

Islamic Communication Ethics Between Son-in-Law and Mother-in-Law in the Rebu Customary Tradition the Suffering in Jaranguda Village, Merdeka District, Karo Regency

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Accepted: June 2025
Revised: July 2025
Approved: August 2025

Kata Kunci:
Tradisi
Rebu Ngerana
Adat Karo
Komunikasi Islam

Keywords:
Tradition
Rebu Ngerana
Karo Custom
Islamic Communication

ABSTRACT

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui Bagaimana etika komunikasi Islam digunakan di Desa Jaranguda, Kecamatan Merdeka, Kabupaten Karo. Dimana adat Rebu merupakan larangan atau tabu dalam berbicara antara mertua dan menantu perempuan dan juga antara mertua lawan jenis terutama saat acara adat di daerah tersebut. Penulis penelitian Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif dengan jenis penelitian kualitatif yang menggambarkan bagaimana praktik terjadi dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Data diperoleh melalui observasi dan wawancara. Selanjutnya, penyajian dan analisis data diceritakan secara deskriptif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat Karo meyakini bahwa adat Rebu Miserable selaras dengan ajaran Islam dalam menjaga keharmonisan keluarga melalui etika komunikasi yang baik, sehingga dapat membangun hubungan keluarga yang harmonis dan damai. Kesimpulan penelitian yaitu Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa adat Rebu Miserable memiliki keharmonisan yang signifikan dengan etika komunikasi dalam Al-Qur'an, terutama dalam menjaga keharmonisan keluarga melalui komunikasi yang efektif dan harmonis, sehingga dapat menjadi landasan untuk membangun hubungan keluarga dan masyarakat yang harmonis dan sejahtera

Abstract: This study aims to explore the Islamic communication ethics used in Jaranguda Village, Merdeka District, Karo Regency, particularly in relation to the "Rebu" custom, which prohibits or taboos certain forms of communication between in-laws and co-siblings-in-law of the opposite sex, especially during traditional events. The study employs a descriptive qualitative research method, which describes the practical application of the custom in daily life. Data was collected through observation and interviews, and then presented and analyzed descriptively. The results show that the Karo community believes that the Rebu Ngerana custom is in line with Islamic teachings in maintaining family harmony through good communication ethics, thereby building harmonious and peaceful family relationships. In conclusion, this study finds that the Rebu Ngerana custom has significant alignment with communication ethics in the Quran, particularly in maintaining family harmony through effective and harmonious communication, and can serve as a foundation for building harmonious and prosperous family and community relationships.

I. Introduction

Islamic communication has increasingly become a field of interest among academics at various universities, driven by the awareness that Western communication theories are not always relevant to Islamic cultural and religious contexts. This has led to efforts to formulate communication

approaches rooted in Islamic values, ensuring that communication practices align with the ethical and moral foundations of Islam (Akbar, 2017)

Communication itself is an integral aspect of human life as social beings. Within these interactions, ethics plays a central role in fostering harmony and mutual understanding. Ethics represents the norms and values agreed upon within a society, serving as guidelines for human behavior and directing individuals toward what is considered proper and beneficial (Sari, Sari, Si, & Sari, 2020). According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), morality is defined as "good or bad behavior or character," indicating that morality can be either positive or negative, depending on the conduct of an individual. In the Islamic framework, however, morality (akhlak) is more specifically understood as "commendable traits or characteristics that define a person," highlighting the significance of cultivating virtuous behavior as part of one's identity and spiritual integrity.

Understanding and practicing moral values are therefore essential for shaping noble character and achieving success in life. Morals and ethics, while often perceived as interchangeable, are distinct in focus. Morality is concerned with the behavioral values expressed in daily life, while ethics deals with the fundamental principles, obligations, and standards that determine what is considered good for humanity (Sari, Sari, Si, & Sari, 2020)

Ethics are also closely tied to customs, as customs form the social foundation upon which ethical norms often rest. Ethics provides a philosophical reflection on customary practices, while customs themselves serve as unwritten societal rules that maintain harmony, solidarity, and collective identity through rituals and shared traditions. Although modernization and globalization present challenges that can weaken traditional practices, many communities continue to preserve and adapt their customs to contemporary contexts (Turyani, Suharini, & Atmaja, 2024)

One community that illustrates this dynamic is the Karo people, who uphold numerous traditions inherited across generations. Among these is the *Rebu* tradition, which prohibits direct interaction between in-laws and daughters-in-law of the opposite sex. This custom is regarded with high respect and remains a significant aspect of daily life as well as ceremonial events (Annisa, 2024).

