

Beyond Tradition: Exploring Alternative Marital Strategies for *Belis* in the Southwest Sumba Regency

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Abstract

In Southwest Sumba, the *belis* tradition, or bride price, is a crucial aspect of marriage practices. While the system is intended to honor and show appreciation for the bride and her family, symbolizing the groom's commitment and respect, it often results in substantial financial burdens, causing social dilemmas and prompting alternative practices. Based on this fact, this paper investigates the influence of the *belis* tradition and the emergence of alternative marriage practices in Southwest Sumba. Through qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and participatory observations in the Southwest Sumba Regency, the experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in *belis* practice are explored. The result showed that financial constraints and the burden of *belis* obligations prompt some couples to seek alternatives such as *dowo koro* [entering the room], pregnancy out of wedlock [*pakabu ulu*], and elopement [*pakodong*], or softer approaches like paying *belis* and postponing marriage [*kahaya ulu mata*]. They go beyond tradition. These alternatives reflect shifting social norms regarding financial considerations, independence, and relationship equality. The study contributes to understanding the complexities of marriage and *belis* traditions in Southwest Sumba, particularly among young people in the Perono community of the Buku Bani site. It emphasizes the evolving nature of marriage within changing cultural contexts and underscores the importance of recognizing individual values and aspirations.

Keywords

Belis; bride price; marriage; Southwest Sumba; tradition

Introduction

For Indonesians, dowry tradition is a cultural practice that plays a vital role in their marriage customs. It can be seen as a symbol of dignity and respect for the family of the bride and groom (Ash-Shabah et al., 2021; Busyro et al., 2023) and a marker of the social status of engaged families (Aini, 2014; Gani & Hayati, 2017; Hakim, 2014; Yansa & Perkasa, 2016). However, this cultural practice is not without controversy. Traditionally, a dowry is often associated with a significant financial burden and even debt for the families involved (Lubis & Suprihatin, 2023). The economic burden of this tradition is felt in specific communities, as is the case with people in the Southwest Sumba Regency. In Perono Buku Bani, we find Lucy's confession about her marriage. According to her, she chose to get married in Bali, which is outside her hometown, because she wanted to marry her beloved immediately. This decision was made since the spouse was constrained by the tradition of *belis* [bride price payment] (Interview Lucy, 18 July 2023). It shows a fascinating phenomenon in Southwest Sumba, where some couples who want to get married face difficulties in fulfilling the *belis* requirements, choose alternative solutions to get married, and try to avoid the *belis* tradition that is strictly adhered to in their *perono* [village]. This strategy is common for women under strict ancestral traditions (Dhillon, 2020; Maxwell & Conrad, 2023).

In Southwest Sumba, the tradition of *belis* plays a critical role in marriage practices (Dori, 2023; Kleden, 2017; Lon & Widayawati, 2017). Ideally, the *belis* system is meant to honor and appreciate the bride and her family, symbolizing a man's commitment and respect. However, it often poses significant financial burdens, leading to social dilemmas and alternative practices. Some couples, unable to meet the high *belis* demands, opt to marry outside their hometowns to circumvent these traditional requirements. As highlighted by Lucy's decision to marry in Bali due to *belis* constraints, this phenomenon illustrates a growing shift in cultural practices. It highlights the tension between traditional and modern desires for autonomy and immediate union.

In India, as explained by Cikita et al. (2023), dowry is also given by the bride-to-be to the prospective husband. The dowry in India serves as a symbol of the acceptance of women into the husband's family. However, there is often intimidation and domestic violence against women who have not given dowry as requested by men. Therefore, to protect women, the Indian government has issued various regulations, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act, Indian Penal Code, and The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, as well as amending customary laws, including Hindu rules that are considered discriminatory and detrimental to women. So far, dowry giving in India has been deemed illegal so that dowry recipients can be subject to imprisonment and fines. In the case of wife murder caused by *dowry death*, the perpetrator can be sentenced to prison (Cikita et al., 2023). Just like in India, a similar situation exists in Bangladesh, where the high demand for dowry from husband to wife is often accompanied by threats of violence and divorce triggered by neoliberal economic developments in the country. Problems related to marriage and asking for dowry allow husbands to take money from their wives and families. This study shows that dowry demand can be understood as a form of conversion in which intimate relationships are transformed into capital accumulation projects, referred to as 'intimate extraction' (Gardner, 2024).

