



# Free Mixing (*Ikhtilāt*) as a Moral Practice in Education and Society: Islamic Ethics, Key Islamic Terms, and Personality Dynamism among the Indigenous Mëranaws

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## ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study explored how Mëranaw Muslims in Tubod, Lanao del Norte, understand and manage free mixing (*ikhtilāt*) within Islamic ethics, education, and local cultural norms. Thirty-five purposively selected participants were engaged through observations, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and reflexive journaling. Thematic analysis examined behavioral patterns, moral reasoning, and cultural meanings in mixed-gender educational and social settings. Participants viewed *ikhtilāt* as a morally sensitive space requiring intention, modesty, respectful speech, regulated physical proximity, and avoidance of gossip or illicit relationships. These practices demonstrate how Mëranaw individuals negotiate faith, culture, and daily interaction while preserving personal dignity, communal honor, and social cohesion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of *ikhtilāṭ*, or the intermingling of non-mahram men and women, is an important concern in Islamic ethics because it is closely related to modesty, moral discipline, social responsibility, and the protection of personal and communal honor. Islamic teachings do not reject all forms of interaction between men and women; however, they emphasize ethical boundaries that prevent *fitnah*, inappropriate attachment, secluded interaction, physical contact, and behavior that may lead to moral or social harm. In this regard, Islamic social ethics highlight modest conduct, respectful communication, self-restraint, and awareness of one's intention in mixed-gender environments (Hazim and Nazari, 2023; Sawai et al., 2020; Wagemakers, 2016).

Contemporary Muslim communities increasingly encounter mixed-gender spaces in schools, workplaces, markets, community events, and public institutions. These settings make gender interaction part of daily life, while also requiring individuals to negotiate religious expectations and social realities. Muslim communities interpret modesty, gender boundaries, and social conduct through both religious teachings and local cultural norms (Balo et al., 2022; Lussier and Fish, 2016; Nurcahyono, 2019). Among the Mëranaw, these negotiations are shaped not only by Islamic values but also by cultural expectations related to dignity, honor, speech, conduct, and social reputation. Language, identity, and cultural expressions among the Mëranaw reflect how moral behavior is connected to broader ideas of communal belonging and social accountability (Regaro and Balgoa, 2023).

The issue of free mixing is especially relevant in educational and social environments, where men and women may interact for learning, work, collaboration, and community participation. In such contexts, the challenge is not simply whether interaction occurs, but how it is morally regulated. Islamic ethical concepts such as *ḥayā'* or modesty, *adab* or proper conduct, avoidance of *khalwah*, and protection from *ghībah*, *namīmah*, and illicit relationships provide important moral frameworks for understanding acceptable interaction. Studies on Muslim modesty, gender relations, and Salafi ethical discourse show that modesty is not limited to clothing but extends to speech, gaze, movement, humor, social distance, and public behavior (Agustina, 2023; Belhaj, 2025; Rosadi, 2022).

Although Islamic teachings provide clear ethical guidance on gender interaction, less attention has been given to how these principles are lived, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday Mëranaw community life. Existing studies have discussed modesty, gender segregation, Islamic legal views, and Muslim gender attitudes in broader contexts (Abd Wahab and Ahmad, 2017; Bakour, 2023; Ilmi and Zayyadi, 2025; Jihaddin et al., 2024). However, the specific ways Mëranaw individuals in Tubod, Lanao del Norte, manage mixed-gender interaction in educational, social, and cultural settings remain underexplored. This gap is important because ethical conduct is not practiced in abstraction; it is shaped through daily encounters, local expectations, communal honor, and embodied habits.

This study, therefore, examines free mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*) as a moral practice within Islamic ethics, education, and society among the Mëranaw. Using an ethnographic approach, the study explores lived experiences, perceptions, and social practices regarding gender mixing in Tubod, Lanao del Norte. Ethnography allows the study to observe everyday behavior, listen to participants' narratives, and interpret the meanings attached to mixed-gender interaction within natural social settings. Through this approach, the study situates Islamic ethical

principles within Mëranaw cultural life and highlights how religious teachings and local norms jointly shape moral awareness, personality, and social behavior.

