

Fetus as a Subject in Culture: A Contextual Study of Pregnancy Practices and Beliefs in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the position of the fetus as a subject within various Indonesian cultural contexts, highlighting how communities interpret fetal existence beyond its biological dimensions. In many Nusantara traditions, the fetus is regarded as a being that possesses social, moral, and spiritual status from an early stage, and its presence is acknowledged and honored through diverse cultural practices. Using a comparative ethnographic approach, this article examines how communities in Java, Sunda, Bali, Minangkabau, East Nusa Tenggara, and Papua understand the existence of the fetus and construct ritual communication patterns that connect the mother with the unborn child. In Javanese and Sundanese contexts, for example, rituals such as mitoni and tingkeban are not merely markers of gestational age but also ceremonial acts of welcoming a new subject believed to have already entered the familial sphere. In Bali, the concepts of bhuta kala and cosmic harmony situate the fetus within a spiritual structure that requires balance between the mother's body and the natural world. Minangkabau communities view the fetus as part of the matrilineal lineage, linking its status closely to clan identity. Meanwhile, in East Nusa Tenggara—particularly within Atoni Pah Meto and Kelimutu traditions—the fetus is often treated as a person who must be protected through taboos, prayers, and symbolic safeguards. In Papua, pregnancy is understood as a relational process involving the mother, ancestors, and nature spirits who watch over the fetus's life journey. This study demonstrates that Indonesian traditions construct a dialogical mother–fetus relationship that influences maternal emotional well-being, the quality of prenatal bonding, and cultural conceptions of the beginning of human life. Thus, the fetus is not merely positioned as “one who will become,” but as a subject already occupying social and spiritual space within the community.

Keywords: Fetus as Subject, Indonesian Cultures, Pregnancy Rituals, Prenatal Communication, Comparative Ethnography, Mother–Fetus Relationship.

INTRODUCTION

In modern medical traditions, the fetus is often positioned as a clinical object—something to be observed, measured, and managed according to standardized biomedical protocols. This positioning frames the fetus primarily through ultrasound images, biometric parameters, and physiological dynamics classified as either normal

or pathological. However, in many Indonesian cultural contexts, the fetus is not understood as a passive entity but as a subject—an embodied being perceived to possess intentions, needs, feelings, and communicative capacities expressed through subtle signs manifested in the mother's body. This perspective generates a range of rituals, taboos, prayers, and behavioral codes that bind the mother, family, and community. The recognition of the fetus as holding social and spiritual status from an early stage transforms pregnancy into a dialogical space that extends beyond biomedical boundaries (Geertz, 1960; Jordan, 1993). Accordingly, fetal presence is understood not only through medical technologies but also through cultural meanings that position the fetus as a person growing within a web of social relations (Suryani & Jensen, 1993; Howell, 1996).

The phenomenon of perceiving the fetus as a subject is an important area of inquiry because it reveals local epistemologies regarding the beginnings of human life. Many Indonesian communities interpret maternal bodily signals—such as fetal movements, specific cravings, or emotional sensations—as symbolic forms of communication rather than merely biological responses. This worldview reflects emotional, spiritual, and affective relationships between mother and fetus, relationships believed to strengthen maternal bonding and enhance psychological well-being during pregnancy (Liamputtong, 2007). Within the field of medical anthropology, this phenomenon fills a gap in the literature concerning how communities understand pregnancy as an intersubjective experience rather than solely a physiological event (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). Moreover, these cultural interpretations illuminate how the maternal body is treated as a living communicative medium between two subjects who mutually influence one another throughout gestation (Acciaioli, 1990; Csordas, 1994).

Based on these considerations, this article raises several foundational questions that guide the analysis. First, how do Indonesian cultures position the fetus as a subject with particular rights and status within social and spiritual structures? Second, what forms of symbolic communication between mother and fetus emerge through rituals, taboos, oral narratives, and everyday embodied experiences? Third, what are the ethical, social, and psychological implications of these cultural constructions for pregnancy practices, family decision-making, and community support for pregnant women? These questions are crucial because the construction of fetal subjectivity not only shapes maternal emotions and behaviors but also influences how communities understand their moral responsibilities toward life in the womb (Bohren et al., 2015; Naura & Herbawani, 2020). By examining these dimensions, this article demonstrates that pregnancy exists at the intersection of biological, social, and spiritual realms that continuously interact.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Fetal Subjectivity

Fetal subjectivity refers to the view that the fetus is not merely a passive biological entity, but a being endowed with a certain degree of agency throughout pregnancy. This agency is expressed through movement patterns, responses to touch and sound, and sensitivity to the mother's emotional states. Numerous studies indicate that fetuses can display simple preferences, such as responding to familiar or soothing voices, and exhibiting movement patterns that reflect “choices” or particular tendencies, as demonstrated in research on fetal recognition of the mother's voice (Kisilevsky et al., 2003). Other studies further show that the fetus responds to maternal touch and vocalization as a form of early relational interaction (Marx & Nagy, 2015). From a phenomenological perspective, fetal agency is not understood as mature cognitive capacity but rather as a basic intentionality that enables early interactions with the external world through the mother's body. Thus, the concept of fetal will becomes a critical foundation for viewing pregnancy as a relational process involving two subjects rather than one.

Beyond agency, fetal subjectivity also encompasses sensitivity to maternal emotion. Research in prenatal psychology demonstrates that the fetus can perceive physiological changes associated with the mother's stress, joy, calmness, or anxiety, which may influence the child's epigenetic development in the long term (Monk et al., 2012). Shifts in maternal hormones and heart rate function as biological signals that the fetus interprets as emotional changes. Many cultures likewise believe that maternal emotions shape the fetus's character, making emotional tranquility a moral and spiritual responsibility. Scientifically, this sensitivity reinforces the notion that mother–fetus communication occurs long before birth through embodied mechanisms that integrate their bodily experiences into a shared affective system (Voorthuis et al., 2019).

