



## **A Christian Ethical Perspective on Extramarital Sexual Practices in the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* Culture of the Sabu Community**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Premarital sex in the Sabu tribe's *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* culture posed social challenges due to lenient customary sanctions, conflicting with Christian ethics on sexual holiness; this study addressed the knowledge gap in transforming such cultural practices through biblical principles. The study examined Christian ethical perspectives on premarital sex within the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* tradition to propose cultural reconstruction. The research focused on the Sabu community in Sabu Raijua Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. A literature review was conducted, supplemented by secondary interview data from customary leaders and pastors, to analyze cultural practices and Christian ethics descriptively. Sabu customary law inconsistently sanctioned premarital sex leading to *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* children (12 cases, 2019-2022), viewing them as blessings, while Christian ethics deemed such acts sinful. Christian ethics condemned premarital sex as violating God's holiness; recommendations included church collaboration with elders for stricter sanctions and comprehensive spiritual education for youth. The study offered practical strategies for cultural transformation, enhancing Christian influence on Sabu tradition to deter premarital sex and promote biblical sexuality.

**Keywords:** Ana Bui Pa Kepue; Sabu community; Christian Ethics; Cultural Transformation

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country rich in cultural diversity. Etymologically, the term *culture* derives from the Sanskrit word *buddayah* (the plural form of *buddhi*), meaning intellect or reason (Fitzgerald, 2017). Culture may also be defined as the product of human ideas and creative works (Koendjaraningrat, 2015). These ideas and works shape systems of thought related to science, philosophy, economics, politics, theology, and history (Tanuwidjaja & Uda, 2020). Such systems give rise to artistic expressions, rituals, and values that are transmitted across generations and become markers of identity.

Christianity is inseparable from culture. It examines culture as a reflection of faith as it is lived out in everyday life (O'Callaghan, 2017). God created human beings in His image and likeness, and as rational beings, humans possess the capacity to create culture. Culture, therefore, should be understood as a human response to God's sovereignty (Tanuwidjaja & Uda, 2020). The challenge lies in how to engage with cultural values that conflict with Christian ethics.

On the island of Sabu in East Nusa Tenggara, there exists a cultural practice known as *Ana Bui Pa Kepue*, which welcomes the birth of a child conceived outside of marriage. The Sabu community believes that the birth of an *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* brings fortune or blessing to the family that raises the child (Djami & Mariano, 2023). Sexual intercourse outside of marriage, however, violates Christian ethical teaching. This stands in tension with the Sabu community's acceptance of individuals who give birth to an *Ana Bui Pa Kepue*. In fact, extramarital sexual intercourse is traditionally considered a violation of customary law and is subject to social consequences (Sioh, 2020). Nevertheless, individuals who give birth to an *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* do not receive customary sanctions (Djami & Mariano, 2023). This acceptance contrasts sharply with the Christian perspective, which clearly identifies sexual intercourse outside of marriage as sin. Therefore, this study examines Sabu customary law concerning extramarital sexual intercourse in dialogue with Christian ethics and explores its implications for the continuity of the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* cultural practice.

Previous studies have examined various aspects of Sabu cultural traditions. Research conducted by Sooi and Qisty (2021) explores Sabu culture as it continues to uphold ancestral belief systems known as *jingitiu*. Other studies focus on cultural practices related to family life within the Sabu community. Sioh (2020) for instance, investigates the *Kenoto* tradition, a customary Sabu marriage system that emphasizes respect for parents, love, togetherness, and mutual appreciation. Dju Bire et al. (2023) examine the cultural practice of returning widows to their families (*kad'di*) following the death of their husbands as an expression of familial compassion. These findings support the study by Latumahina and Wibowo (2024), which argues that Sabu family-centered cultural values significantly contribute to the emotional recovery of single mothers after the loss of their spouses. Collectively, these studies highlight the central role of family in Sabu society. This emphasis is also reflected in research on the customary law of *Ana Bui Pa Kepue*, which regulates parental responsibilities and inheritance rights (Soruh, 2023). Furthermore, S. Ndolu et al. (2024) recommend that the Sabu community,

religious leaders, and traditional authorities reform customary legal systems to better protect the rights of *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* children. Djami and Mariano (2023) analyze this cultural practice from a Christian ethical perspective, particularly concerning the community's acceptance of children born outside of marriage. Building on these previous studies, the present research examines extramarital sexual relations within the context of the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* tradition from the perspective of Christian ethics. This study aims to offer recommendations for improving Sabu customary law regarding sexual relations outside of marriage in relation to the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* cultural practice.

