

The Honor of Women and *Belis* in Manggarai Traditional Marriage Customs

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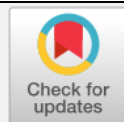
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ARTICLE INFO

Publication Info:
Research Article



How to cite:

Hairuddin, K., Iskandar, A. M., & Harifuddin, H. (2024). The Honor of Women and *Belis* in Manggarai Traditional Marriage Customs. *Society*, 12(2), 214-224.

DOI: [10.33019/society.v12i2.339](https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v12i2.339)

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Received: January 2, 2022;

Accepted: November 10, 2024;

Published: November 16, 2024;

ABSTRACT

This study explores the functions and meanings of belis, a traditional dowry or bride price in Manggarai culture, within marriage ceremonies in Mbuilt Village, West Manggarai. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in symbolic interactionism, data were collected through in-depth interviews with cultural informants, supported by observation and literature review, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman three-step framework. The findings reveal that belis serves as a key cultural element, fostering social integration, promoting harmony, and preserving traditions in Manggarai marriages. Symbolically, belis represents the union of two families (social integration) and signifies an economic exchange. The study also highlights the challenges faced by families, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, in fulfilling the belis requirements, underscoring its deep cultural significance and the commitment it represents.

Keywords: *Belis; Tradition; Traditional Marriage; Women*

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a country rich in ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. One manifestation of this cultural diversity can be observed in the varying traditions of different regions, particularly in marriage customs. Marriage ceremonies are often imbued with sacred traditions and rituals that reflect the socio-cultural conditions of the region (Aminullah, 2017). Customary practices influence these traditions passed down and taught by families and local communities.

In marriage customs, dowries or offerings symbolize the union of the bride and groom, as well as the joining of two families from distinct social and cultural backgrounds (Alfida et al., 2016). The term for dowries varies across ethnic groups. For instance, in the Batak community of North Sumatra, it is called *sinamot*; in the Minangkabau culture of West Sumatra, it is known as *bajapuik*; in the Bugis-Makassar community of South Sulawesi, it is referred to as *sompa* or *doi menrek* or *doi-panaik*; and in the Manggarai region of East Nusa Tenggara, it is termed *belis* (Sudjianto, 2020).

The contents of dowries also differ by tradition. They may include land, jewelry, houses, or money. In some cases, livestock such as buffalo, cattle, pigs, or horses are offered. For example, in the Toraja community, dowries may consist of buffaloes, rice, betel leaves, traditional clothing, traditional food, old coins, vegetables, and tubers (Zakaria, 2017). Among the Bugis-Makassar community, dowries typically include gold, the Qur'an, prayer equipment, and money (et al., 2017).

In the Manggarai community, particularly in Mbuit Village, Boleng Subdistrict, West Manggarai Regency, the unique customs of the local society are also evident in their marriage practices. A central aspect of these traditions is *belis*, a dowry that is considered the key to the customary marriage process. The requirements for *belis* include livestock such as pigs, cattle, goats, buffaloes, and horses, along with a specific amount of money, all of which must be prepared by the groom's family (Jovani, 2020). *Belis* plays a pivotal role in the marriage customs of Manggarai, symbolizing the rich cultural heritage and the bonds formed through these rituals.

Research on *belis* has been conducted by various scholars from diverse perspectives, such as economic, legal, and social dimensions. For example, Suryawati examined the contradictions in the demands for *belis* from the perspectives of customary law and socio-economics in Lante Village, West Reok Subdistrict, Central Manggarai Regency (Suryawati, 2017). Her study highlights the customary obligation for the groom to provide *belis* as a dowry to marry a woman from Manggarai. However, the high value often demanded *belis* conflicts with the socio-economic realities of the groom's family, especially in Lante Village. This contradiction arises because not all families can afford the high *belis* requested by the bride's family, leading to a perception that *belis* may exploit the groom's family.

Ninggrum explored *belis* in the marriage traditions of the Lamaholot ethnic group, focusing on its role as a mandatory requirement for traditional weddings (Ninggrum, 2016). In this context, *belis* takes the form of elephant tusks, which are highly valued due to their rarity and high cost. Among the Lamaholot people, the value of elephant tusks symbolizes the earnestness of a man in his desire to marry a Lamaholot woman.

Rodliyah et al. studied *belis* and its implications for the dignity of women in the marriage system of the Manggarai community in East Nusa Tenggara (Rodliyah et al., 2016). Their findings reveal that the provision of *belis* by the groom to the bride's family can elevate the economic status of the bride and her family. This is particularly true given the high value of *belis*, which can reach hundreds of millions of rupiah.