Fetal subjectivity also extends into the broader social domain, particularly through the fetus's involvement in family dynamics and the recognition of its moral standing. In many households, the fetus is treated as a new family member with symbolic status—addressed by name, spoken to, or even considered in family decision-making. These communicative practices align with scientific findings indicating that the fetus consistently responds to the mother's voice, enabling an early form of intersubjective relationship (Voegtline et al., 2013). Social and emotional recognition of the fetus illustrates that its status as a subject is shaped not only by biological development but also by cultural, spiritual, and relational constructions that confer moral value upon it. Accordingly, pregnancy is

understood as a triadic relationship among mother, fetus, and family, who together interpret the emergence of new life within frameworks of ethics and care.

Embodied Anthropology and Nusantara Spirituality

Embodied anthropology in the Nusantara context demonstrates that the human body is never viewed solely as a biological entity but as a locus where social, cosmological, and spiritual forces intersect. In many local cultures, the pregnant body is considered a medium that opens pathways between the human world and the spiritual realm, rendering pregnancy a sacred and symbolically charged event. This framework resonates with developmental research showing that the fetus is sensitive to rhythm, sound, and maternal language—strengthening the idea that the maternal body serves as a living channel of prenatal communication (Kisilevsky, 2009). Rituals such as *mitoni* in Java, *mama noka* in Flores, and the practice of *ngidam* are interpreted as forms of cross-realm communication in which the mother's body functions as a cosmological bridge. The liminality of the pregnant body is further supported by classic findings on fetal adaptation to the mother's voice, demonstrating that the pregnant body is an active communicative medium linking two experiential worlds (DeCasper & Fifer).

Nusantara spirituality positions the fetus as an integral component of the cosmic order, making pregnancy a process associated with maintaining harmony between humans, ancestors, and unseen forces. The belief that maternal emotion influences the fetus's spiritual balance aligns with contemporary psychoneuroimmunological evidence demonstrating that maternal stress increases biological inflammation during pregnancy (Coussons-Read et al., 2013). Moreover, emerging epigenetic studies show that maternal emotional experiences can shape the child's DNA methylation patterns—revealing mechanisms through which emotional and spiritual experiences may leave intergenerational biological traces (Cao-Lei et al., 2016). Accordingly, Nusantara practices such as prayer, ritual protection, cleansing ceremonies, and specific taboos align with scientific understanding that emotional and spiritual equilibrium is essential for fetal development. This approach emphasizes that the pregnant body is not merely a site of biological growth but a meeting point of spiritual, social, and psychological energies that must be safeguarded.

This holistic orientation also explains why many Nusantara cultures emphasize ritual as a symbolic form of communication between humans and the cosmos during pregnancy. Rituals involving offerings, chants, or protective objects attached to the mother's body are understood as actions meant to balance energies and safeguard the fetus. This perspective aligns with neuropsychological findings showing that maternal psychological conditions and emotional environments influence fetal brain development and behavioral responses (Thomason, 2024). Further research indicates that prenatal stress increases the risk of developmental and behavioral disorders in children, reinforcing the relevance of cultural practices that seek to preserve maternal calm (Jagtap, 2023). Additionally, vocal interactions between mother and fetus—through prayer or singing—have empirical grounding, as maternal voice has been shown to affect fetal physiological responses (Carvalho et al., 2019). Thus, Nusantara rituals are not merely symbolic but resonate with scientific evidence on the importance of positive stimulation during pregnancy. Overall, the emphasis on spiritual, emotional, and social balance in traditional practices reinforces scientific perspectives that pregnancy is a multidimensional event connecting body, mind, and environment (De Weerth & Buitelaar, 2018).

Pre-Verbal Mother–Fetus Communication

Pre-verbal mother–fetus communication, from an ethnographic perspective, is understood as a form of interaction that emerges through bodily experience and affective awareness rather than through verbal language. Maternal intuition represents one of the earliest forms of this communication, occurring when the mother perceives “subtle messages” from the fetus through bodily sensations, shifts in movement rhythm, or spontaneous emotional impressions. In many cultures, such intuition is regarded as a form of bodily intelligence that enables the mother to “understand” her fetus's needs without words. For instance, a sudden feeling of restlessness may be interpreted as a sign that the fetus requires calm, whereas sensations of warmth or serenity are understood as the fetus's positive response to maternal care. From a phenomenological standpoint, this intuition is not viewed as mystical but as a manifestation of the deep connectedness between the mother's body and the fetus, who share physical, emotional, and spiritual space throughout pregnancy. Thus, pre-verbal communication becomes the foundational layer of their emerging intersubjective relationship (Makino et al., 2009; Araki et al., 2010; Kantrowitz-Gordon et al., 2019).

Beyond intuition, pre-verbal communication is also expressed through fetal movement, which is interpreted as a form of self-expression and responsiveness to the external world. Movement is not understood merely as a biological reflex but as an intentional signal that mothers interpret as the fetus's “reply” or active engagement. When the mother speaks, touches her abdomen, or listens to particular music, the fetus often responds through kicks or shifts in movement rhythm. In cultural contexts, fetal motion is regarded as a means through which the fetus communicates its condition—comfort, excitement, or unease. Many Indigenous communities treat changes

in fetal movement as significant signs that guide taboos, prayers, or ritual actions. Consequently, fetal movement becomes an embodied medium of communication that strengthens the mother's recognition of the fetus as a subject capable of responding, expressing itself, and participating in the dynamics of pregnancy (Tsuruhara et al., 2012; Pimenta et al., 2016; Voorthuis et al., 2019).

Pre-verbal communication also encompasses dreams, subtle sensations, intuitions, and reciprocal emotional responses that arise throughout pregnancy. In many Nusantara traditions, dreams function as bridges between the conscious world and the spiritual realm; therefore, a mother dreaming of a baby, water, certain animals, or ancestral figures is believed to be receiving messages about her fetus. Intuitive impressions—such as sudden urges to protect oneself or the feeling of another presence within the body—are likewise interpreted as part of an intuitive communicative process linking the mother, the fetus, and the non-physical world. Psychologically, reciprocal emotional responses are evident when the mother's emotional state influences fetal rhythms and, conversely, when fetal movement alters the mother's emotional condition. These phenomena illustrate that mother–fetus communication is not merely an exchange of biological signals but a relational process that simultaneously engages the body, the psyche, and cultural meaning (van Ierland & de Beaufort, 2009; Wu et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using a **Constructivist Grounded Theory** design (Charmaz, 2006) to examine how various Indonesian cultures construct the concept of fetal subjectivity as a social, moral, and spiritual entity. This design was chosen because it allows the researcher to develop theory directly from the cultural interactions, interpretations, and representations of the fetus found within the data. The constructivist paradigm assumes that meaning is not merely discovered but constructed through a dialogical process between the researcher and cultural texts, customary practices, field observations, and clinical empirical data. Consequently, this study does not only describe pregnancy-related practices but also analyzes how the body, emotions, rituals, and cultural cosmologies shape collective understandings of the fetus as a subject.