The existence of the *Rebu* custom demonstrates the community's commitment to maintaining familial harmony. Its underlying purpose is to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts that might arise from interactions between in-laws and daughters-in-law. To achieve this, communication is often facilitated through a mediator, ensuring that exchanges remain respectful and effective. As noted by Hutagalung and Pelawi (2020), the *Rebu* custom emerged from historical experiences of familial tension and has since functioned as a cultural mechanism for sustaining peace, strengthening kinship bonds, and fostering communication rooted in respect and restraint.

يٰۤاَيُّهَا نِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ لَسْتُنَّ كَأَحَدٍ مِّنَ النِّسَاءِ ۚ إِنِ اتَّقَيْتُنَّ فَلَا تَخْضَعْنَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَيَطْمَعَ الَّذِي فِي قَلْبِهِ مَرَضٌ وَقُلْنَ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا ﴿٣٢﴾

It means : O the wives of the Prophet! You No like other women , if You be pious . Then don't You submit (weaken) soften sound) in speak so that rise the desires of existing people disease in his heart , and say it good words.

Surah Al-Ahzab verse 32 emphasizes the importance of ethical speech, particularly for the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). This verse serves as a guideline for speaking with dignity, kindness, and politeness. At the same time, it provides a warning not to speak in a tone that is overly soft, coquettish, or artificial, as such behavior may attract the attention of those with diseased hearts. In a broader context, this verse can be interpreted as a universal principle, guiding Muslims to communicate with respect and integrity in all situations while avoiding styles of speech that might lead to slander, misinterpretation, or temptation. By understanding and practicing these ethics of speech, individuals can cultivate harmonious and effective relationships in both personal and social life.

The study of the Rebu Ngerana tradition in the Karo community offers a different perspective compared to previous research. Earlier studies identified two main factors behind the shifting practice of this tradition. The first are internal factors, such as the lack of understanding and socialization of the tradition, as well as the erosion of cultural values within the community. The second are external factors, including modernization, globalization, environmental changes, economic pressures, and political developments, all of which have contributed to the transformation of this practice (M, 2020)

Research by Puja Khairani further elaborates on the specific parties involved in rebu. These include, first, rebu between a son-in-law and father-in-law (bengkila); second, rebu between a son-in-law and mother-in-law (mami); and third, rebu between a son-in-law and siblings-in-law (turangku). In addition, Khairani identifies several prohibitions associated with this tradition, such as rebu ngerana (prohibition on speaking), the prohibition of sitting side by side, the prohibition of sitting on the same mat, and the prohibition of eating together during traditional celebrations (puja khairani, 2024)

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to understand how communication ethics are practiced between sons-in-law and in-laws, both in daily interactions and during traditional ceremonies. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on identifying the actors involved in rebu or classifying its prohibitions, this research specifically highlights the role of Islamic communication ethics. In doing so, it aims to provide a deeper explanation of how Islamic communication principles can be applied within the cultural framework of the Karo tradition. This comparative perspective not only sheds light on the interplay between religion and culture but also underscores how both serve as complementary resources for maintaining family harmony and strengthening social cohesion within the community.

II. Research Methods

This study employed qualitative methods with a descriptive approach to examine and characterize the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition in the Karo community, particularly in Jaranguda Village, Merdeka District, Karo Regency. The use of a qualitative methodology was intended to understand the meaning of *Rebu Ngerana* and the ways in which this tradition is practiced within Karo society.

Data were collected through fieldwork that combined participant observation and in-depth interviews. The researcher conducted interviews with four informants who were directly involved in or knowledgeable about the practice of *Rebu Ngerana*. Prior to data collection, the researcher engaged in preparation and briefing sessions with the selected informants to establish rapport and ensure clarity in the research process.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, data validation techniques were applied. These procedures were essential to minimize potential errors, reduce ambiguity, and strengthen the accuracy of the information gathered. By employing these methods, the study was able to present findings that are both accurate and trustworthy, thereby offering valuable insights into the role and significance of the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition in the Karo community.