The previous studies primarily focused on the material and economic aspects of the *belis* tradition. However, this research in Mbuit Village examines the functions and symbolic meanings of the materials used in *belis* as cultural symbols. This perspective has not been widely explored, particularly through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the functions and meanings of *belis* in Manggarai traditional marriage customs in Mbuit Village, Boleng Subdistrict, West Manggarai Regency. The research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are the functions of *belis* in Manggarai traditional marriage? (2) What are the symbolic meanings of *belis* in Manggarai traditional marriage?

This study is grounded on the premise that *belis* continues to be preserved by the Manggarai community despite changing times. This persistence suggests that *belis* hold vital functions and meanings for the life of the Manggarai people.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Symbolic Interactionism Theory

This theory posits that the meanings interpreted by humans arise from the communication between individuals. It also places the concept of self and individual perception in a central position constructed through interactions using symbols. According to Blumer, following the ideas of Herbert Mead, achieving specific goals requires relationships between individuals and society that occur naturally (Wirawan, 2012).

The essence of symbolic interaction lies in the exchange of symbols interpreted as representations of communication. This perspective recommends viewing human behavior within the context of reciprocal relationships, where one's actions are a result of considerations expected by others interacting with them. The understanding individuals give is certainly in accordance with the socio-cultural context of the interaction taking place.

In this understanding, meaning is built through social interactions, which are not free from the intervention of social structures. Instead, they are closely tied to the interests or constructions of social power within the local community (Mulyana, 2002).

For Mead, in addition to recognizing others during interactions, individuals also recognize themselves. Symbolic interaction is carried out using language as the primary symbol, alongside gestures. Symbols are not fixed facts; they exist in a process that continuously evolves. This process of meaning transformation is the main subject of analysis for interactionists. Through interactions, individuals learn to understand conventional symbols, subsequently learning to use them and comprehend the roles of other actors (Poloma, 2010).

Blumer's concept of symbolic interactionism highlights the unique nature of human interaction, characterized by mutual interpretation and understanding between individuals. It is not merely a reaction to others' actions but is based on the meanings assigned to others' actions. Human interaction is mediated through symbols, interpretation, or mutual understanding of goals and actions. For Mead, every individual possesses a variety of alternative actions in their thoughts before representing them in actual social reality (Ritzer, 2012).

Principles of Symbolic Interactionism:

- 1) A person's response to a symbol is always based on media that are contextually perceived or understood from human behavior or the surrounding objects.
- 2) Meaning is the result of social interaction, not inherent in the object. Meaning is shaped by the influence of language expressed in actions and ideas.
- 3) The meaning understood by individuals shifts continuously, both without interaction and through interaction, due to mental processes triggered by internal dialogue (Soubur, 2004).

In the philosophical pragmatism perspective, symbolic interactionism sees human social behavior as relying on solutions to problems through adaptation to the physical environment. Humans understand their surroundings with full awareness and use their perspective to interpret the environment. Social behavior always manifests symbolically.

In the context of traditional Manggarai marriages, the researcher observes that all stages within the tradition are the results of community interaction. The symbols in this context convey meanings collectively understood by the community. Thus, there is a synergistic interaction between individuals, society, and their environment in forming self-identity. Identity and culture are inseparable entities. Boundaries illustrate differences in beliefs, interests, and relative power among individuals or groups. Individuals adapt their actions through an interpretative process. The meaning itself is closely related to perception, which is the process of assigning meaning to sensations (sensation is the process of capturing stimuli through the senses). In other words, perception transforms sensation into information (Wirawan, 2012).

Brodbeck's Categories of Meaning:

1) Inferential Meaning

The meaning of a word (symbol) is the object, thought, idea, or concept referred to by the symbol (called the referent). A single symbol can have multiple referents.

2) Significant Meaning

A term is linked to other concepts.

3) Intentional Meaning

The meaning intended by the user of a symbol. This meaning exists only in the mind of the individual and may vary between individuals (Soubur, 2004).

In human communication, a distinctive feature is the emergence of vocal symbols in speech. These vocal symbols are understood as standard by listeners. This is different from non-human communication, such as among animals, which primarily relies on physical signals.

"Talking about symbols inevitably involves the meanings conveyed by those symbols. As James P. Spradley said, 'All cultural meanings are created using symbols,' and Clifford Geertz emphasized that 'Meaning can only be stored within symbols'" (Soubur, 2004).