Data were collected through extensive literature review (classic ethnographies, medical anthropology articles, prenatal psychology works, and customary documents) and non-participant observation at Santo Borromeus Hospital, Bandung, conducted from May to October 2024. In addition, the study involved **30 pregnant women** from diverse cultural backgrounds (Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Minangkabau, NTT, and Papuan) who were attending routine prenatal check-ups at the hospital. This site was selected because of the ethnic diversity of its patients, enabling the researcher to observe how cultural perspectives on fetal subjectivity appear or negotiate within a modern medical setting. Customary literature, ritual texts, oral narratives, and previous studies were used to capture the construction of fetal subjectivity within Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Minangkabau, NTT, and Papuan communities, while clinical observations illustrated how these traditions interact with contemporary medical practice. These two data sources were integrated to ensure that the emerging theory is grounded in both traditional and clinical contexts.

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously, following the three main stages of grounded theory: **open coding, axial coding, and selective coding**. During open coding, all data were assigned initial codes to identify concepts related to fetal subjectivity, preverbal communication, maternal bodily symbolism, and ritual practices. Axial coding was used to link the initial categories into relational patterns across biological, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. In the selective coding stage, all categories were synthesized into a theoretical framework explaining how Indonesian cultures position the fetus as a social actor and moral subject. This analysis was conducted iteratively by revisiting the data, refining categories, and testing their consistency across sources.

Data validity was ensured through **source triangulation**, comparing findings from customary literature, scientific studies, and clinical observation. **Conceptual triangulation** was also applied by integrating perspectives from embodiment phenomenology, medical anthropology, Nusantara spirituality, and prenatal psychology. The researcher maintained reflexivity by documenting biases and positionality to avoid overshadowing cultural voices or ritual meanings. This process ensured that the resulting theory is strongly cross-referenced, contextually sensitive, and richly grounded.

All research procedures followed health research ethics principles. Observations at Santo Borromeus Hospital were conducted without recording patients' personal identities and focused solely on general phenomena related to maternal–fetal communication. The study was conducted after obtaining ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee of Santo Borromeus Hospital (Approval Number: 026/KEPK/IX/2024). Each customary source and ritual text was analyzed with respect for cultural sacredness and integrity. Thus, the theory developed in this study is grounded in authentic empirical data and constructed with respect for cultural dignity, traditional values, and the status of pregnant women and fetuses as valued subjects.

RESULTS: THE FETUS AS A SUBJECT IN DIVERSE INDONESIAN CULTURES

The meaning of the fetus in Indonesian societies is never situated solely as a biological phenomenon; rather, it is always embedded within cosmological, moral, and social frameworks that shape the experience of pregnancy. Various Indigenous communities in Indonesia possess distinct ways of understanding fetal existence—ranging from perceiving the fetus as a spiritual entity, a successor in the lineage, to a social actor who is involved early on in family dynamics. These beliefs not only influence the behaviors of pregnant women but also determine patterns of care, ritual practices, and emotional relations between the mother, the family, and the unborn child.

This section presents how cultural constructions of the fetus as a subject emerge in six major cultural groups in Indonesia. Each culture demonstrates unique interpretations of fetal presence—whether through rituals, bodily symbols, ancestral relations, or the social structures that sustain them. This understanding shows that fetal subjectivity is recognized long before birth, and that the prenatal experience cannot be separated from the cultural context in which the pregnant woman lives.

Java

In Javanese culture, pregnancy is regarded as a sacred phase in which the fetus is positioned as a *titipan Gusti sing Maha Kuwasa*—a divine trust that must be protected with moral and spiritual awareness. This belief is rooted in the notion that the fetus receives a soul at a certain gestational age, typically after four months, when it is believed that an angel breathes life into the unborn child. From this point onward, the fetus is no longer seen merely as a biological entity but as a small person who has entered the kinship network. The *mitoni* or *tingkeban* ritual at seven months of pregnancy serves as a public affirmation that the fetus has already become part of the family and community (Rosa, 2023). Through this ritual, the community expresses respect for the new life while offering prayers for safety, harmony, and protection from spiritual or physical harm.

Rituals of communication between mother and fetus in Javanese culture exhibit a depth of emotional connection understood as a form of preverbal dialogue. Mothers are taught to practice *ngendika marang jabang bayi*—a subtle mode of speaking to the unborn child using gentle language, affection, and soothing tones (Mutmainnah & Afyanti, 2019). This practice is seen not only as an early form of character education but also as a means to strengthen emotional and spiritual bonds between mother and baby. Communication also includes regulating one's thoughts, words, and actions to remain *ayem* (calm), as the mother's emotional state is believed to directly influence the fetus's comfort. Thus, the maternal body functions not only as a biological medium but also as a resonant vessel for emotions, prayers, and moral messages. In this framework, pregnancy becomes a living dialogical space in which mother and fetus mutually respond through sensations, intuition, and bodily movement.

Food selection during pregnancy in Javanese culture also reflects the belief that the fetus possesses its own desires. Many mothers and families understand *ngidam* (pregnancy cravings) not merely as a biological phenomenon but as the fetus's way of communicating its preferences or inclinations toward certain tastes (Zulkifli et al., 2023). Food choices are therefore adjusted to “what the baby wants,” both to maintain fetal comfort and as a form of honoring its subjectivity. Beyond food, pregnant women are guided in their daily conduct, such as not rejecting simple wishes to avoid disappointing the unborn child, and avoiding actions that could disrupt emotional harmony. At this stage, pregnancy becomes a relational process in which the mother, family, and fetus interact within symbolic and practical domains. Altogether, these traditions demonstrate that Javanese culture regards pregnancy as a social and spiritual phenomenon—not merely a medical one—with the fetus positioned as an active subject within relational networks (Naura & Herbawani, 2020).