## METHOD

This study employs a literature review approach. A literature review involves the systematic collection of theories and information from relevant scholarly sources related to the research topic (Gilbert et al., 2018; Starcher et al., 2018). The analysis of the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* cultural practice was further supported by interview data from: (1) traditional elders in East Sabu District, Sabu Raijua Regency, as documented by Soruh (2023); (2) customary elders in Pedarro Village, Sabu Mesara, as reported by Djami and Mariano (2023); and (3) a pastor from GMIT Sesawi Lederaemawide Church (Djami & Mariano, 2023). These data were reduced and organized to focus specifically on the phenomenon of sexual relations outside of marriage within the context of *Ana Bui Pa Kepue*. The findings were then presented in a descriptive narrative outlining the position of Christian ethics toward the phenomenon examined within the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* cultural practice. This study ultimately offers practical recommendations for addressing extramarital sexual relations in this cultural context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Sabu Community and the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* Cultural Practice

The Sabu people are among the ethnic groups that continue to preserve customary traditions in their daily lives. They inhabit Sabu Island in Sabu Raijua Regency, East Nusa Tenggara (perkim.id, 2022). In 2022, the population included 92,294 Protestant Christians (BPS Kabupaten Kupang, 2022). Despite the widespread presence of Christianity, the Sabu community continues to maintain ancestral beliefs known as *jingituu* (Sooai & Qisty, 2021). The *jingituu* belief system holds that everything on earth originates from *Deo Ama* (God the Father), who nurtures and sustains all life (Kristin & Gabriella, 2023; Wila et al., 2025). Family bonds also play a central role in Sabu society. The kinship system is traced through both paternal (*udu*) and maternal (*hubi*) lineages (Uly & Radja, 2015). The *udu* lineage represents family clans and social status, while *hubi* reflects the life cycle, including marriage and death (Uly & Radja, 2015). These ancestral beliefs and family values strongly influence the performance of Sabu customary rituals.

One cultural practice found in Sabu society is *Ana Bui Pa Kepue*. The term derives from the Sabu language: *ana* (child), *do bui* (to fall), and *pake pu'e* (from a tree) (Djami & Mariano,

2023). This designation refers to children born as a result of sexual relations outside of marriage, as the male party (*udu*) is considered unable to assume responsibility. Consequently, the child is raised by the maternal side (*hubi*) and their family (Soruh, 2023). Under customary law, *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* children thus obtain kinship affiliation and inheritance rights from the *hubi* lineage (Ndolu et al., 2024). Based on Soruh's interviews with traditional elders in East Sabu District, Sabu Raijua Regency, twelve cases of *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* were recorded between 2019 and 2022 (Soruh, 2023). These data indicate that extramarital sexual intercourse continues to occur on Sabu Island.

According to Djami and Mariano (2023) there are two primary factors contributing to sexual intercourse outside of marriage within the Sabu community, particularly in Pedarro Village, Sabu Mesara. The first factor, described by Pastor Origenes of GMIT Sesawi Laderaemawide Church, is the *padoa* tradition. This tradition serves as a social gathering for young people over several days, which often fosters romantic attraction and may lead to inappropriate behavior (Djami & Mariano, 2023). The second factor, as noted by Moses, a customary elder, is the excessive freedom granted by parents in adolescent dating relationships (Djami & Mariano, 2023). Under customary law, couples who engage in sex outside of marriage are subject to social dishonor (Sioh, 2020). However, such sanctions are not applied to individuals who give birth to *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* children, as these children are believed to bring blessings and material benefit to the family (Djami & Mariano, 2023). This situation reflects a degree of leniency within Sabu customary law toward acts of extramarital sexual intercourse.