Symbols are also used in subjective thought, particularly linguistic symbols. However, these symbols are not used in visible form but through internal conversations. Similarly, invisibly, individuals refer to themselves regarding the identity contained in others' reactions to their behavior (Wirawan, 2012).

'Gestures' as significant symbols emerge in individuals who respond meaningfully. Through these symbols, thinking processes occur. The essence of thought is shaped by the meaningful signals internalized through externalized interactions as a form of interaction with others. Therefore, discussions about signals choose meaning, and the stimulus and response are shared among all participants (Upe, 2010).

A meaning is only valid situationally or contextually and is not universal. It depends on the agreement among individuals interacting using shared symbols. For example, in Sundanese or Javanese communities, pointing at something is done using the thumb, while in Bugis-Makassar communities, the index finger is used. Thus, meaning is a mental agreement among individuals who use or understand the symbol.

2.2. Belis

Traditional Manggarai marriage ceremonies are inseparable from *belis*, particularly in their cultural and symbolic significance. *Belis* is a vital part of the cultural heritage of Greater Manggarai. Beyond the religious marriage rites, *belis* can be interpreted as a dowry or bridal price. In everyday Manggarai usage, the term is often used interchangeably with *paca*. Essentially, *belis* refers to valuable items or properties that are deemed culturally significant and are used in Manggarai traditional wedding customs (Janggur, 2010).

Belis consists of a set of dowries provided by the groom's family (*anak rona*) to the bride's family (*anak wina*), typically determined through mutual agreement during the *pongo* (bonding) process. This dowry generally includes money and livestock, such as buffaloes and horses. In Manggarai traditional wedding terminology, money is referred to metaphorically using terms like *kala* (betel leaves), *one cikang* (in the pocket), and *one mbaru* (in the house). At the same time, livestock is described with terms such as *peang tana* (outside the house).

All discussions regarding the *belis* amount to be given by the groom's family to the bride's family take place during the *pongo*. During this process, negotiations are conducted between the *tongka* (spokesperson) from the bride's family and the groom's family. The bride's family sets the initial *belis* amount, which the groom's family responds to through bargaining until a final agreement is reached. If no agreement is reached, the ceremony is postponed.

Once all matters concerning *belis* are discussed and a mutual agreement is reached, the groom's family presents the agreed-upon dowry to the bride's family.

3. Research Methodology

This study is descriptive and qualitative, using a symbolic interactionism approach. The focus of the research is the function and meaning of *belis* and its position as a primary requirement in marriage. The selected informants are those who have an understanding of the *belis* tradition in Manggarai marriage customs, such as traditional leaders, community figures, and religious leaders.

Data collection uses in-depth interviews regarding the function and meaning of *belis*, observation of the use of *belis* in marriage ceremonies, and literature studies. The use of these data collection techniques is intended to gather deeper insights into the issues addressed in this paper.

Data analysis follows a three-step qualitative analysis technique: categorization, reduction, and conclusion (Miles & Huberman, 1999). In the categorization phase, interview data on the themes of *belis* meaning and *belis* function are grouped according to themes in a specific table. Then, data that are not directly related to the themes are reduced or discarded, and finally, conclusions are drawn.

4. Results

4.1. The Role of Belis in Manggarai Customary Marriage

Belis fundamentally holds positive symbolic value. The primary focus is not on the amount of *belis*—such as the value of money, goods, or livestock given—but rather the meaning it conveys: a symbol of respect for the dignity of women. Women are viewed as figures of motherhood who give birth and life to humanity. Therefore, a woman's presence in the family of the groom is regarded as positive. *Belis* serves as a medium through which appreciation is expressed for the woman's role as a mother, forming the basis for reciprocal familial interactions between the bride and groom's families. It functions as a reminder for both parties of the importance of mutual respect. Thus, *belis* is a socio-cultural product created to ensure

human welfare, particularly upholding the dignity of women within a cultural context. Additionally, *belis* play a role in strengthening the bond between husband and wife, as well as between their respective families.

Belis is viewed as a form of honor and respect for the woman, her family, and both parties involved. It also acts as an expression of gratitude toward the bride's parents for raising their daughter. Moreover, *belis* symbolize the groom's responsibility toward the bride. Choosing a partner in Manggarai society – whether male or female – requires careful consideration and is typically a matter for the extended family of the prospective couple. Marriages in Manggarai are not taken lightly. The concept of *belis* is one of the essential conditions for marriage, where the groom (referred to as *anak wina*) presents a certain amount of money and livestock to the bride's family (referred to as *anak rona*).