Specifically, this study aims to: (i) explore Mëranaw participants lived experiences and insights regarding gender mixing in Islam; and (ii) understand how mixed-gender interactions occur and are perceived in their daily educational, social, and cultural settings.

The study is grounded in the Qur'an, the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and classical Islamic legal principles concerning acceptable gender interaction. These foundations are examined alongside ethnographic observations and participant narratives to provide a culturally grounded understanding of how Islamic teachings are interpreted and practiced in Mëranaw society. The study is not intended to issue religious rulings or represent the position of a preacher or religious authority. Rather, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural, educational, and religious dimensions of mixed-gender interaction within contemporary Mëranaw community life. To clarify the conceptual and operational use of Islamic and cultural terms in this study, the key terms are defined in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Conceptual and operational definitions of key terms.

TERM	CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION IN THIS STUDY
Adab	Islamic etiquette or moral conduct in personal, social, and religious life.	Proper manners and behavior of men and women when interacting in mixed-gender settings.
Ajnaby/Ajnabiyyah	A man or woman who is not a mahram to a person.	Men or women outside the group of individuals with whom unrestricted interaction is religiously permitted.
Fatwa	A ruling on a point of Islamic law issued by a recognized authority.	Rulings made by qualified <i>ulamah</i> on specific points of Islamic law.
Fiqh	The interpretation and elucidation of Islamic law.	Juristic interpretation of Islamic legal matters related to gender interaction.
Fitnah	A state of trouble, temptation, or moral/social disorder.	Circumstances that may lead to moral or social problems prohibited by Islamic teachings.
Gender segregation	The practice of separating men and women to prevent moral transgressions.	Arrangements in schools, workplaces, or social events that maintain distance or prevent inappropriate mixing.
Hadith	Reports of the sayings, actions, or approvals of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), including chains of transmission.	Historical narrations of the Prophet's words and actions as conveyed by the <i>Sahaba</i> .
Haram	Anything prohibited by Islamic law.	Deeds or actions clearly forbidden by <i>Sharī'ah</i> .
Ikhtilāṭ	The mixing of men and women in one place.	Situations where men and women interact in shared spaces, such as schools, workplaces, or public events.
Illicit relationship	Any social, emotional, or sexual interaction prohibited by Islamic law.	Inappropriate relationships or interactions that may result from unregulated mixing.
Jurisprudence	A collection of rules imposed by authority.	Islamic jurisprudence, particularly <i>Sharī'ah</i> law.
Khalwa/Khulwah	A man being alone with a woman who is not a mahram in a secluded place.	Men and women being together in private spaces where prohibited acts could occur without hindrance.

**Table 1 (continue).** Conceptual and operational definitions of key terms.

TERM	CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION IN THIS STUDY
Mahram	A person with whom marriage is permanently prohibited under Islamic law.	Individuals with whom close interaction is permitted under Islamic law.
Modesty/Hayāʾ	A quality of humility, dignity, and moral consciousness is emphasized in Islamic ethics.	Behaviors and attitudes that demonstrate self-respect and respect for others in mixed-gender interactions.
Moral deviation	Actions or behaviors that violate moral or religious norms.	Behavior between men and women that contradicts <i>Sharīʿah</i> rules due to unregulated interaction.
Non-mahram	A person of the opposite sex who is legally permitted to marry under Islamic law.	Men and women who are not mahram to each other must observe restrictions in interaction.
Public decorum	Acceptable social behavior in public spaces.	Manners, speech, and conduct of men and women in schools, workplaces, or social gatherings according to Islamic etiquette.
Qurʾan	The sacred scripture of Islam was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).	The primary source of Islamic law and guidance, including <i>Sharīʿah</i> .
Satr/Awrah	Parts of the body that must be covered according to Islamic law.	Dress and appearance that preserve modesty in mixed-gender environments.
Sharīʿah	The Islamic code of law is derived from the Qurʾan and Sunnah.	Laws stipulated in the Qurʾan and prophetic teachings.
Social ethics	Principles guiding behavior in society based on moral or religious standards.	Standards of conduct expected from men and women in social and educational settings according to Islamic teachings.
Sunnah	The normative way of life in Islam is based on the teachings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).	The Prophet's deeds, sayings, and approvals are used as guidance.
Tabarruj	A woman's display of beauty or adornment is intended to attract attention.	Behaviors or styles of dress forbidden by <i>Sharīʿah</i> due to their provocative nature.
Temptation/Shahwah	Sexual desire or attraction that may lead to sinful behavior.	Emotional or physical attraction that may arise in mixed-gender environments and lead to prohibited actions.
Walimah	A marriage banquet is traditionally performed after the marriage ceremony.	Islamic wedding celebration.
Zina	Any prohibited sexual act or behavior that may lead to illicit relations.	Illegal sexual relationships or acts between men and women.