### **Culture and Christian Ethics**

The concept of culture was established by God from the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:28). God indirectly brought culture into existence through His created beings—humanity (Mawikere & Hura, 2022). Unlike divine truth, however, culture is a limited human creation. This limitation is reflected in the absence of an absolute standard of cultural truth (Tanuwidjaja & Uda, 2020), whereas God's truth is absolute. The task of Christianity, therefore, is to purify and rationally evaluate culture (Jatmiko, 2020). Christian values call humanity to greater obedience to God rather than to cultural norms (Tanuwidjaja & Uda, 2020). Consequently, cultural transformation is necessary so that traditional values do not conflict with Christian ethics.

The cultural mandate given to humanity to glorify God was corrupted when human beings fell into sin. Culture then became a means for pursuing personal honor, which led God to confuse human language and scatter people across the earth (Genesis 11:1–8). The restoration of the cultural mandate is revealed through the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. Through His redemptive work, Jesus removed barriers between nations and languages, and the Great Commission—to make disciples of all nations—represents a process of cultural transformation (Matthew 28:19–20; Bowman, 2003).

The application of Christian ethics in cultural transformation is also exemplified in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Paul reinterpreted the concept of an “unknown god” into the true knowledge of God (Acts 17:22–31; Sirait, 2024). In proclaiming the Gospel, Paul adapted his approach to local cultural contexts (1 Corinthians 9:19–22; Kuncoro et al., 2022). This contextual engagement enabled the Gospel to be received, take root, and grow among its hearers.

Christian ethics guide believers to live in full obedience to God while not positioning themselves in total opposition to culture. Christianity is called to exist and exert positive influence within cultural contexts. When Christian ethics are embodied within culture, the message of salvation can be communicated in ways that are understood, accepted, and lived out according to local contexts (Mawikere & Hura, 2022). Believers thus express Christian ethics as salt and light within society, engaging cultural values without adopting a posture of judgment.

### **A Christian Ethical Perspective on Sexual Intercourse Outside of Marriage**

The primary standard of Christian ethics is the holy moral character of God. God’s holiness is absolute and allows no exceptions for those who violate it (Grudem, 2018). Christian ethics functions as a moral safeguard, guiding human beings to live in holiness. The presence of Christian ethical teaching awakens individuals to live lives grounded in the Word of God and centered on Jesus Christ, fully submitted to God’s sovereignty, marked by gratitude for divine grace, governed by principled living, and shaped by proper life priorities (Long, 2010; Walle, 2017). This ethical awareness leads believers to turn away from sin. Consequently, the scope of Christian ethics extends beyond truth, morality, and goodness to include discernment between sinful and righteous conduct.

#### ***God’s Holiness as the Norm of Christian Ethics***

The central standard of Christian ethics is the holy moral character of God—an absolute norm that permits no exceptions for those who transgress it. This understanding involves a deeper theological reflection on *hagiasmos* (sanctification or holiness) as an ethical principle that surpasses mere legal obedience. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonian church, the sanctity of believers’ lives is situated within an eschatological framework—preparation for the coming of Christ (*parousia*) (Cutter, 2025; Walle, 2009). Christian ethics teaches that believers must live with continual awareness of God’s absolute holiness. As a result, moral life is not simply the fulfillment of external laws but an internal transformation of character that reflects the image of God. Holiness (*hagiasmos*) is not merely the rejection of sin but a positive affirmation of total devotion of one’s life to God (Kim, 2024).