In the context of Manggarai marriage, *belis* plays a significant role, both as a tradition and as a requirement symbolizing familial ties. It serves as an expression of thanks to the woman for leaving her family and joining a new one while also providing value to the woman herself. *Belis* further determines the legitimacy of the marriage as compensation for the parents' efforts and serves to strengthen the kinship bond between the groom's and bride's families. It unites two distinct clans and families, honoring the sacredness of marriage.

During the traditional Manggarai marriage process, symbolic terms such as “*One Cikang*” (in the pocket) and “*One Peang*” (outside the house) are used to refer to *belis* components. “*One Cikang*” refers to the amount of money the groom's family prepares for the bride's family, while “*One Peang*” refers to the livestock—such as buffalo, horses, cattle, goats, or pigs—that are provided, often kept outside the house.

The *belis* tradition in the village of Mbuit is unique in several ways. Both the groom's and the bride's families, as well as the extended families from both sides, are required to wear *songke* (Manggarai traditional cloth). This symbolizes the unity between the two families. Additionally, the groom is required to wear a *topi re'a* (a comfortable traditional hat made from rattan), signifying that he is respected within the family. According to informant P.O.,

“*Belis* plays an important role in Manggarai customary marriage as a way to elevate the status of women and their families. It is a responsibility that must be fulfilled to ensure the smooth progress of the marriage. A man who enters into marriage without honoring the *belis* tradition does not value his dignity. *Belis* is a culture that has been passed down through generations, reflecting seriousness and responsibility” (P.O., personal communication, 2022).

Another informant, M.N., stated,

“Maintaining the primary role of belis is crucial to prevent any shift in its meaning. It is a fundamental part of the marriage process in Manggarai and must be preserved and passed down to future generations. Belis is a primary requirement, as it reminds men of the effort and hard work they put in when marrying their loved ones, enabling them to be prepared for any circumstances” (M.N., personal communication, 2022).

The involvement of families in gathering *belis* is further illustrated by informant Y.A., who shared:

“I participated in sida weta and received money from several relatives, including from my aunts and cousins. My male relatives were also willing to contribute a portion of their earnings. We also held a kumpul kope event, which raised a significant amount of money due to the cooperation of my friends. I had previously been involved in

organizing *kumpul kope* events for others who had already married" (Y.A., personal communication, 2022).

In Manggarai, *kumpul kope* (money gathering) is frequently held during weddings and other events, where families and friends contribute to help the groom's family meet the *belis* requirements. This mutual aid reflects the community's spirit of collaboration, not only in matters of *belis* but also in education and during times of mourning.

Belis serves as the dowry to be presented to the bride's family to ensure the marriage is conducted according to familial expectations. It plays a critical role in elevating the status of women and their families, acknowledging the efforts of the women's families, and uniting both families. Rather than being a source of division, *belis* strengthens familial bonds. Suppose the groom's family is unable to meet the *belis* requirement during the marriage ceremony. In that case, they will settle the balance during subsequent events, such as funerals, births, or educational milestones, without coercion, as *belis* is fundamentally about kinship.

As informant M.D. emphasized,

"Songke fabric is always used in Manggarai's customary ceremonies, especially during weddings. The fabric not only carries traditional significance but also embodies the values expressed through its patterns and colors. The process of making songke – from weaving it by hand using plant-based threads – remains a traditional craft. Before a customary marriage, the groom's family must prepare the requirements set by the bride's family; if the role of belis is not fulfilled, its meaning shifts. Therefore, we must uphold traditions, including the importance of belis in the marriage process" (M.D., personal communication, 2022).

Songke fabric is a striking element of every ceremonial event in Manggarai, especially weddings, and *belis* must be preserved in its traditional role to avoid a shift in its meaning.

In the words of K.H.,

"The presence of family is crucial in the marriage process, not just as a ceremonial formality, but as a sign of support for the couple. Belis is a family tradition, and there is no system of rejection if the groom's family cannot meet the belis requirements. Any sacrifices made by the groom to fulfill the bride's family's requests must be valued. Suppose the belis is not fully provided during the wedding. In that case, the groom's family will settle it later during other significant family events, following mutual discussions between both families" (K.H., personal communication, 2022).

Based on these interviews, it is evident that the family plays a crucial role in the customary marriage process. The presence of family members signifies strong support for the couple, and the *belis* payment, which is a primary requirement in the customary marriage process, will be settled by the groom's family based on an agreement made between both families.