Meanwhile, research on the *belis* tradition has extensively covered various aspects and regions. Studies like those by Dade (2012), Juliawati (2016), Kleden et al. (2021), and Lede et al. (2017) provided comprehensive overviews of *belis* practices in East Nusa Tenggara.

Specific to Sumba, researchers like Steven and Yunanto (2019), Syahrul et al. (2020), Selan et al. (2023), and Hermawan and Nomleni (2024) examined the social, cultural, and economic impacts of belis. However, these studies often overlook the Kodi tribe community in Southwest Sumba, focusing instead on broader regional practices or other tribes like Wewewa. Even though on Sumba Island itself, there are three major tribes, namely Wewewa, Laura, and Kodi, which have three different languages from each other. This difference in wording makes the terms used to refer to the steps of ritual implementation different.

Furthermore, the ritual is performed and interpreted differently. Wara (2012) touched on social and cultural changes in the region but lacked a focus on the Kodi community and the alternatives couples adopt to navigate the belis tradition. This paper aims to complement the shortcomings of previous studies that ignored Kodi's tribe and the aspects of exploring options as part of social changes in marriage due to the tradition of belis. Prospective brides and grooms get around this marriage system with bride prices of belis by developing an alternative wedding tradition. They go beyond custom.

In line, this paper, in addition to exploring the implementation of the belis tradition and the meanings it contains, also wants to unravel the influence of the belis tradition, encourage a deeper understanding of the factors that influence couples in finding alternatives, and look at community responses and related social and cultural implications. This paper also explores the challenges and consequences of belis customs, specifically in today's Perono Buku Bani Society.

This research is crucial for understanding the evolving dynamics of traditional practices in contemporary Sumba society. Cultural traditions like belis are not static; they are continuously negotiated and reinterpreted by each generation. As Hall (2020) and Barker (2005) argued, traditions are shaped by power relations and are subject to change as different actors navigate these norms. This study contributes to the anthropological discourse on how traditions adapt in the face of modernity and economic pressures, aligning with the perspectives of Clifford and Marcus (2023) and Marcus and Fischer (1999). By exploring the responses and adaptations within the Kodi community, this research provides valuable insights into the interplay between tradition and modernity, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of cultural practices in a rapidly changing world.

Method

This paper is the result of research using qualitative research methods. Through this approach, researchers searched for meaning, meaning, or understanding of a cultural event, especially those related to the 'belis' tradition (Neuman, 2014; Pathak et al., 2013; Patton, 2014). This research used a qualitative approach, collecting and analyzing descriptive data to understand the influence of the belis tradition and explore alternatives to marriage in the Southwest Sumba Regency. First, this study used a qualitative approach to understand the impact of the belis tradition on marriage in the people of Southwest Sumba. The qualitative approach allowed researchers to explore the experiences, perspectives, and meanings inherent in these traditional practices. Second, to collect data, researchers used methods common in qualitative research, namely in-depth interviews and observation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

In-depth interviews were conducted with couples involved in 'belis' and alternative exploration, in this case, Lucy and her husband, Ori's father, Mama Ruben, and Lukas and his wife. In-depth interviews allowed researchers to gain deeper insight into the couple's thoughts, feelings, and motivations in dealing with the belis tradition and looking for alternatives.

Meanwhile, participatory observation was also used to directly observe marriage practices, beliefs, and traditions in the Southwest Sumba Regency (Kawulich, 2005; Mackellar, 2013; Pohland, 1972). Through these observations, researchers could see social interactions, family dynamics, and cultural contexts that influence the implementation of the belis tradition. Third, data analysis was conducted with a thematic approach, where data from in-depth interviews and participatory observations were analyzed to identify emerging patterns, themes, and meanings related to the influence of the belis tradition and exploration of alternatives in marriage (Roth, 2015). Fourth, researchers compared the experiences and perspectives of couples involved in the belis tradition and investigated other options. This allowed researchers to illustrate differences and similarities in views and the impact of the two practices. Finally, this study focused on the Buku Bani site's kampung community [perono] in the Southwest Sumba Regency. This focus enables researchers to understand marriage practices and beliefs in a specific local context. This research was carried out simultaneously on Rato Nale in Southwest Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

The research protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the National Research and Innovation Agency, and it is supported by decision letter number 231/KE.01/SK/05/2023.