#### ***Foundations of Christian Ethics: Scripture, Christ, and the Sovereignty of God***

Christian ethics calls human beings to live lives grounded in the Word of God and centered on Jesus Christ, fully submitted to the sovereignty of God, marked by gratitude for divine grace, governed by principled conduct, and shaped by proper life priorities. This ethical awareness leads individuals to turn away from sin. In this sense, the scope of Christian ethics

encompasses not only truth, morality, and goodness but also discernment between sinful and righteous behavior (Bryson, 2024).

This ethical framework is grounded in the understanding that the Christian life is a response to God's redemptive grace in Christ. Christian ethics, therefore, is not a form of legalistic moralism, but a response ethic rooted in the experience of salvation.

### ***Marriage as the Sacred Context for Sexuality***

Sexual intercourse within marriage is holy and good—sexuality is a gift of God within the marital relationship. This understanding challenges theological traditions that have often viewed sexuality as intrinsically inferior or merely biological. Instead, within a more holistic Christian theology, sexuality is recognized as an integral dimension of God's good creation (*tov* in Genesis 1) (Havryliuk, 2024).

Within the Pauline corpus, particularly in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul offers instruction regarding marital intimacy grounded in mutual love and partnership. His counsel emphasizes that spousal love is expressed through reciprocal responsibility and authority, one expression of which is sexual intimacy. This perspective demonstrates that sexuality within marriage is not simply a biological function oriented toward reproduction, but a covenantal expression of love and mutual commitment (Prusak, 2024).

### ***Marital Sexuality as a Covenantal Expression***

In the Christian tradition, marriage is understood as a sacred covenant—not merely a social contract, but a spiritual commitment involving the presence of God. Within this covenant, sexuality acquires profound theological meaning: it becomes a symbol of spiritual union and fidelity in communion with God. In Ephesians 5:21–33, Paul employs the metaphor of marriage to portray the relationship between Christ and the Church, indicating that marriage carries eschatological spiritual significance.

Sexuality within marriage should thus be understood as the bodily expression of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as a “life shaped by God”—a life that reproduces within human relationships the total love and self-giving (*kenosis*) of God (Lantz, 2025; May, 2025). In this way, marital sexuality functions sacramentally—not in a formal sacramental sense (as in Catholic tradition), but as a tangible sign and means through which God's grace is mediated within intimate relationships (Smith, 2023).

### ***Moral Boundaries in Marital Sexuality***

Sexual relations within marriage are holy and good. Sexuality is a gift from God within the marital relationship (Allender & Longman III, 2024). Marriage involves a communion grounded in love. Paul teaches that love between husband and wife is expressed through the fulfillment of mutual responsibilities and authority, one expression of which is sexual intimacy (Zubairu, 2024). Sexual intercourse is also to be practiced using sexual organs according to

their proper purpose (Tampenawas & Mangantibe, 2020). For this reason, sexual relations outside of marriage are regarded as contrary to Christian ethics.

Moral boundaries also apply to sexual expression within marriage itself. The teaching that sexual relations should occur in accordance with the natural function of sexual organs reflects a theological awareness that the human body possesses “bodily integrity” that must be respected—even within legitimate marital contexts. This integrity is not arbitrary, but rather a reflection of God’s design for the human body and its natural purposes (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025).

### ***God’s Rejection of Sexuality Outside of Marriage***

God condemns sexual relations outside of marriage. Human beings were created in the image and likeness of God, possessing dignity, excellence, and holiness above other creatures (Genesis 1:27; Darmawan & Purnamawati, 2023). God desires that individuals care for their bodies faithfully. Sex outside of marriage constitutes a misuse of the body—God’s gift—for selfish desire (Rogers & Tarwater, 2022). Men and women who are unmarried are called to maintain relationships that honor God and to remain conscious of the consequences of violating holiness (Erhabor & Ottuh, 2023; Fleischacker, 2023). Sexual intimacy outside of marriage is therefore considered sinful because it contradicts Christian ethical teaching.