The novelty of this study lies in its ethnographic focus on how *ikhtilāt* is lived, interpreted, and morally negotiated within the Mëranaw community in Tubod, Lanao del Norte. While previous studies have discussed gender mixing, modesty, Islamic ethics, and gender relations in broader Muslim contexts, this study highlights the localized ways Mëranaw individuals connect Islamic teachings with cultural values such as *maratabat*, public decorum, and

communal reputation. By presenting participants' lived experiences and direct narratives, the study contributes a culturally grounded understanding of free mixing as an everyday moral practice rather than merely a legal or doctrinal issue.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the lived experiences, cultural meanings, and moral practices of the Mëranaw community regarding free mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*) in educational and social settings in Tubod, Lanao del Norte. Ethnography was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how Islamic ethical principles are interpreted, negotiated, and practiced in everyday interactions. This approach allowed the researcher to observe natural social behavior, examine moral reasoning, and interpret communal norms that could not be fully captured through quantitative methods.

A total of 35 Mëranaw Muslims were purposively selected as participants. The selection was based on three criteria: adherence to Islamic ethical principles, active engagement in mixed-gender educational, social, or work environments, and willingness to share personal experiences. Both male and female participants were included to obtain diverse perspectives on how mixed-gender interaction is understood and regulated in daily life.

Data were collected through multiple ethnographic techniques. Participant observation was used to document daily interactions, dress practices, speech patterns, spatial arrangements, and behavioral boundaries in mixed-gender spaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions, lived experiences, and moral reasoning regarding *ikhtilāṭ*. Informal conversations were also used to capture spontaneous reflections and culturally embedded meanings that might not emerge in formal interviews. In addition, reflexive journaling was used to record contextual details, researcher observations, and reflections throughout the fieldwork process. These methods provided a more holistic understanding of the social and moral dynamics of mixed-gender interaction among the Mëranaw (Mendes *et al.*, 2025; Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023).

Data analysis followed thematic ethnographic procedures. Interview transcripts, field notes, informal conversation records, and reflexive journal entries were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to intention, modesty, speech, physical proximity, social boundaries, gossip, illicit relationships, and communal honor. These codes were then grouped into broader themes and interpreted in relation to Islamic teachings and Mëranaw cultural norms. The findings were presented through thick descriptive narratives to reflect participants' lived realities, cultural meanings, and moral interpretations rather than numerical trends (Mendes *et al.*, 2025; Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained before participation. Confidentiality was maintained by protecting participants' identities and avoiding details that could disclose personal information. The researcher also practiced cultural sensitivity by engaging respectfully with participants and acknowledging the moral and religious significance of the topic. As both observer and cultural participant, the researcher documented authentic practices while remaining reflexive about positionality, interpretation, and ethical responsibility during fieldwork (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several themes emerged from prolonged observation, participant engagement, informal interviews, and cultural immersion among Mëranaw individuals navigating mixed-gender environments in Tubod, Lanao del Norte. Rather than presenting the findings as numerical trends, this study interprets participants' lived realities, cultural reasoning, and the meanings they attach to free mixing (*ikhtilāf*) within educational, work, and social settings. The findings show how Mëranaw individuals maintain Islamic discipline while participating in contemporary mixed-gender spaces.

Members of the Mëranaw community recognize mixed-gender interaction as a common part of daily life. Such interaction occurs in markets, schools, workplaces, neighborhood gatherings, and community events. However, participants did not describe these interactions as morally neutral. Instead, they approached them as situations that require intention, discipline, modesty, and awareness of Islamic ethical boundaries. The main themes and representative participant quotations are presented in **Table 2**. Participants understood *ikhtilāf* as a morally sensitive social condition rather than as an entirely prohibited or morally neutral reality. Mixed-gender interaction was considered unavoidable in daily educational, work, and social spaces; however, participants emphasized that such interaction must be guided by intention (*niyyah*), modesty (*ḥayā'*), respectful speech, and clear ethical boundaries. Mëranaw individuals do not simply avoid social participation; instead, they regulate participation through Islamic discipline and cultural expectations.