To understand the extent to which these cultural values are embodied in practice among the participants, this study summarizes the distribution of beliefs, practices, and modes of maternal–fetal communication in a summary table. Table 1 presents the characteristics of five pregnant Javanese participants and illustrates the consistency between Javanese traditions and the embodied experiences they reported during pregnancy.

Table 1. Prenatal Communication Practices in Javanese Culture

Participant Code	Gestational Age	Main Cultural Practices	Taboos & Customary Restrictions	Forms of Maternal–Fetal Communication	Core Javanese Cultural Beliefs
P-J1	28 weeks	Performs <i>mitoni</i> and maintains an <i>ayem</i> emotional state	Avoids anger, conflict, negative talk; maintains calm thoughts	<i>Ngendika marang jabang bayi</i> every night	The fetus is a divine trust with a soul after four months

P-J2	24 weeks	Observes food restrictions and avoids household conflict	Avoids certain foods (excessively spicy or spoiled food), avoids crowds, controls emotions	Responds to movements as the baby's "answers"	<i>Ngidam</i> reflects the fetus's wishes
P-J3	32 weeks	Recites Javanese prayers and <i>mantra halus</i>	Avoids strenuous physical activity, coarse speech; maintains polite language	Speaks softly while stroking the belly	Maternal emotions directly influence fetal well-being
P-J4	18 weeks	Practices positive thinking (<i>tansab sumerep</i>)	Avoids negative thoughts, conflict; respects parents and husband	Interprets dreams as messages from the fetus	The fetus becomes conscious after four months
P-J5	30 weeks	Performs simple Tuesday–Kliwon rituals and avoids crowded events	Avoids parties/large gatherings; maintains calm demeanor; avoids rushed decisions	Uses gamelan music to soothe the fetus	Household harmony affects fetal conditions

Table 1 demonstrates that all Javanese participants view pregnancy not merely as a biological process but as a spiritual and moral phenomenon involving subtle interactions among mother, fetus, and the social environment. A dominant pattern is the belief that the fetus already possesses spiritual awareness after four months of gestation; therefore, mothers are encouraged to maintain emotional tranquility (*ayem*) and avoid conflict, which is believed to have a direct influence on fetal comfort.

Regarding communication, all participants practiced forms of preverbal dialogue such as *ngendika marang jabang bayi*, belly stroking, using music, or interpreting dreams as messages from the fetus. This shows that in Javanese culture, maternal–fetal communication is understood as an intuitive process rooted in embodied awareness and symbolic cultural structures.

Additionally, food-related practices such as *ngidam* are treated as expressions of fetal desire rather than mere hormonal changes. Variations in rituals—such as *mitoni* and the use of specific sacred days (e.g., Tuesday–Kliwon)—illustrate that the fetus's condition is consistently situated within the cosmological rhythm and ethical order of Javanese family life. Overall, the table reinforces the finding that Javanese culture constructs a distinctive pattern of prenatal intersubjectivity: the fetus is positioned as a moral, spiritual, and relational subject from within the womb.

Sunda

In Sundanese culture, the fetus is regarded as a being *ngabogaan rasa*, an entity endowed with emotional sensitivity even while still in the womb. This concept is rooted in a cosmological view that life begins not merely from biological processes, but from the subtle interconnectedness between the mother, the baby, and the surrounding environment (Hadiati, 2022). For this reason, maternal emotions are believed to directly shape fetal development—both physically and spiritually (Mulyana & Setianingsih, 2021). This belief is reflected in the advice of Sundanese elders, who frequently remind pregnant women to maintain emotional balance, avoid prolonged sadness, and refrain from conflict or anger that may “*nembus ka jero awak*”—penetrate into the baby's inner being.

Within this perspective, the maternal body is viewed as a resonant space that connects two subjects, where every emotional vibration—joy, fear, anger, or calmness—is believed to be transmitted to the fetus as a subtle form of communication that plays a crucial shaping role. To illustrate prenatal practices characteristic of Sundanese culture, the following table summarizes the experiences of five Sundanese pregnant women. Table 2 highlights traditional rituals, customary prohibitions, forms of mother–fetus communication, and spiritual beliefs transmitted across generations in Sundanese society.

Table 2. Prenatal Communication Practices in Sundanese Culture

Participant Code	Gestational Age	Rituals & Spiritual Protection	Customary Prohibitions	Forms of Mother–Fetus Communication	Sundanese Cultural Beliefs
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P-S1	26 weeks	Daily <i>jampé</i> recited by parents/healers	Not sitting on doorsteps; not cutting hair	Speaking softly & rubbing the belly	The fetus has <i>rasa</i> (emotional sensitivity) and responds to the mother's emotions
P-S2	30 weeks	Reciting Qur'anic prayers and <i>jampé</i> during anxiety	Avoiding heavy lifting; not walking alone at night	Responding to fetal movements as signs of discomfort	Maternal emotions influence the fetus' physical and spiritual condition
P-S3	22 weeks	<i>Selapanan</i> ritual & family prayers	Avoiding strenuous household chores	Listening to traditional music & reciting prayers	The fetus is believed to be sensitive to the environment and maternal mood
P-S4	28 weeks	Special <i>jampé</i> for nausea or mild ailments	Avoiding anger and family disputes	Speaking softly while gently tapping the belly	The mother's body mediates emotional and spiritual messages
P-S5	34 weeks	<i>Selasa-klinwon</i> ritual & household harmonization on prayers	Avoiding conflicts within the household	Reciting soft mantras and singing to the fetus	Household harmony and maternal peace affect fetal well-being

Table 2 underscores that Sundanese culture views pregnancy as a complex relational process rather than a purely biological phenomenon. All participants practiced spiritual rituals (*jampé*, Qur'anic recitations, mantras) to soothe the mother's emotions and protect the fetus from metaphysical disturbances. Strict customary prohibitions—such as avoiding doorsteps, heavy lifting, or walking alone at night—reflect the communal ethic of honoring the fetus as a being sensitive to its environment.

Forms of mother–fetus communication in Sundanese culture emphasize subtle, pre-verbal interaction, including soft speech, belly caressing, singing, or prayer recitation. These practices illustrate the belief that the fetus is capable of responding to emotional and spiritual stimuli. Overall, Sundanese culture highlights the balance between maternal mental states, household harmony, and spiritual rituals as essential factors in establishing prenatal intersubjectivity, positioning the fetus as a subject endowed with *rasa*, sensitivity, and moral presence even before birth.