The claim that God condemns extramarital sexual relations should be understood within a relational framework of sin. Sin is not merely the violation of law (*hamartia* in a deontological sense), but the rupture of the relationship with God and with others. This understanding rests on several theological principles. First, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and personal integrity. Human beings are created in the image of God and thus possess inherent dignity and holiness (Genesis 1:27). This concept provides the anthropological foundation for understanding why extramarital sexuality is sinful: it distorts human identity as bearers of God’s image (Paembonan & Ronda, 2024). Contemporary interpretations emphasize that the image of God encompasses not only rationality but also relational, volitional, and bodily dimensions. Accordingly, when individuals engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage, they reduce human relationality to mere physical function, neglecting the holistic unity of the person created in God’s image (Vorster, 2005).

Second, the body is a divine trust. God calls human beings to care for their bodies faithfully. In 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul employs the metaphor of *skeuos* (vessel) to describe the body as a container of treasure—the Gospel of Christ. More broadly, the body is a trust given by God to be stewarded with honor and spiritual discipline. Sexual relations outside of marriage represent the misuse of the body for ego-driven gratification, thereby rejecting God’s theological design for human sexuality (Hartin, 1991).

Third, the theological formulation of *porneia* (sexual immorality). In the New Testament, *porneia* broadly refers to all sexual relations outside of marriage, both premarital and extramarital. Contrary to popular understandings that narrow its meaning, both traditional and contemporary Christian theology recognize *porneia* as a comprehensive ethical category (Punt, 2017). Within Christian ethical discourse, *porneia* is understood not merely as a breach

of social norms but as the manifestation of *epithymia*—disordered desire—that alienates individuals from God’s will. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3–5, Paul contrasts a life free from *porneia* with one governed by *hagiasmos* (holiness) rather than by *pathē epithymias* (passionate lust) characteristic of those who do not know God.

### ***Awareness of Spiritual and Relational Consequences***

Unmarried men and women are called to maintain relationships that honor God and to remain conscious of the consequences of violating holiness. This pastoral perspective should not be understood as psychological pressure, but rather as a profound awareness of spiritual reality. When an individual violates holiness through sexual relations outside of marriage, the act constitutes not only moral failure but also a rupture in the relationship with God (Ugwuewo, 2019). Christian theology teaches that every human action carries both relational and eschatological consequences. In Pauline language, such actions are described as “defiling” (*miainō*) the body, creating spiritual bonds that extend beyond the merely physical dimension.

### ***Graced Restoration: The Redemptive Dimension of Christian Ethics***

It is essential to emphasize that Christian ethics is not a punitive moral system devoid of hope. On the contrary, Christian ethics operates within the framework of God’s redemptive grace. For those who have fallen into sexual sin, the Church is called to function as a community of healing and restoration rather than condemnation. Christian soteriology affirms that no sin lies beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness in Christ (Enns, 2016; Mendrofa et al., 2023). Accordingly, ethical teaching on sexual sin must always be accompanied by the proclamation of the Gospel—offering forgiveness, renewal, and restoration within a church community that reflects the redemptive love of Christ.

## **The Application of Christian Ethics to the Phenomenon of Extramarital Sexual Intercourse within the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* Cultural Practice**

### ***Consequences of Sexual Intercourse Outside of Marriage***

Sexual intercourse outside of marriage results in health, psychological, social, and spiritual consequences for those involved. Individuals who engage in extramarital sexual activity face increased risks of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancy, pressure to seek abortion, miscarriage, and even maternal and fetal mortality (Gedefie et al., 2024). Pregnancy outside of marriage also generates emotional distress, including fear, anxiety, emptiness, regret, and loss of trust (Higgins, 2024). These psychological struggles are often intensified by social exclusion and lack of preparedness for parenthood (Tjolly & Soetjningsih, 2023). Socially, individuals who engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage frequently experience rejection from both family and community. Families who are unable to accept such circumstances may resort to verbal and physical abuse, and in some cases pressure the individual to terminate the pregnancy (Kusuma, 2024). Moreover, the majority of

Indonesian society holds negative attitudes toward individuals involved in extramarital sexual relations (Ambarwati et al., 2022). Such exclusion reflects the violation of prevailing social norms and values.