One important pattern was the role of intention and moral awareness in regulating interaction. Participants explained that they could engage in markets, schools, workplaces, and community events as long as their conduct remained respectful and purposeful. Avoiding seclusion with non-mahram individuals was also described as a way of protecting spiritual focus and preventing morally compromising situations. Free mixing is interpreted as a space requiring self-restraint, ethical awareness, and responsibility rather than complete social withdrawal. This interpretation is consistent with discussions of Islamic moral practice and gender boundaries in Muslim societies (Tajdin, 2022; Jihaddin *et al.*, 2024; Wagemakers, 2016).

Modesty also emerged as a central regulator of behavior. Participants described modesty not only in relation to clothing but also through speech, posture, gestures, humor, and physical distance. Everyday actions, such as speaking politely, maintaining respectful distance, and avoiding ambiguous jokes or gestures, were understood as expressions of religious and cultural discipline. This supports the view that *ḥayā'* functions as a lived moral ethic shaping how Muslim individuals conduct themselves in public and mixed-gender spaces (Belhaj, 2025; Sawai *et al.*, 2020).

Physical contact was treated as a clear moral boundary. Participants carefully navigated shared spaces to avoid accidental or unnecessary contact with non-mahram individuals. Even small gestures, playful touching, or excessive closeness were viewed as potentially inappropriate because they could blur ethical boundaries. This careful management of proximity demonstrates how Islamic values are embodied in everyday movement, spatial awareness, and social decision-making (Agustina, 2023; Belhaj, 2025; Rosadi, 2022).

**Table 2.** Emergent themes and representative participant quotations on free mixing (*ikhtilāf*) among the Mëranaw.

THEME	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTATION	INTERPRETATION
Intention and moral discipline in mixed-gender interaction	"I see men and women in the marketplace or during community events, but I always remind myself to keep my intention pure and act respectfully. It helps me protect my faith and focus on my responsibilities."	Participants viewed mixed-gender interaction as unavoidable in daily life but morally regulated through intention, respect, and self-discipline.
Avoidance of seclusion with non-mahram individuals	"When I avoid being alone with someone who is not a mahram, I feel calmer and more able to concentrate on my work and prayers. It helps me remain true to my beliefs while still engaging in daily life."	Avoiding private or secluded interaction helped participants preserve spiritual focus and moral confidence.
Modesty in dress, speech, and distance	"I always wear modest clothing, speak politely, and try to maintain a respectful distance."	Modesty was practiced through clothing, speech, posture, and spatial behavior in mixed-gender settings.
Careful regulation of humor and gestures	"Even when joking, I carefully choose my words and actions so nothing is misunderstood."	Participants regulated casual communication to prevent misunderstanding and preserve dignity.
Avoidance of physical contact	"Even a small bump makes me uncomfortable, so I always make space when passing by. It shows respect for myself and others."	Physical distance was treated as an expression of respect, modesty, and moral self-protection.
Maintaining dignity while interacting socially	"We can laugh together, but we avoid gestures that might be considered too close. It is about maintaining dignity and following our faith."	Participants distinguished acceptable social warmth from inappropriate familiarity.
Friendship with limits	"We can joke and laugh together, but we are careful not to form attachments or behave in ways that could compromise our values."	Social relationships were allowed but carefully bounded by religious and cultural expectations.
Managing emotional closeness	"It's normal to feel close to others, but we must always ensure our actions do not harm families or the community."	Participants linked personal conduct with family honor and communal responsibility.
Avoidance of illicit relationships	"When we work or study closely, feelings may arise, but we must control them. Illicit relationships bring shame and disturb the harmony of our community."	Attraction was recognized as possible, but self-control was viewed as necessary to prevent moral and social harm.
Protection of <i>maratabat</i> or communal honor	"Our actions not only reflect on ourselves; they also affect our families and the reputation of our community. Respecting boundaries preserves dignity for everyone."	Moral behavior was understood as both personal and collective responsibility.
Avoidance of gossip and harmful speech	"We avoid talking about others. Even small words can harm trust and respect in the community."	Participants viewed gossip as harmful to trust, dignity, and community harmony.
Avoiding situations that invite speculation	"If someone has a close interaction with a person of the opposite gender, people may speculate. We are careful to avoid giving room for gossip."	Participants managed not only actual behavior but also public perception of behavior.