Customary prohibitions in Sundanese tradition are understood not merely as social rules, but as ethical forms of communication between mother and fetus. Restrictions such as not sitting on doorsteps, not cutting hair, avoiding heavy objects, or not walking alone at night serve as symbolic gestures of caution intended to protect the baby from physical and metaphysical risks. Sundanese communities believe that the fetus can sense maternal actions; thus, everyday behaviors must reflect respect (*ngajenan*) for the unborn child. Practices such as dressing modestly, speaking softly, and maintaining clear thoughts are seen as ways the mother honors the *jabang bayi*. Therefore, prohibitions function not simply as restrictions, but as moral representations of how a mother maintains subtle communication, preserves energetic balance, and ensures harmony between herself, the fetus, and the surrounding environment.

Bali (Hindu)

In Balinese culture, which is deeply rooted in Hindu cosmology, the fetus is positioned as a soul undergoing rebirth through the process of reincarnation. The presence of the fetus is not seen merely as the beginning of biological life, but as part of a long spiritual journey in which the *atma*, or soul, returns to the world to perfect its karma and dharma (Wulandari & Whelan, 2011). For this reason, pregnancy is regarded as a sacred phase that connects the spirit world to the human realm. For Balinese families, the unborn child may be the reincarnation of an ancestor or a past family member who returns to continue the lineage and safeguard cosmological balance (Bhandesa, 2021). This belief encourages mothers and families to treat the fetus with deep respect, tenderness, and vigilance. Every action, thought, and utterance of the pregnant woman is believed to directly influence the harmony

of the fetus's spiritual journey, making pregnancy a period that is carefully guarded physically, emotionally, and ritually.

To illustrate empirically the distinctive prenatal practices in Bali, the following table summarizes the experiences of five Balinese Hindu pregnant women. Table 3 presents customary rituals, forms of inner communication with the fetus, and spiritual beliefs that shape the experience of pregnancy within the context of Balinese Hindu cosmology.

Table 3. Prenatal Communication Practices in Balinese (Hindu) Culture

Participant Code	Gestational Age	Rituals & Spiritual Protection	Customary Prohibitions	Forms of Mother–Fetus Communication	Balinese Cultural Beliefs
P-B1	23 weeks	<i>Neloni</i> & purification prayers	Avoiding conflicts & maintaining household purity	Speaking softly while gazing at offerings	The fetus is an ancestral soul returning to continue the lineage
P-B2	30 weeks	<i>Magpag Rare</i> birth preparation ritual	Avoiding heavy lifting & unclean places	Praying and tapping the belly	Body, spirit, and environment are interconnected through ritual
P-B3	24 weeks	Weekly small <i>selamatan</i> ceremony	Avoiding family disputes	Listening to gamelan music and mantras	The placenta (<i>ari-ari</i>) is regarded as the baby's spiritual sibling
P-B4	27 weeks	Ritual cleansing and symbolic wrapping of the placenta	Not walking alone at night	Reciting prayers while preparing offerings	The placenta maintains the baby's energetic balance
P-B5	30 weeks	Lamps & incense for the placenta	Avoiding anger & sustaining household harmony	Singing softly and offering prayers	The fetus and placenta are part of a complex spiritual network

Table 3 illustrates that Balinese pregnant women engage in prenatal practices that integrate ritual, prohibitions, and inner communication. Rituals such as *Neloni*, *Magpag Rare*, and ceremonies dedicated to the placenta are intended to balance spiritual energies, maintain family harmony, and welcome the returning soul of the fetus. Customary prohibitions emphasize purity, caution, and harmonization with the cosmological environment, such as prohibitions against heavy lifting or engaging in conflict.

Forms of mother–fetus communication emphasize symbolic and pre-verbal interaction, including soft speech, prayers, mantras, gamelan music, and offering rituals. These practices reflect the belief that the fetus is not merely a biological being, but a spiritual subject engaged in interaction with its environment, the ancestors, and the *ari-ari*. Overall, Balinese culture highlights prenatal intersubjectivity involving a complex relationship between the body, the spirit, and the cosmos, making pregnancy a sacred experience filled with ritual, moral, and spiritual dimensions.

The understanding that the fetus carries the spiritual dimension of ancestral presence is reflected in various ceremonies, including *Magpag Rare* and *Neloni*, which symbolize the early interaction between the family and the unborn child. The *Neloni* ritual, performed at a specific stage of pregnancy, serves as a rite of purification and protection, as well as an early form of welcoming the soul entering the human world. *Magpag Rare*, conducted after birth, reinforces the belief that the child has fully entered the human realm and must be welcomed with reverence. In both rituals, prayers, offerings, and symbolic gestures serve as channels of communication between humans, the fetus, and the ancestors. These traditions demonstrate that the relationship between the family and the child begins long before physical birth, and that communication with the fetus occurs through religious symbols rich with meaning.

One of the central elements of the Balinese understanding of infant subjectivity is the unique treatment of the placenta (*ari-ari*), regarded as the baby's spiritual twin or subtle sibling. The placenta is personified as a guardian and life companion that maintains the baby's energetic balance from the womb into adulthood. Therefore, its handling after birth is carried out with great care through rituals that include cleansing, wrapping, and burying it in a cosmologically significant location believed to be safe. Families even prepare lamps or incense to "illuminate" the placenta during the first days after birth, symbolizing respect and reciprocal connection between the baby and its spiritual sibling. This belief illustrates that in Balinese culture, the subjectivity of the fetus and infant is inseparable from a complex web of spiritual relations in which body, spirit, and the universe are interconnected through ritual and everyday practice.