Results and discussion

Belis from the perspective of the Buku Bani Perono community

Southwest Sumba is one of the regencies on Sumba Island, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. Sumba Island is southeast of Flores Island and the southern part of the Nusa Tenggara Islands. East Nusa Tenggara has four districts: West Sumba, Southwest Sumba, Central Sumba, and East Sumba (Damara, 2019). This study took the locus in Southwest Sumba, located in the southwestern part of Sumba Island. Geographically, Southwest Sumba is bordered by West Sumba Regency to the north, Central Sumba Regency to the east, the Indian Ocean to the south, and East Sumba Regency to the west (Willa & Noshirma, 2015).

The capital of the district is Tambolaka. In the Southwest Sumba region, there are several ethnic groups or tribes that inhabit the area, such as We Ewewa, Laura, and Kodi. This paper will focus on the Perono Buku Bani community, part of the Kodi community. Kodi has three *perono* [villages] that have become prehistoric sites: Parono Buku Bani, Tosi, and Toda. Buku Bani is a large village with seven small villages: Waikaroko, Nggalu Watu, Wudi, Ramba Loddo, Lamete, Wai Yengo, and Pakae. The residents of the three villages still believe in the Ancestral Religion called Marapu. However, many of them are recorded as Christians and Catholics, and a few people also embrace Islam (Interview Paulus, July 2023).

Southwest Sumba is famous for its natural beauty, stunning beaches, and rich culture. Sumba Island is generally known for its cultural diversity, unique traditions, and traditional

ceremonies still vigorously carried out by the local community. The island also has a diverse landscape, ranging from white sandy beaches to green hills and highlands. One of the fascinating local cultures in Southwest Sumba is belis. Community wisdom called belis is a tradition of giving a bride price to local women to be married. Belis is a bride price in the form of livestock provided by the man to the woman when going to a wedding in the Buku Bani community in Southwest Sumba.

The belis tradition derives from the Marapu, an ancestral belief in Southwest Sumba. In the Marapu belief, every time there is a passage event in the human cycle, including when a person enters marriage, there will be a vacuum of the cosmos. The belis given by men to women is considered a way to fill the void of the cosmos (Kapita, 1976). Thus, belis transcendently serves to balance the cosmos. Referring to the classic view of Hertz (1960) and van Gennep (1960) about rites of passage, the intermediate stage in the human life cycle always leaves room for uncertainty, emptiness, mystery, and challenges. In this case, when a person enters the stage of marriage, he also experiences separation, merge, and aggregation, as van Gennep called it. That stage needs to be accompanied by rituals to secure the passage process. In the Buku Bani society, belis is part of securing and maintaining balance during such migrations.

Anggraeni et al. (2003) mentioned other functions of belis, such as strengthening kinship relations, respect for women, and social prestige. However, the primary function of marapu belief is to maintain the balance of the cosmos. This function is different in dowry traditions elsewhere. Several places in Indonesia also recognize dowry traditions, for example, uang panai in Bugis society (Mahmuddin & St. Aisyah, 2019; Rinaldi et al., 2022), jujuran in Banjar, mayam in Aceh culture, japuik in Padang Pariaman community, Mahar Bowo in Nias community (Azhari et al., 2024; Kadir et al., 2021; Khasanah et al., 2020; Salsabila et al., 2023). In some areas, such as Pariaman-Minangkabau, the dowry is given to the man, not the woman (Busyro et al., 2023). This is similar to dowries in some parts of India that favor men (Agarwal Goel & Barua, 2023). Indonesia and several other parts of the world, especially in Asia, recognize dowries with their respective local terms (Anukriti et al., 2022; Makino, 2019). However, dowry in the places mentioned above generally strengthens kinship and respect for women or men and shows social prestige. However, belis is more than that; it is part of the spirituality of the Marapu faith. Failure to do so will disrupt the balance of nature and can result in diseases and even natural disasters. The position of belis, when compared to dowry in Islamic law, is equally a pillar in the marriage that the man must fulfill. The difference is that dowry in Islam is compulsory, but it aims to achieve women's rights and respect (Simbolon, 2022). While belis goes beyond that, it serves respect for women while maintaining the balance of the universe.