III. Results and Discussion

A. Results

Social constructionism illustrates that values, ideologies, and social institutions are human creations, and their impact often requires time to be fully understood. For example, in the past people believed that the Earth was the center of the universe, but Galileo later demonstrated that the Sun held that position. His view contradicted dominant beliefs of the time, leading many to label him insane and ultimately resulting in his imprisonment (Ngangi, 2011)

The theory of social construction developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann is among the most influential in sociology. They argue that social reality is the product of construction, a process in which individuals and groups create meaning and interpret the world through ongoing

social interaction. Their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), became the foundation for this perspective. It explores how individuals and societies collectively construct understandings of reality through continuous processes of interaction and communication. Since its publication, Berger and Luckmann's framework has been applied across various disciplines to explain how social reality is shaped and how individuals make sense of the world (Gusti, 2021)

This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for analyzing the *Rebu* tradition. The *Rebu* practice exemplifies how social realities are constructed and sustained within communities. As a social product, the tradition embodies moral values and serves as a behavioral guide in social relations. It emerges and persists through the repeated interactions of individuals and groups, gradually becoming embedded within the community's accepted norms. In this way, the *Rebu* tradition demonstrates how social construction shapes cultural practices that both regulate and preserve social harmony.

The term *ethics* derives from the Greek words *ethos* and *ethikos*, meaning character, behavior, or custom. In its broadest sense, ethics refers to the principles that guide human conduct. Within the realm of communication, communication ethics are understood as the values, norms, and guidelines that regulate human interaction, whether face-to-face or mediated through technology. Communication ethics are essential for establishing harmonious and effective relationships between individuals and groups. Practicing these ethics enhances the quality of interaction, fosters mutual understanding, and minimizes unnecessary conflict. Importantly, communication ethics are not uniform but are shaped by cultural and traditional contexts. Each society cultivates its own communicative norms, making cultural awareness vital for achieving harmony and meaningful relationships (Naingolan, 2024)

Islamic communication, in this respect, can be defined as the process of conveying messages rooted in Islamic values, employing appropriate language, tone, and delivery. It encompasses all dimensions of Islamic teaching, including *aqidah* (faith), *sharia* (law), and *akhlak* (morality). At its core, Islamic communication manifests through *da'wah*—the effort to guide individuals toward adherence to Islamic teachings. *Da'wah* involves not only persuasion but also wisdom, empathy, and a commitment to embodying the values one communicates. Its ultimate goal is to encourage behavior aligned with the path that pleases Allah SWT (Farida, 2020)

The role of good communication in building positive relationships and fostering cooperation cannot be overstated. When communication ethics are practiced consistently, interactions improve in quality, relationships are strengthened, and societal cohesion is maintained. Conversely, neglecting communication ethics often results in misunderstandings, conflicts, and social division. Language, as a central component of communication, profoundly shapes human interaction; positive and ethical language has the power to influence behavior and attitudes in daily life. For this reason, mastering effective and positive communication is indispensable for nurturing constructive relationships (Naingolan, 2024)

In the Qur'an, ethical communication is emphasized through several guiding principles, often framed as *qaulan* (forms of speech):

- **Qaulan Ma'rufa (القول المعروف)** – Good speech, characterized by politeness, courtesy, and adherence to norms of decency (QS. Al-Ahzab: 32; QS. An-Nisa: 5, 8).
- **Qaulan Sadida (القول السديد)** – Truthful words, reflecting honesty and alignment with reality (QS. Al-Ahzab: 70).
- **Qaulan Layyina (القول اللين)** – Gentle speech, marked by kindness and the avoidance of offense (QS. Taha: 44).
- **Qaulan Baligha (القول البالغ)** – Effective speech, delivered with clarity, precision, and persuasive strength (QS. An-Nisa: 63).
- **Qaulan Karima (القول الكريم)** – Noble words, demonstrating respect, kindness, and moral excellence (QS. Al-Isra: 23).

These Qur'anic principles provide a moral and practical framework for ethical communication. They emphasize that communication is not merely an exchange of information but a moral act that reflects one's faith, values, and respect for others. When practiced, these principles foster mutual respect, harmony, and justice in both personal and social life.