Minangkabau

In Minangkabau culture, which follows a matrilineal kinship system, the presence of the fetus is regarded as the successor of the maternal line (*matrilineal descent*), holding a highly important position in the social structure (Silalahi & Khairiah, 2020). Because lineage is inherited through women, every pregnancy carries the meaning of clan continuity and strengthens the position of women within the extended family network (*kaum*). The fetus is not merely considered a future family member, but an heir to values, land, and clan identity. Consequently, the maternal relatives—particularly the *mamak*, *bundo kanduang*, and senior women—play a strong role in safeguarding the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the pregnant woman (Syarief, 2020). They ensure that the mother's behavior, food intake, activities, and psychological state remain balanced, as it is believed that the quality of pregnancy will determine the dignity and future of the lineage. To clarify Minangkabau customary practices during pregnancy, Table 4 summarizes the experiences of five Minangkabau pregnant women. The table highlights rituals, prohibitions, forms of communication with the fetus, and beliefs that position the fetus as both a guest and an heir of the maternal line.

Table 4. Prenatal Communication Practices in Minangkabau Culture

Participant Code	Gestational Age	Rituals & Spiritual Protection	Customary Prohibitions	Forms of Mother-Fetus Communication	Minangkabau Cultural Beliefs
P-M1	24 weeks	Daily prayers and the reading of <i>petuah</i> (wise counsel) by <i>bundo kanduang</i>	Avoiding physically heavy work	Speaking softly & listening to the advice of senior women	The fetus is a "family guest" who must be respected
P-M2	28 weeks	Simple ceremony to welcome the fetus (prayers & small offerings)	Avoiding harsh words & household conflict	Greeting the fetus with gentle verbal expressions	The fetus brings blessings and responsibility to the family
P-M3	22 weeks	Special counsel and prayers before sleep	Avoiding heavy lifting, keeping thoughts calm	Rubbing the belly while reciting prayers	The mother's body as an ethical and spiritual communication medium
P-M4	30 weeks	Recitation of customary mantras by the <i>mamak</i>	Avoiding prolonged sadness, preventing conflict	Singing softly and gently tapping the belly	The fetus is an heir to maternal values and identity
P-M5	26 weeks	Family gathering ritual for collective prayer	Avoiding strenuous labor & maintaining household harmony	Listening to advice & interacting gently with the fetus	Pregnancy as a collective process involving the entire family

Table 4 shows that Minangkabau culture positions the fetus as a family guest and heir of the matrilineal line, who must be honored through rituals, prohibitions, and gentle communication. Daily rituals, prayers, and advice from *bundo kanduang* or the *mamak* are used to soothe the mother and maintain the fetus's inner harmony. Customary prohibitions emphasize caution, avoidance of conflict, physical labor, and harsh speech, aiming to protect the fetus physically and spiritually.

Forms of mother–fetus communication in Minangkabau culture emphasize ethical and relational interaction, including gentle speech, singing, listening to counsel, and touching the belly as a sign of care. These traditions reveal that pregnancy is a collective process in which the entire family participates in maintaining the fetus's balance, morality, and spiritual well-being. These practices reinforce social, matrilineal, and communal values, and position the fetus as a respected subject who plays an important role in sustaining Minangkabau cultural continuity.

In Minangkabau culture, the fetus is often regarded as a “family guest” who must be treated with respect, gentleness, and courtesy. The term *guest* reflects the belief that the fetus brings blessings as well as responsibility, requiring the family to create a home atmosphere that is comfortable, calm, and filled with prayer. This attitude is reflected in various customary practices, such as prohibitions on pregnant women engaging in heavy work, encouragement to maintain mindful speech and thoughts, and the habit of senior women offering guidance on proper behavior during pregnancy. In addition, the food and drinks consumed by the pregnant woman are carefully monitored as a form of respect for the unborn child. From this perspective, pregnancy becomes a space of ethical communication between the family and the fetus, in which the mother's body is seen as a temporary place of residence for a noble being who will become an important part of the maternal lineage. These traditions demonstrate the depth of Minangkabau communal values in nurturing life from the earliest stages in the womb.

East Nusa Tenggara (NTT)

In various Indigenous communities in East Nusa Tenggara, the fetus is viewed as a being who “descends together with a guiding spirit,” a subtle entity that arrives bringing spiritual protection from the ancestors (Putro & Murniasi, 2019). This belief is rooted in a cosmological view that human life is always under the guidance of transcendent forces beginning from the pre-birth stage. Therefore, pregnancy is regarded as a process involving not only the mother's physical body but also the participation of the spirit world that maintains the baby's life balance. In several ethnic groups such as Manggarai, Lio, and Sumba, the presence of the fetus is always associated with strong ancestral lineage, placing the pregnant mother at the center of the extended family's attention (Toy et al., 2020). Every physical change, every dream experienced by the mother, and certain emotional sensations are often interpreted as messages from the guiding spirit accompanying the unborn child. This shows that the fetus's subjectivity has been recognized long before birth. Table 5 summarizes prenatal cultural practices in NTT, highlighting ritual traditions, taboos, forms of mother–fetus communication, and distinctive NTT beliefs that position the fetus as a spiritual being who arrives with a guiding spirit.

Table 5. Prenatal Communication Practices in NTT Culture

Participant Code	Gestational Age	Rituals & Spiritual Protection	Taboos & Cultural Restrictions	Forms of Mother–Fetus Communication	NTT Cultural Beliefs
P-N1	27 weeks	Prayers & mantras by Manggarai elders	No harsh words, no lifting heavy objects	Speaking gently & tapping the belly	The fetus arrives with a guiding spirit that maintains the baby's life balance
P-N2	26 weeks	<i>Soma</i> ceremony for baby's safety (Lio)	Avoiding conflict, keeping the mind calm	Greeting the fetus with prayer & traditional music	The fetus gives “signs” through the mother's bodily sensations
P-N3	24 weeks	<i>Reba Ngada</i> with prayers & food symbols	Avoiding crowds, abstaining from certain foods	Singing softly while preparing offerings	Prenatal life is guided by ancestors and guiding spirits
P-N4	25 weeks	Daily advice and prayer by cultural elders	Avoiding anger, maintaining	Listening to mantras and responding to	The mother's body as a resonance

			household harmony	fetal movements	medium between humans and the spirit world
P-N5	25 weeks	Baby protection ritual & family prayer	Not working too hard, avoiding harsh speech	Rubbing the belly while praying	The fetus as a spiritual subject within ancestral and communal relations

Table 5 emphasizes that pregnancy in NTT is understood as a spiritual and social process in which the fetus is present as a being who brings protection from a guiding spirit. Traditional rituals (*Soma*, *Reba*, elders’ prayers) and cultural taboos (avoiding conflict, harsh words, heavy activities) are believed to maintain the mother–fetus energetic balance. Mother–fetus communication takes subtle and symbolic forms, such as gentle speaking, singing, tapping the belly, and listening to elders’ advice.

