing leadership within a cosmic framework, thus portraying it as divinely sanctioned. It is essential to understand that these symbolic components were not merely passive myths;

instead, they functioned as active political tools utilized to reinforce legitimacy, especially during times of political bargaining and strife. Their enduring presence within oral traditions suggests a cultural approach to legitimizing women's leadership through cosmological endorsement, a feature observable in various Southeast Asian traditions of sacral queenship (Andaya, 2023).

Furthermore, the institutional arrangements of Gorontalo politics provide additional insight into the feasibility of female leadership. The title of *olongia lo lipu* was given based on agreement within the *Bantayo Poboide*, a council of village leaders, rather than through strict inheritance (Haga, 1981). The process of discussion allowed for leadership based on legitimacy, which came from ritual approval and community agreement, rather than being determined by gender. Researchers (Andaya, 2023; Ng, 2018) have found similar systems of negotiable legitimacy in Sulawesi and Southeast Asia, often allowing for female leadership. As a result, this political flexibility in Gorontalo created institutional pathways that enabled individuals like Tolangohula to gain prominence.

Regional and inter-island interactions significantly influenced Gorontalo's political landscape. Its strategic location along Tomini Bay facilitated connections with neighboring societies, including those in the Philippines and Maluku, where documented instances of female leadership and sacred queenship were present. As a result, these interactions may have contributed to the acceptance of female leadership within Gorontalo. Comparative analyses indicate that the Malay sultanate of Patani institutionalized queenship for more than a century, and Aceh underwent a protracted "Era of the Queens" throughout the 17th century (Andaya, 2023; Ng, 2018; Ozay, 2011). These examples demonstrate that Southeast Asian political systems did not uniformly exclude women, and Gorontalo's oral histories can be understood as part of this wider regional trend.

Furthermore, the linguistic data concerning the term *olongia* supports this interpretation. *Olongia* was gender-neutral, meaning it could be used for both male and female kings (Haga, 1981). It is a departure from the titles used by European royalty. The colonial adoption of this term, equating it with "*vorst*" (king), demonstrates how European perspectives obscured indigenous gender-neutral systems of authority. The gender-neutrality of "*olongia*" supports the idea that Gorontalo society recognized leadership potential regardless of gender, mirroring widespread Southeast Asian patterns of non-gendered power structures. The decline of women's leadership narratives throughout the twentieth century illustrates the marginalization of oral traditions amid cultural and political transformations. Modernization, the expansion of print culture, and the influence of nationalist historiography prioritized written records, consequently diminishing the significance of oral histories, especially those pertaining to female monarchs. Furthermore, religious reform movements reinforced patriarchal structures, thus discouraging the preservation of narratives that celebrated women in positions of power. As a result, the historical record largely ignored women's leadership, a pattern that reflects broader trends in patriarchal historical writing in postcolonial settings.

On the other hand, the continued presence of Tolangohula's story in oral traditions highlights the lasting power of different ways of remembering. Modern women's studies scholarship and heritage efforts have endeavoured to reclaim these narratives, framing oral traditions as counter-archives that challenge the homogenization of national histories. In this context, oral literature serves both as a repository of local memory and to restore suppressed identities, contest homogenizing historical narratives, and validate multiple channels of authority (Finnegan, 2012; Vansina, 1985). These actions align with widespread postcolonial critiques, which advocate for a reevaluation of colonial translations and nationalist narratives that have often excluded the contributions of indigenous women in leadership roles.

The revival of Tolangohula's story is significant for current leadership models and the formation of identity in Indonesia. Including indigenous women leaders in educational programs and community stories helps create new role models. These role models then challenge the usual ideas about leadership, which have historically favored men. Ethno-pedagogical research suggests that integrating indigenous knowledge into educational contexts fosters civic virtues such as empathy, accountability, and community involvement (Rattu, 2019). Therefore, the revival of stories such as Tolangohula's offers both symbolic and practical means of fostering inclusive leadership.

Furthermore, this study contributes to wider conversations concerning memory and identity within postcolonial studies by demonstrating how oral traditions can furnish crucial historical evidence of women's impact. The revival of Tolangohula's memory serves as a prime example of how oral literature can function as a counter-archive, thereby contesting the patriarchal biases inherent in colonial and nationalist historical narratives.

This research critically assesses prevailing perspectives on gender and power dynamics within Southeast Asia, with a specific emphasis on the gender-neutral elements present in political concepts such as *olongia*. This methodology facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the region's political landscape. Furthermore, the analysis clarifies the interconnections between Gorontalo's oral traditions, symbolic representations, political structures, and linguistic classifications, thus underscoring the historical significance of female leadership. Moreover, it reveals the marginalization of these narratives stemming from colonial translation, contemporary influences, and patriarchal viewpoints, while also recognizing current efforts to revive them. This study positions Tolangohula within the broader context of Southeast Asian viewpoints on female leadership. It emphasizes the significance of oral traditions, serving as both historical documentation and instruments for reassessing leadership and identity in contemporary Indonesia.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This investigation reveals that Gorontalo's oral traditions offer substantial evidence of female political leadership, particularly exemplified by Tolangohula. Oral narratives and symbolic representations collectively validate her authority, positioning her as a political unifier and a sacralized entity whose legitimacy was grounded in cosmological beliefs and ritualized remembrance. The employment of gender-neutral terminology, such as *olongia*, suggests that Gorontalo's political framework permitted female rulers, thereby contesting the prevailing notions of exclusively patriarchal systems in premodern Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, the analysis emphasizes the socio-political contexts that facilitated women's authority, encompassing deliberative councils, consensus-driven governance, and interactions with inter-island networks that normalized alternative legitimacy models. Comparative analyses situate the Gorontalo example within a broader Southeast Asian context characterized by adaptable gender roles in positions of authority, simultaneously underscoring Gorontalo's particularity, wherein oral traditions, as opposed to formal institutional records, constitute the principal source of evidence.

Simultaneously, the suppression of women's perspectives, arising from colonial translation practices, 20th-century cultural marginalization, and patriarchal structures, underscores the vulnerability of oral traditions when faced with institutionalized historical narratives. As a result, the re-emergence of these previously marginalized viewpoints contributes to ongoing academic discussions about memory, identity, and gender within postcolonial studies.

By restoring Tolangohula's story and its inherent symbolism, this research adds to the existing scholarship on Southeast Asian political cultures, oral traditions, and feminist historical analysis. Future investigations should broaden comparative analyses across Sulawesi and the surrounding region, while simultaneously fostering pedagogical applications that incorporate women's leadership narratives into civic education and community heritage initiatives.

#### **Ethical approval**

Ethical approval was not required for this study

#### **Informed consent statement**

Informed consent was not obtained for this study

#### **Disclosure statement**

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