The term *Rebu* in this context refers to a taboo or prohibition against certain actions, while *Ngerana* means speaking or communicating. Thus, *Rebu Ngerana* can be interpreted as a prohibition on speaking or communicating in particular situations. Within Karo culture, *Rebu Ngerana* functions as a customary rule with specific meanings and purposes. Violating this prohibition is considered an act of ignorance toward tradition and a disregard for cultural norms (Yunus & Maria, 1995).

The *Rebu Ngerana* tradition carries deep and complex meaning within the Karo cultural framework. Beyond restricting individual freedom, this tradition reminds members of the community to remain mindful of social principles in family life. Through understanding and observing *Rebu Ngerana*, the Karo people preserve harmonious relationships and practice good manners in interpersonal interactions. This tradition also raises awareness of the importance of respect and balance in social relations.

1) Origins of the Rebu Tradition



Fig. 1. The Siwaluh Jabu House

The *Rebu* tradition is rooted in the historical and cultural practices of the Karo people. One of its earliest contexts can be traced to the *Siwaluh Jabu* house, a traditional communal residence that accommodated eight families. To ensure harmony and prevent misunderstandings within such close living arrangements, the Karo developed a system of rules known as *Rebu*. These rules serve as guidelines for instilling respect, morality, and politeness in daily interactions. Individuals who violate *Rebu* are labeled *la radat*—those ignorant of custom—and may be subject to public ridicule. This underscores the central role of *Rebu* in shaping social and cultural values, as well as its continuing importance in maintaining balance and harmony within Karo society (M, 2020).

2) Parties Bound by Rebu

According to Karo custom, three specific kinship relations are subject to *Rebu*: 1) Between a mother-in-law (*mami*) and son-in-law (*kela*). 2) Between a father-in-law (*bengkila*) and daughter-in-law (*pernwin*). 3) Between in-laws of opposite genders.

These three groups hold vital roles in the enactment of traditional customs, especially during wedding ceremonies. Each group occupies a distinct position, yet their roles are interdependent and must be understood collectively to ensure the smooth conduct and sanctity of customary events. Maintaining harmony among these groups is therefore essential for the success of traditional rituals (Hasibuan, 2021)

3) Implementation of *Rebu* Among Relatives



Fig. 2.and 3. The *Naruhken* Ceremony

The practice of *Rebu Ngerana* is closely associated with marriage, which creates new kinship ties and necessitates specific rules of etiquette in communication. *Rebu* applies to three relational dynamics: daughters-in-law with fathers-in-law, sons-in-law with mothers-in-law, and in-laws of opposite genders (Yadi, 2020)

The tradition begins during the *Naruhken* ceremony, a customary event in which the bride and groom are formally introduced to the groom's family and residence. During this occasion, the couple seeks permission and offers apologies to both sets of parents. Once the groom requests blessings and forgiveness from the bride's parents, and the bride reciprocates toward the groom's parents, the *Rebu Ngerana* prohibitions are officially ratified. From that moment onward, the communication restrictions between in-laws take effect as part of married life.

4) Forms of *Rebu* in Karo Customs

The *Rebu Ngerana* tradition manifests in several specific prohibitions: a) Speech Restrictions – Verbal interaction between fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law and sons-in-law, as well as in-laws of opposite genders is limited. This rule safeguards politeness and prevents potential misunderstandings. b) Sitting Arrangements – In-laws are prohibited from sitting side by side. Daughters-in-law, for instance, are expected to lower their gaze and avoid direct physical proximity to their in-laws as a sign of deference and respect. c) **Shared Seating (Mats)** – Fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law are prohibited from sitting together on the same mat. While mats are generally used as communal seating during ceremonies, specific seating rules are enforced to preserve decorum and balance in family relationships.

Through these prohibitions, *Rebu Ngerana* reflects the Karo people's commitment to preserving politeness, respect, and social harmony within extended family structures.

B. Discussion

One of the informants, Mr. Usaha Purba, explained that the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition continues to function as a strong mechanism for preserving family ties in the Karo community. He emphasized that the relationship between in-laws of the opposite sex, commonly referred to as *turangku* (the husband of an older sibling and the wife of a younger sibling) is particularly bound to the *rebu* rules, with these individuals showing the greatest commitment to upholding the tradition.