These practices demonstrate the collective role of the community in caring for pregnant mothers and their unborn babies, emphasizing the integration of the body, spirit, and social network. The belief that the fetus gives “signs” through bodily movements strengthens the view that pregnancy is an intersubjective experience involving the mother, fetus, ancestors, and community simultaneously.

The role of cultural elders is crucial in maintaining harmonious communication between mother and fetus. In some traditions, pregnant mothers are intentionally approached by elders or cultural figures who “calm the baby” when the mother experiences discomfort or when fetal movements feel unusual. This interaction is understood as a form of spiritual dialogue in which the elders convey prayers, advice, or soft mantras addressed directly to the baby’s guiding spirit. This practice not only provides psychological comfort to the mother but also reinforces the belief that the unborn child is sensitive to the voices, words, and emotional energy of adults. The presence of elders in the pregnancy process reflects the community’s view that the mother and fetus are a unit that must be cared for collectively—not only by the nuclear family but by the entire customary structure.

Traditional rituals such as *Soma* among the Lio or *Reba* among the Ngada also often include special prayers for the unborn baby as part of petitions for safety and continuity of lineage. In these ceremonies, the unborn child is placed within a relational network among ancestors, family, and community through food symbols, dances, and customary mantras. Furthermore, the people of NTT believe that the fetus can give “signs” through the mother’s bodily movements—whether as an indication of joy, discomfort, or particular messages requiring attention. Fetal movement is understood not merely as a biological response but as a subtle form of communication between two subjects: the mother and the being still in the womb. This perspective shows that prenatal life in NTT is understood through a strong spiritual lens, where the mother’s body becomes a resonance space for communication between humans and the spirit world.

Papua

In several Indigenous communities in Papua, the fetus is understood not merely as biological life but as a spiritual subject under the protection of ancestral spirits. The presence of the fetus is believed to be connected to lineage, making every stage of pregnancy a process tied to the cosmological balance between the human world and the spirit world (Yogi et al., 2025). Pregnant women are positioned as guardians of two realms—the physical world and the ancestral world—meaning that their emotional and physical states have a direct impact on the fetus’s well-being (Karwuni & Winarti, 2025). This belief leads Papuan communities to carefully maintain the social and spiritual environment surrounding pregnant mothers. They believe that disharmony within the family can disrupt the bond between the fetus and the ancestral spirits who protect it. Therefore, pregnancy is treated with great caution, as it concerns the continuity of lineage and the honor of the tribe. Table 6 summarizes prenatal cultural practices in Papua, emphasizing rituals, taboos, mother–fetus communication, and cultural beliefs that position the fetus as a spiritual subject protected by ancestral spirits.

Table 6. Prenatal Communication Practices in Papuan Culture

Kode Partisipan	Usia Kehamilan	Ritual & Perlindungan Spiritual	Pantangan & Larangan Adat	Bentuk Komunikasi Ibu–Janin	Keyakinan Budaya Papua
P-P1	24 minggu	Upacara sederhana saat mual berlebihan	Tidak berselisih, menjaga ucapan sopan, tidak	Mengusap perut sambil berdoa	Janin berada di bawah perlindungan roh leluhur

		(sesaji daun & minyak kelapa)	membicarakan hal buruk		
P-P2	30 minggu	Upacara doa keluarga & tetua adat	Menghindari konflik rumah tangga, menjaga keharmonisan	Berbicara lembut & bernyanyi halus	Janin dapat merasakan energi emosional di sekitarnya
P-P3	22 minggu	Doa tetua adat saat gerakan janin berbeda dari biasanya	Tidak melakukan aktivitas berat, menjaga pikiran tetap tenang	Menyentuh perut sambil mendengarkan mantra	Kehidupan prenatal dipandu roh leluhur dan garis keturunan
P-P4	25 minggu	Ritual pemulihan keseimbangan spiritual	Tidak marah, tidak memarahi pasangan, menghindari pertengkaran	Mendengarkan doa dan nasihat tetua	Tubuh ibu menjadi medium resonansi antara manusia dan dunia roh
P-P5	26 minggu	Upacara kecil dengan air dan minyak kelapa	Tidak keluar malam sendiri, menjaga pikiran dan ucapan positif	Menepuk dan mengusap perut sambil berdoa	Janin adalah subjek spiritual dalam jaringan relasi keluarga & leluhur

This table emphasizes that pregnancy in Papua is understood as a spiritual and social process in which the fetus is present as a spiritual subject protected by ancestral spirits. Traditional rituals (small ceremonies, elders' prayers, offerings) and cultural taboos (avoiding conflict, harsh speech, heavy activities, arguments) maintain the energetic balance between mother and fetus. Forms of mother–fetus communication are subtle and symbolic, including gentle speech, singing, belly rubbing, and listening to elders' guidance.

These practices demonstrate the collective role of the community and extended family in caring for pregnant mothers and their unborn babies, emphasizing the integration of the body, spirit, and social networks. The belief that the fetus responds to emotional energy in its surroundings reinforces that pregnancy is an intersubjective experience involving the mother, fetus, family, and community simultaneously.

The traditional practices surrounding pregnancy show the close relationship between the mother's body and the spiritual realm. One such form of attention is a small ceremony performed when the mother experiences excessive nausea, certain dreams, or unusual fetal movements. This ceremony usually involves simple offerings such as leaves, coconut oil, or blessed water, which are then applied to the mother's belly. The purpose is to calm the fetus's protective spirit and ensure that the developing life remains in a state of balance. The ceremony also serves as a channel of communication between the family and the ancestors to request protection. This practice shows how the mother's bodily sensations are not separated from spiritual meaning but understood as signs requiring cultural and ritual attention.

The belief that the fetus is sensitive to household conflict becomes a strong social foundation in Papuan communities. Many tribes believe that the fetus can "hear" or feel the emotional energy around it, so arguments, anger, or family disharmony are believed to disturb its inner development. Therefore, the family holds a cultural obligation to maintain peace throughout the pregnancy. Elders may even reprimand couples who fight too often, as such behavior is believed to endanger the fetus's spiritual balance. Family harmony is not merely a moral value but part of prenatal protection regulated by cultural norms. This practice shows that in the Papuan cultural perspective, prenatal communication occurs not only between mother and fetus but also involves the extended family and community as guardians of the emotional and spiritual environment necessary for the developing life.