The process of belis in Buku Bani society involves a series of talks between the male and female families. Belis is an integral part of the wedding itself. The marriage will be considered perfect after going through a connected traditional procession. Before the wedding, the man will perform the first stage, enter ask [ptama pnege], to the woman's family. This stage is also known as *lamugeren panengin* [knock on the door], in which the male side hands over one buffalo or one horse. At this stage, the male family will officially apply for a female proposal to the female family. Each side will appoint a spokesperson called a *To Keteng Pnege* to represent them in the talks process. Usually, the *To Keteng Pnege* is a respected and aged family figure. In this first stage, the men's families will convey their goodwill and why they want to propose to women. They will also discuss matters related to the requirements of belis, such as the number of farm animals that must be submitted for the bride price. At this time, negotiations will occur between the two sides to reach an agreement that satisfies both parties.

The importance of this first stage is to initiate a formal process in marriage, respect the woman's family, and ensure the readiness of the men to carry out their responsibilities as husband and head of the family. This stage also opens up opportunities for the woman's family to evaluate the background and goodwill of the groom (Interview Martinus and Benyamin, July 2023).

After the woman approves the proposal, the right time is determined to carry out the next stage, namely *antar sirih pinang* or *latahamama*. At this stage, the male party usually carries one buffalo or horse and one bag of betel and areca nut. At this stage, marriage is also held with a special ritual. One is the ritual *tunu manumbolo*, which refers to the burning of chickens. This symbolic ritual marks the beginning of the marriage bond between the two parties. In addition, the ritual *kalidda koro kambatu luna* is also performed, during which couples enter a circle of rooms and are surrounded by piles of pillows. This stage reflects an essential moment in the marriage tradition in the Buku Bani community. The *Antar betel nut* symbolizes gift exchange as a sign of agreement between the male and female families. In this process, the man formally presents a gift to the woman's family as a sign of their appreciation and commitment to carrying out the marriage. The *tunu manumbolo* and *kalidda koro kambatu luna* rituals also have deep meaning. They depict the beginning of a new married life, where the couple enters a new world together and enters their roles and responsibilities as husband and wife. This ritual also signifies the presence and approval of the family and community around them (Interview Rato Nale and Martinus, July 2023).

When delivering betel nut and areca nut, both parties, represented by *To Keteng Pnenge*, will gather and sit together to discuss and determine the number of livestock that will be part of the *belis*. The *belis* discussed consists of two parts: *belis panuwale* [meet the price] and *belis lawoyo* [leave the house]. In *belis Panuwale*, the male party must provide a certain amount of farm animals as part of the bride's price. Typically, the requirements for *belis panuwale* include one mother buffalo, two calves, and two horses. This shows the commitment and responsibility of the men in fulfilling the agreed *belis* requirements as part of the marriage tradition in the Buku Bani community. In addition, there is also *belis lawoyo* which involves a more significant number of farm animals. At this stage, the male side must provide one male buffalo, two female buffaloes as a mother, three buffalo cubs, and ten horses. The *belis lawoyo* shows a more outstanding commitment on the part of the man to leave the woman's family home and take the woman to live together in a new household. The gift of *belis* reflects commitment, responsibility, respect for women, and the customs and values upheld in the community.

However, the number of *belis* is still being negotiated and discussed. These discussions are usually conducted to reach an adequate agreement for both families. In this conversation, the men will convey the number and type of livestock they mean as *belis*. The woman's family will respond; they can propose changes or additions if the number or type of animals is inappropriate. At this stage, both sides will try to reach an adequate agreement. Factors influencing negotiations between a man's and a woman's families include social status, wealth, and related family welfare. If both parties agree on the agreed number and type of livestock, then the *belis* process will continue. This process of conversation and negotiation is individual and can vary from family to family. Therefore, the number of farm animals can be handed over more or less as the *belis* varies.