### ***Implementing Christian Ethics through Cultural Inculturation in Sabu Society***

Although sexual relations outside of marriage are traditionally considered a violation of cultural ethics within Sabu society, the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* practice reveals inconsistencies in Sabu customary law. Djami and Mariano (2023) note that individuals involved in extramarital sexual relations within this cultural context are exempt from social consequences. This stance contrasts sharply with Christian ethics, which consistently affirms that sex outside of marriage constitutes sin under all circumstances.

Christianity, therefore, should play an active role in influencing both the Sabu community and customary elders to respond firmly to the sin of extramarital sexual relations. Uly and Radja (2015) observe that Sabu's customary rituals already involve processes of cultural inculturation with the church. Such inculturation should provide opportunities for the church to offer ethical guidance aimed at reforming existing customary law. Pastors, as church leaders, are called to remind the Sabu community that sexual relations outside of marriage violate the moral law (Exodus 20:14) and are identified as sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18). Church leaders should also cultivate constructive relationships with customary elders. Through respectful and contextual engagement, Christian ethics can serve as a transformative force within customary legal systems. Ultimately, this process is expected to lead to the reconstruction of customary law, including the implementation of sanctions for individuals who give birth to *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* as a result of extramarital sexual intercourse.

### ***Implementing Christian Ethics through Community Education in Sabu Society***

The cultivation of Christian ethics can be directed particularly toward adolescents, who represent a group vulnerable to engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage. For Sabu youth, the internalization of Christian ethics should take the form of comprehensive spiritual education involving the family, school, and church. Spiritual education aims to foster faith development toward Christlikeness. Such formation guides adolescents toward conviction by the Holy Spirit and genuine repentance (Olajide, 2024). Within the church context, adolescents should be nurtured by spiritually sensitive mentors who are capable of engaging and accompanying them effectively (Darmawan et al., 2024; Sopakua et al., 2024). Spiritual education is not merely the transmission of moral values but plays a crucial role in equipping young people to make wise decisions amid competing life choices (Mendrofa, 2025). With mature spiritual understanding, adolescents are expected to develop healthy perspectives and responsible attitudes toward their sexual behavior (Przygoda et al., 2023). The role of educators is central to comprehensive spiritual formation. Teachers are called not only to instruct but also to model ethical living. Parents, schoolteachers, youth mentors, and pastors must embody the values they teach and serve as living examples for Sabu adolescents. Spiritual educators should

themselves experience spiritual renewal, teach with love, and demonstrate integrity in their daily lives. Through these efforts, adolescents may come to understand that as bearers of God's image, they are called to refrain from sexual relations outside of marriage.

## **CONCLUSION**

Christian ethics affirms that sexual relations outside of marriage constitute sin. The leniency of customary sanctions toward individuals engaged in extramarital sexual relations within the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* cultural practice reflects ethical inconsistency within Sabu society. The task of Christian ethics is therefore to transform Sabu culture by fostering awareness that sexual relations outside of marriage are sinful. Such cultural transformation is expected to influence customary elders to reconstruct traditional legal systems in ways that discourage extramarital sexual behavior. Effective transformation requires collaboration among schools, healthcare institutions, and spiritual mentors to raise adolescent awareness of the dangers associated with sexual relations outside of marriage. The continued existence of the *Ana Bui Pa Kepue* practice suggests that previous Christian moral instruction has not yet fully achieved cultural transformation. Future research is therefore encouraged to develop educational programs aimed at cultural transformation within Sabu society in order to minimize extramarital sexual relations.

## **Competing interests**

The first author (P.W.), the second author (N.J.S.), and the third author (F.K.) have no conflicts of interest.

## **Author contributions**

P.W. conceived the research concept, developed the research idea, and conducted data collection. N.J.S. verified the data and analyzed the research results. F.K. structured the research report and systematically compiled it.

## **Ethical considerations**

This article adheres to all ethical standards in research, without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## **Data availability**

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## **Disclaimer**

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