From the perspective of the Islamic community, the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition is seen as closely aligned with religious teachings. According to Nurhartania Belle, when speaking to parents or in-laws, one must use polite language and respectful words, which reflects both Islamic principles and Karo customs. She observed that the tradition of *Rebu Ngerana*, which emphasizes manners and respect toward parents and in-laws, is consistent with Islamic values that stress devotion, kindness, and politeness in family interactions. Thus, both Islam and the *Rebu* tradition work together in reinforcing values of respect and social harmony.

Another informant, Mrs. Nur Afni Barus, highlighted that ethics and religion are both central in shaping social behavior. She argued that the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition draws influence from religious teachings, particularly those that emphasize ethical conduct toward parents and in-laws. For example, she noted the importance of modest dress and polite speech when interacting with in-laws, underscoring that both religion and tradition operate hand in hand in cultivating respectful family relationships.

Similarly, Mrs. Suryati Ginting stressed that the *Rebu* tradition helps individuals maintain politeness while also strengthening unity and kinship within families and the broader community. She explained that by implicitly regulating human behavior, the *Rebu Ngerana* custom encourages the development of good manners and mutual respect among family members, especially in-laws.

The research findings also demonstrate that the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition is consistent with Islamic communication ethics, particularly the principle of *qaulan ma'rūfa*—speaking good, polite, and appropriate words. In the Qur'an, Allah commands believers to communicate with *qaulan ma'rūfa*, which refers to speech that adheres to norms of decency, avoids offensive expression, and respects the feelings of others. For instance, in Surah An-Nisa (verses 5 and 8), Muslims are instructed to use words that are appropriate, respectful, and beneficial. This parallel shows that Karo customs and Islamic teachings converge in their shared emphasis on courteous communication, family harmony, and the cultivation of ethical social behavior.

وَلَا تُؤْتُوا السُّفَهَاءَ أَمْوَالَكُمُ الَّتِي جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَمًا وَارْزُقُوهُمْ فِيهَا وَاكْسُوهُمْ وَقُولُوا لَهُمْ قَوْلًا مَعْرُوفًا ﴿٥﴾

Meaning : And do not give the weak-minded your property, which Allah has made a means of sustenance for you, but provide for them with it and clothe them and speak to them words of appropriate kindness. (An-Nisa : 5)

وَإِذَا حَضَرَ الْقِسْمَةَ أُولُو الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينُ فَارْزُقُوهُمْ مِنْهُ وَقُولُوا لَهُمْ قَوْلًا مَعْرُوفًا ﴿٨﴾

Meaning : And when [other] relatives and orphans and the needy are present at the [time of] division, then provide for them [something] out of the estate and speak to them words of appropriate kindness. (An-Nisa : 8)

IV. Conclusion

This study concludes that the communication ethics embedded in the customs of the Karo people, particularly the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition, demonstrate a strong alignment with the ethical principles of communication outlined in the Qur'an. Specifically, QS. An-Nisa verses 5 and 8 underscore the importance of speaking in a manner that is good, polite, and respectful, values that are also reflected in the practice of *Rebu Ngerana*. Within the Karo community, this custom serves as a means of preserving family harmony through respectful, cautious, and effective communication.

The findings highlight that the ethical communication values embodied in the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition are not only consistent with Islamic teachings but also provide a cultural framework for fostering harmonious and prosperous family and community relationships. In this way, the *Rebu Ngerana* tradition exemplifies how indigenous cultural practices can converge with religious values, reinforcing each other to strengthen social cohesion. Such integration demonstrates that traditional customs can serve as living models for the application of Qur'anic communication ethics in daily life, ensuring that respect, politeness, and harmony remain central to social interaction.

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LIST OF INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

- Mr. Usaha Purba, Interview at his home, on Sunday, May 4, 2025 at 8:00 PM
- Mrs. Suryati Ginting, Interview at her home, on Sunday, May 4, 2025 at 8:00 PM
- Mrs. Nur Afni Barus, Interview at her home, on Monday, May 5, 2025 at 9:00 PM
- Nurhartania Belle, Interview at Her Home, Tuesday, May 6, 2025, at 7:00 PM