DISCUSSION

In many cultures in Indonesia, the fetus is never positioned as a passive being merely waiting to be born. Instead, it is understood as a social actor whose presence can influence family dynamics from the prenatal period. In various traditions, family decisions—whether related to work, travel, or participation in customary activities—

are often adjusted to maintain the comfort and safety of the fetus. This view positions the unborn baby as a respected subject, as it is believed to already possess will, feelings, and sensitivity to the mother's emotional and environmental conditions. In some communities, the fetus is even believed to "give signs" through movement, the mother's dreams, or shifts in emotional states sensed intuitively. Thus, the fetus becomes a factor that actively shapes the family's social structure, producing decisions that show its presence is acknowledged and considered even before physical birth.

The activities of mothers during pregnancy are also strongly influenced by the fetus, which is regarded as a highly valued entity. Many cultures impose rules and restrictions on physical, emotional, and social activities for pregnant women, not solely for medical reasons but because of the belief that the mother's actions reflect her treatment of the fetus (Geertz, 1983). Mothers are not allowed to perform heavy labor, travel to certain places, or speak or act harshly in order to maintain the comfort of the unborn baby. Even sleeping schedules, eating patterns, and bodily cleansing rituals are often arranged based on the fetus's responses or "wishes." When the mother feels certain movements or discomfort, the family interprets them as communicative signals from the baby that need attention. In this way, the fetus directs the rhythms of the mother's and family's daily life, not as an object but as a relational subject that shapes everyday ethics.

Community rituals are often arranged based on the fetus's presence as an integral part of the social structure (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Traditions such as *mitoni* in Java, *neloni* in Bali, *reba* in Flores, or special ceremonies in Papua are performed as acts of welcoming and spiritual protection for the unborn baby. By carrying out these rituals, the community acknowledges that the fetus has already become a "social member" even before being physically born. These ceremonies typically involve prayers, symbolic foods, dances, or customary chants intended to guide the fetus's journey toward birth (Hobel, 2008). The presence of the fetus becomes a reason for communities to gather, strengthen solidarity, and nurture intergenerational relations. Thus, rituals are not merely ceremonial but practical forms of social recognition of the fetus's subjectivity. It is placed within a network of family and ancestral relations, showing that prenatal life holds a culturally significant position.

Communication between mother and fetus in various Indonesian cultures is understood as a cultural practice with emotional and spiritual functions. This communication may take the form of speaking softly to the belly, touching specific areas when the baby moves, reading prayers, or performing rituals to calm the fetus. Such communicative practices often serve as emotional regulation for the mother, as through gentle dialogue with the unborn baby, she feels calmer, supported, and deeply connected. Emotional stability is believed to directly influence the fetus's comfort, making prenatal communication a naturally emergent caregiving strategy in cultural contexts. Even intuitive experiences—such as premonitions, dreams, or mood changes—are often interpreted as fetal responses. Therefore, mother–fetus communication functions as a social adaptation mechanism that helps mothers manage stress, strengthen their sense of control, and build empathetic relationships from the prenatal period.

Contemporary research in prenatal psychology shows that emotional interaction between mother and fetus contributes significantly to the baby's neuropsychological stability (Wikan, 1990). When mothers engage in prenatal communication, their bodies produce hormones that create positive emotional states, such as oxytocin and serotonin, which also flow through the placenta. This condition supports the development of the baby's nervous system, reduces the risk of prenatal stress, and aids in fetal emotional regulation. Beyond biological effects, cultural beliefs about mother–fetus closeness can enhance maternal confidence during pregnancy. Many studies show that mothers who feel connected to their fetus experience lower levels of anxiety and have better emotional readiness for childbirth and parenting. Thus, prenatal communication practices carry cultural significance as well as relevant scientific grounding.

Cultural beliefs have also been shown to positively affect maternal well-being. When mothers perceive their fetus as an active subject, they tend to maintain healthier, more careful, and more affectionate behavioral patterns. Many traditional practices—such as avoiding stress, maintaining a positive mood, getting adequate rest, and eating foods "desired by the baby"—indirectly align with modern medical recommendations. Cultural rituals performed by families and communities also provide significant social support to pregnant mothers, helping reduce feelings of isolation and strengthening psychological resilience. Thus, although rooted in traditional belief systems, these practices have real therapeutic effects. This demonstrates that a holistic understanding of pregnancy—one that involves the body, emotions, and spirituality—can provide benefits not only culturally but also medically and psychologically for both mother and fetus.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultures in Indonesia consistently view the fetus as a subject endowed with emotional sensitivity, spiritual depth, and significant moral status. Across various communities, the fetus is not

positioned as a passive biological object but as an entity embedded within a social relational network from the early stages of pregnancy. This perspective is reflected through customary rituals, behavioral rules, forms of pre-verbal communication, and spiritual practices devoted specifically to the unborn child. Pregnant women are placed in carefully protected circumstances because they are believed to maintain an intersubjective relationship with the fetus through emotions, intuition, and bodily sensations. Thus, pregnancy is understood as a social–spiritual phenomenon that involves both family and community in the process of safeguarding prenatal life. These findings reveal that traditional understandings of the fetus hold strong epistemological consistency and cultural value within the structure of Indonesian society.

The findings of this study open a broader dialogue between anthropology, medicine, developmental psychology, and cultural ethics. The fetal subjectivity acknowledged in local traditions aligns with modern scientific evidence concerning the importance of maternal emotional health, pre-verbal stimulation, and the influence of prenatal stress on neuropsychological development. By understanding pregnancy through a cultural lens, healthcare providers can build approaches that are more empathetic, context-sensitive, and collaborative with families. Further research may deepen the understanding of how cultural constructions of the fetus as a subject influence maternal mental health, early parenting practices, and long-term child development. Moreover, this knowledge has the potential to enrich maternal and child health policies, particularly efforts to integrate local cultural values into holistic maternal care services. In this way, culture and science can reinforce one another in nurturing life from the prenatal period onward.

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