The *belis* tradition is passed down from generation to generation. It has become an integral part of the cultural identity of the people of Southwest Sumba, especially the Perono Buku Bani community. This tradition has a central role in marriage rituals that involve the

community and bind the relationship between the male and female families. In such societies, the tradition of belis is considered a significant and sacred ceremony. Each stage in this tradition has a deep symbolic meaning and is believed to bring blessings and good luck to the marriage. The belis tradition involves the participation and support of all community members, including family, neighbors, and traditional leaders. During the belis, there was strong social interaction between male and female families. This tradition strengthens the bond between the two families and ensures the readiness and seriousness of the male side to enter the marriage bond. Through the tradition of belis, values such as commitment, honor, and responsibility are reflected. These traditions strengthen a sense of unity, nurture intergenerational relationships, and maintain a rich cultural heritage. The Perona Merapu Buku Bani community values and respects the belis tradition as an integral part of their identity. Although this tradition involves the payment of bride prices in the form of significant livestock, society makes the belis tradition a means of strengthening family ties and honoring women's families. This tradition is also a manifestation of local wisdom inherited from their ancestors. By maintaining the tradition of belis, the people of Southwest Sumba, especially the Perono Merapu Buku Bani community, try to preserve the uniqueness of their culture in the face of changing times and the influence of globalization. The belis tradition is one of the ways they strengthen their cultural identity and maintain the sustainability of their ancestral heritage.

The belis tradition is accepted and respected by the people of Southwest Sumba as it plays a central role in their social structure and daily lives. Some factors that influence acceptance and respect for this belis tradition include social norms, customs, and cultural beliefs held by the community. Social norms that have expectations about commitment in marriage, honor for family, and respect for businesses are factors in the acceptance of the belis tradition. The belis tradition is considered an act that meets social expectations and norms recognized by society. In addition, the belis tradition is considered an inseparable part of their customs. Through the implementation of this tradition, communities maintain and maintain their cultural heritage, strengthen intergenerational ties, and continue traditional practices that are considered necessary in their social life. More importantly, the cultural beliefs inherent in the people of South West Sumba also influence acceptance and respect for the belis tradition. Some artistic ideas include the impression that the payment of belis will bring good luck, happiness, and blessings in marriage. If belis is not carried out, it will cause disaster for their families. This belief encourages people to carry out traditions respectfully and obediently (Hermawan & Nomleni, 2024).

Implementing belis is vital in social, economic, and cultural relations. The tradition of belis strengthens social ties between the man's family and the woman's family to be married. Through negotiation and agreement on the bride price, this tradition helps maintain the social bond between the two families involved in marriage. It can also result in more harmonious and mutually supportive relationships between male and female families within the community. Regarding economy and community development, belis is property or asset. In this case, livestock can make a substantial economic contribution to a woman's family. It can help improve the well-being of families and their contribution to community building. In addition, implementing belis is part of respect for local culture and traditions. Local communities can maintain their cultural identity by supporting and continuing these traditions. It also helps strengthen their pride and awareness of their cultural heritage and strengthen social bonds and solidarity among community members.

Alternative marriage practices in Southwest Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara

“I still live at my mother’s house because my husband has not paid off my *belis*,” said Mama Sonya (Lucy) and Mama Ruben (Borowalo) when we asked them why they chose to stay in Parono (Village) Marapu Buku Bani. In Buku Bani society, marriage does not automatically entitle husbands who come from outside the *perono* to take their wives away from their parent’s homes. The tradition of *belis* must first be fulfilled by husbands if they want to take their wives out of the wife’s family home. The husband must live in the wife’s house and serve her family. This condition called *kawin masuk*. For some couples, residing in the wife’s family home may result in the husband experiencing limitations in his freedom of activities and financial independence.

In this tradition, some couples have been married for several years and have children but still live with their wife’s parents because their *belis* have not been fully repaid. Papa Ruben is a clear example; he has one child and a marriage that has lasted for two years; he still lives in his wife’s family house because he has been unable to pay off the *belis*. The same thing was experienced by Bapa and Mama Sonya, who had been married for nine years but still had to live in the wife’s family house because they could not pay off the *belis*. This situation shows that the magnitude of this *belis* burden makes not all couples able to fulfill it. Therefore, some teams try to find alternative solutions to stay together and marry the partner they love without violating the customs they have adhered to. They look for creative ways to avoid the heavy burden. Despite this, they still try to maintain traditional values and relationships with women’s families. This situation reflects the complex dynamics of the *belis* tradition and people’s efforts to navigate it with more flexible solutions while respecting their cultural values and customs.