4.2. The Meaning of *Belis* in Manggarai Customary Marriage

Belis is a dowry provided by the groom's family to the bride's family. Before determining the amount of *belis* to be given, representatives from each family, known as *tongka* (spokespersons), are prepared for discussions. The determination of the *belis* amount involves negotiations between the *tongka* from both families.

During the *belis* handover, if the groom's family is unable to fully meet the requested amount set by the bride's family, further discussions will be held. These discussions, conducted by the respective *tongka*, address the shortfall in the *belis*. Despite any deficits, the bride's family typically accepts the partial *belis* brought by the groom's family, and the marriage process proceeds as planned. However, the remaining balance of the *belis* must still be settled later, as any unpaid *belis* represents an obligation for the groom's family.

Thus, *belis* is considered a fundamental requirement for customary marriage, reflecting its role within a familial context and its importance in preserving traditional practices. As informant P. J. explained:

"Belis is a primary requirement in marriage because it is a tradition passed down by our ancestors, and as successors, we must continue this practice in every marriage process" (P. J., personal communication, 2022).

In discussions surrounding *belis*, a local saying is often cited: *"toe salang tua, landing salang woe taku tedeng"* (not the path to a palm tree, but the path to a water source). This expression underscores that the kinship bond established through marriage remains intact even after the individuals involved have passed away. This cultural perspective highlights the enduring significance of *belis* as a symbol of unity and familial connection in Manggarai society.

5. Discussion

In every culture, some symbols represent values recognized and upheld by the community. These symbols serve as unifying elements, as members of the community share a common interpretation of their meaning.

From the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, *belis* is not merely a material tradition imbued with various symbols and meanings (Susanti et al., 2016). Instead, it also serves as a recognized function within the Manggarai community, particularly as a social bond that unites two distinct families within the institution of marriage.

Simultaneously, the *belis* symbol undergoes sacralization. This sacralization reinforces social norms regarding the obligation to include *belis* as an essential component of any customary marriage ceremony. In essence, a marriage is not deemed valid under customary law without the presence of *belis*.

Regions across Indonesia have their symbolic representations of dowries. For instance, in Aceh, it is known as *Mayam* (Abdullah, 2022) in the Bugis area as *Doi Menre* (Juhansar et al., 2021), and the Makassar ethnic group as *Doi Panaik* (Kadir et al., 2021).

Within a community, social harmony is paramount. To achieve this, members need to share a common interpretation of the community's primary symbols. These shared interpretations become objectified and deeply ingrained in the minds of individuals, thereby binding the community members emotionally and spiritually.

In the Manggarai community, the *belis* symbol represents respect and the honor of Manggarai women. There are at least four recognized functions of *belis*. First, it serves as a form of respect. Second, it establishes social and emotional bonds. Third, it expresses gratitude. Fourth, it symbolizes the perceived value of women. However, this value is not always viewed purely in material terms or monetary figures. Instead, its meaning varies depending on the cultural perspective (Tukan & Sawarjuwono, 2020). Nevertheless, in some family realities, *belis* can be interpreted differently by husbands, potentially leading to domestic violence (Lakamau & Wibowo, 2021).

Given its importance, the *belis* tradition is actively preserved by the community, albeit with certain adaptations (Nuwa, 2019). These adaptations include changes such as the substitution of traditional elephant tusk *belis* with more practical alternatives (Wadu, 2016).

Another intriguing aspect is the support from the Bible, which does not oppose *belis*. It is permitted as long as it is approached critically and positioned as part of the cultural transformation of *belis* itself (Kamuri & Toumeluk, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The *belis* tradition holds significant functions for the sustainability of Manggarai society. First, it serves as a means of social integration by uniting two families from different backgrounds. Second, it functions as a tool for social harmonization, helping to mitigate conflicts within the community. Third, *belis* fulfills a cultural function by preserving and perpetuating this long-standing tradition.

As a prerequisite for a valid marriage, *belis* is also recognized as a form of dowry (*mahar*). It can be understood as a medium of exchange whose value is determined by social status. The higher the social status, the greater the value of the *belis*.

This study recommends that the *belis* tradition be adapted to align with contemporary developments to ensure that it remains relevant and does not fall behind in the evolving cultural landscape.

7. Acknowledgment

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all individuals who supported and contributed to this study. We are especially thankful to the traditional leaders, community leaders, and religious figures of Mbut village for their invaluable insights, time, and cooperation. Your contributions have been essential to the successful completion of our research.

8. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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