Further, Mëranaw participants valued social harmony but practiced what may be described as “friendship with limits.” They accepted conversation, teamwork, and light humor in educational and social settings, yet they remained cautious about emotional attachment, excessive familiarity, and behavior that could compromise moral values. Participants did not reject social interaction itself; rather, they continuously evaluated its tone, purpose, and possible consequences.

A major cultural dimension of the findings is the importance of *maratabat*, or communal honor. Participants linked their personal actions to family dignity and community reputation. This means that moral behavior in mixed-gender interaction was not understood only as individual piety but also as collective responsibility. Avoiding illicit relationships, inappropriate closeness, and actions that could invite suspicion was seen as a way of protecting both the self and the wider community.

The avoidance of gossip (*ghībah*) and slander (*namīmah*) was also strongly emphasized. Participants explained that even small rumors could damage trust, respect, and social relationships. Therefore, they regulated not only their actions but also situations that could be misinterpreted by others. This concern reflects a moral system in which public perception, discretion, and accountability are closely connected to Islamic ethics and Mëranaw cultural values.

Mëranaw individuals navigate a delicate balance between Islamic moral discipline and contemporary social realities. In educational and social spaces, *ikhtilāṭ* becomes a site where faith, culture, personality, and communal responsibility are actively expressed. Participants’ practices show that Islamic teachings are lived through ordinary decisions about dress, speech, humor, distance, movement, collaboration, and public conduct. Through intentionality, modesty, avoidance of physical contact, controlled humor, prevention of illicit relationships, and protection from gossip, participants maintain interactions that are morally appropriate, socially respectful, and culturally meaningful.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted among 35 purposively selected Mëranaw participants in Tubod, Lanao del Norte; therefore, the findings may not represent all Mëranaw communities or other Muslim groups in the Philippines. Second, because the study used an ethnographic qualitative design, the findings emphasize depth of meaning rather than statistical generalization. Third, participants’ responses may have been influenced by social desirability because the topic involves religion, morality, gender interaction, and communal honor. Future studies may include participants from different localities, age groups, schools, workplaces, and religious backgrounds to provide broader comparative insights.

Based on the findings, educators, community leaders, and parents are encouraged to strengthen culturally sensitive moral education that helps young Mëranaw Muslims understand appropriate boundaries in mixed-gender educational and social settings. Schools and community institutions may promote guidance on *adab*, modest communication, respectful distance, and responsible interaction without discouraging necessary participation in learning, work, and public life. Future studies may examine how Mëranaw youth, teachers, and religious leaders interpret *ikhtilāṭ* across different educational levels and community contexts, using broader participant groups and comparative settings to deepen understanding of how Islamic ethics and local culture shape gender interaction.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study examined how Mëranaw individuals in Tubod, Lanao del Norte, understand and manage free mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*) within Islamic ethics, education, and society. The findings show that participants do not view mixed-gender interaction as entirely avoidable in contemporary life, especially in schools, workplaces, markets, and community gatherings. Instead, they approach it as a morally sensitive space that requires intention, modesty, respectful speech, regulated distance, and self-discipline. Participants maintained ethical boundaries by avoiding seclusion with non-mahram individuals, unnecessary physical contact, excessive joking, emotional attachment, illicit relationships, gossip, and situations that could invite suspicion. These practices reflect the influence of Islamic teachings and Mëranaw cultural values, particularly the importance of *maratabat*, or communal honor. The study concludes that *ikhtilāṭ* among the Mëranaw is negotiated through everyday moral practices that balance religious discipline, cultural expectations, and social participation. Thus, Islamic ethics are not only taught as abstract principles but are lived through daily decisions about dress, speech, movement, interaction, and public conduct.

#### 5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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