Although the *belis* tradition is vital in the social, economic, and cultural structure, it is still an ‘expensive’ tradition for most people. *Belis* can pose a considerable financial burden to married couples, especially if they lack resources. Nevertheless, *belis* has a profound social and cultural significance for the people of Southwest Sumba. This tradition is about financial transactions and illustrates the commitment, appreciation, and respect between male and female families. In Christianity, Catholicism, and especially Islam, dowry is a manifestation of sincerity, readiness, and affection through the giving of money, goods, or services by a man to a woman (Kafi, 2020). In addition, *belis* itself in the Marapu belief is considered a balancing rite of the cosmos. Therefore, although *belis* is considered an expensive tradition, people still value and practice it as part of their cultural heritage and customs. *Belis* became a vital part of building communal bonds. That system binds citizens, and everyone must do so. This is what Weber (1993) called the social obligation of the individual in building social cohesion. According to Weber, a person can be excluded from his environment if he does not carry out a social agreement.

In some cases, when couples face a heavy financial burden in fulfilling the *belis*, another exploratory solution is to negotiate to reduce the demands of the *belis*. This kind of negotiation usually takes place at the *latahamama* stage. This stage usually also involves negotiating various matters, including the markets of the *belis* and other marriage requirements. In the *latahamama* stage, the male family usually conveys beliefs and needs, such as how many farm animals should be handed over as part of the bride’s price or property that should be given to the female family. However, during challenging economic conditions, the bride and groom’s families may try to reach a lighter or more flexible agreement to reduce the financial

burden. Everyday negotiated matters include proposing a reduction in the number of farm animals that must be handed over. It can also be suggested that the type of livestock be substituted; that is, if the male family cannot provide the requested type, they try to offer a replacement with a different kind of livestock that is easier to obtain. Another way is to apply for belis payments in stages, where the man's family pays part of the belis first, and the rest will be delivered within a certain period after the wedding. In this case, both parties communicate openly and honestly about their financial limitations. This is where the role of To Keteng Pnenge is needed to negotiate without offending both parties.

There are cases where the couple prefers to marry outside their *perono* [elopement or *pakodong*] even though, in the end, they return to the *perono*. They are faced with the obligation of belis. However, the liability of belis will be lightened by this alternative solution. Although it becomes lighter, returning to the village is not necessarily possible for couples outside the town who want to live together after marriage. They still have to face the consequences, such as fines or 'pig stabbings,' before being allowed to enter the village. A pig stabbing is a tradition that involves paying farm animals to a woman's family as a form of compensation for customary violations that occur due to elopement. Although not as big as belis, pig-stabbing remains a financial burden the couple must bear. Elopement also allows women to live in their husbands' villages even though their belis have not been fully repaid. This is an exception to the traditional rule that requires women to stay in a woman's family home until the belis is paid in full by the husband. However, in the context of elopement, women can live with their husbands even though their belis are still not entirely fulfilled. This often happens because couples want to live together and build a family, even though financial limitations still constrain them. This condition shows that although alternative solutions, such as elopement, allow women to live in their husband's village before the belis is paid off, there are still consequences and obstacles the couple must face. The pig stabbing fine is a form of appreciation and recognition for customary violations that occur, while the implementation of elopement carries social and everyday implications that must be faced by the couple (interview Lucy, July 2023).

Choosing to marry outside *perono* is a choice Mama Sonya and her husband made. Mama Sonya, a girl from Buku Bani, has experience in the outside world because she has worked in various places outside Sumba Island before finally marrying someone from Sumba Island. She once migrated as a female worker [*Tenaga Kerja Wanita*] to Malaysia, where she was involved in a different world of work from her birth environment. In addition, Mama Sonya also has experience working as a maid in Java, which teaches her about the dynamics of life in various places. Through these experiences, Mama Sonya became open to diverse cultures and views. These insights may have influenced her decision to marry outside the local norm. They may recognize that marriage is more than tradition and that compatibility, understanding, and love play a more critical role in building a happy family. In this context, Mama Sonya and her husband's choice to step outside customary norms reflects a way to combine experiences and understanding gained from the outside world with their values and culture.

Being pregnant out of wedlock is also a form of alternative exploration for couples who want to get married but cannot afford such a sizeable belis demand. Complex economic and social considerations often influence the decision to take this path. Couples who feel pressured by the significant burden of bride price think that getting pregnant out of wedlock can allow them to have a more intimate relationship and build a family even if they are not officially married. By getting pregnant out of wedlock, they hope to get the blessing of their respective parents and be married off soon. They can usually fulfill the guidance if they can, and this

belis debt will be passed on to their children if they cannot meet it. This choice has complex emotional and social consequences, including that family acceptance of an extramarital pregnancy takes different amounts of time, depending on the circumstances.

Another extreme alternative is marriage because of *dowo koro* [entering the room]. The male side takes this approach for several reasons, such as not getting the blessing of the woman's parents, the woman is betrothed to another man, or limitations in meeting the demands of belis. By adopting this principle of *dowo koro*, men and women can get immediate approval, and the marriage can take place immediately. Belis obligations that must be presented can be carried out after the agreement. This *dowo koro* strategy is recorded in Martin's experience when he decides to marry his partner. Martin performed this act with a machete in his hand when he secretly entered his girlfriend's room in the middle of the night. They have agreed on a time, taking the moment when the partner's parents are already in a deep sleep. Upon arriving in the room, his girlfriend called out for his father, and Martin was already prepared with a machete that had been designed near his girlfriend's neck. After this incident, forced or not, Martin and his partner finally got approval, and soon he was asked to fulfill the belis. His partner's family proposed a condition of 20 livestock. Still, after negotiation, it was decided that Martin should provide 15 livestock, with details of six medium buffaloes, six horses, one female or mother buffalo, one sizeable male buffalo instead of Mamoli's gold, and one buffalo to be sacrificed for a meal with the invitation in the fire eye ritual. However, because Martin had not been able to fulfill all the requested belis, he was told to prepare five heads of cattle first as a sign of commitment to the shortage of 10 other livestock he had to meet within one year. When the promised time came, Martin brought a lack of 10 livestock and carried out a fire-eye massacre. This ritual is the last ritual of the wedding series, which indicates that the belis has been paid off and the husband can bring the wife to live together outside the wife's *perono* (Interview Martinus, July 2023).

Martinus not only uses the *dowo koro* strategy but also, at the same time, uses the belis payment strategy gradually as an alternative to fulfilling the guidance of belis. The gradual payment of belis is an attempt to overcome the financial burden associated with the demands of belis. By dividing belis payments into stages, they can manage economic limitations more effectively. This approach also allows couples who wish to get married to respect the belis tradition while not incurring excessive financial stress at the beginning of the marriage. Gradually repaying belis requires discipline and good communication between both parties; this strategy reflects adaptation to old traditions in a more flexible and sustainable modern context.

There is another way that has proven effective in helping men pay for belis without having to take their female partners away or marry outside their hometown or also using the *dowo koro* strategy. This method is more elegant because it does not violate custom and involves the entire closest family of the groom-to-be. This method is known as *kahaya ulu mata* or hand gathering, where the groom asks for help from his family and relatives to fulfill the bride-to-be's request for belis. The demand for belis can be in the form of livestock or money, and it becomes a debt for the groom that will be paid according to their agreement. In the practice of *kahaya ulu mata*, the groom's family and relatives contribute collectively to raise funds or farm animals needed as belis. They recognize the importance of the belis tradition and the responsibility attached to it, so they are willing to assist in this effort. This method strengthens family ties and solidarity between the bride and groom's families and shows strong support from the family in carrying out the belis tradition.

In this context, kahaya ulu mata becomes a more respectable and civilized alternative for the groom-to-be. They do not need to avoid belis traditions or break social norms by finding other ways to pay for belis. Instead, they seek solutions within their families to fulfill their obligations by helping each other and sharing burdens. This method also reflects the importance of values such as togetherness, cooperation, and mutual support in the people of Southwest Sumba. This shows that in the face of financial challenges associated with belis, people choose to maintain the integrity of their culture and customs more dignifiedly and by prevailing social norms. In addition, the cost of maintaining and caring for farm animals is also a factor that increases the financial burden. Married couples living with women's families must also assume the responsibility of caring for and providing for the livestock that are part of their belis. This entails additional expenses that can put economic pressure on the couple. In this context, belis is still considered an expensive tradition because it requires considerable financial resources. This can lead to social and economic inequality among societies, where financially disadvantaged couples face difficulties meeting the demands of belis and establishing a stable married life.

When choosing a marriage partner, some rules should not be broken by the Kodi community, especially the Buku Bani community. One is the prohibition against marrying fellow *kabihu* [clans], specific groups, or families in Kodi society. Buku Bani women are prohibited from marrying men from the same *kabihu* [exogamy] (Woha, 2020). This ban aims to maintain genetic diversity and avoid intermarriage within families that are too closely related. In addition, there is a prohibition against marrying "sibling children" in the Buku Bani community. This means that women should not marry men they are closely related to, such as cousins or children of siblings. This prohibition aims to maintain family continuity and avoid conflicts of interest arising in marital relationships with family members who are too close in kinship. Because of the ban, Buku Bani women will generally live outside the *kabihu* where they were born when they were married, especially when their belis have been paid off. They look for partners outside their group or clan who meet the kinship requirements stipulated in customs. In contrast, Buku Bani men can invite their external partners to live with them within the Buku Bani community.

Another alternative that can be done is to postpone marriage even though the man already has a heart tether (Rehim et al., 2023). This method is taken by Mr. Benya, a young man from Perono Buku Bani, because he has not been able to meet the demands of belis in front of his eyes even though he already has a heart tether (Benyamin Interview, July 2023). Benya is a young local man who received his undergraduate education in Java Island, Indonesia, and works as an Indonesian teacher at an elementary school. He chose to work first, collect belis payments, and then propose to his favorite girl. His decision to delay submitting to his favorite girl is risky because other young men with the funds to pay belis can seize his heart tether. Mr. Benya's decision reflects his commitment to facing the obstacles of the belis tradition, which has value and significance in his culture. She strives to solve this challenge in more soft and strategic ways to ensure success in enjoying her married life in the future without abandoning the cultural values that her ancestors have passed down.

Post-belis consequences and challenges

Implementing the tradition of belis in the current era inevitably has consequences and challenges that the Buku Bani community must face. Although these traditions have existed in their culture and marriage practices for many years, modern society's changing social, economic, and values developments bring new challenges. One of the fundamental challenges

and consequences is the tendency for men to become lazy after paying off the *belis*. In Father Aji Arsyad's view, "after paying off the *belis*, some men in Southwest Sumba tend to become lazy because they feel they have completed their main responsibilities in marriage." They may no longer feel the need to work hard or strive for a stable source of income. This can result in an imbalance in the roles and contributions of husband and wife in financially meeting the family's needs.

Another consequence and challenge are that *belis* can affect women's independence in the marriage relationship. In some cases, after paying off the *belis*, women may experience decreased power in the marriage relationship. In certain cultures or contexts, the payment of *belis* is often considered an obligation that binds the husband to the wife and the woman's family. When *belis* are paid off, women are often considered to have been 'paid in full' by their husbands and families. As a result, women can lose autonomy and freedom to make life decisions. The social expectations and norms attached to traditional gender roles can bind them after the *belis* is paid off. Women feel limited in influencing family decisions or making significant personal decisions. They can feel constrained by expectations to follow social rules set by their husbands, families, or the wider community. When viewed on the positive side, this *belis* can play a role in preventing divorce and polygamy (Keytimu, 2023). This is due to the cost required for *belis*, which is large enough that the future husband must try harder if he wants to remarry.

On the other hand, for women, asking for a divorce also cannot be done easily, especially in the context of domestic violence. The wife cannot divorce easily because they have been paid the *belis* off. They must return all the *belis* they received (Hermawan & Nomleni, 2024). In addition, in the event of a divorce, custody of the children of the marriage will pass to the father. As a result, women in Sumba prefer to live forever with their partners until they want to separate. The substantial cost associated with *belis* can be seen as a deterrent to impulsive decisions regarding divorce or remarriage. This financial commitment may encourage future husbands to invest more effort into the success of their marriages, as the prospect of incurring additional *belis* can act as a disincentive to remarrying.

Another irony due to *belis* is that debt accumulating from generation to generation is one of the severe impacts of trying to pay off *belis*. When the *belis* has not been fully repaid, the debt can be passed on to the couple's children, creating a prolonged financial burden and dependence on future families. As debt is passed down from generation to generation, families are trapped in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break through. Unpaid debt can limit families' access to economic and educational resources essential to improving their living conditions. This can create an inability to free oneself from the cycle of poverty, hinder social mobility, and limit better economic opportunities for future generations. In addition, the long-term debt burden can also affect the well-being of the children in the family. They experience financial instability, difficulties meeting basic needs, and limited access to education and development opportunities. Mounting debt can hinder children's social and economic development, creating gaps in social mobility and limiting their future potential. For couples who marry for love, they are willing to bear each other's burdens together. They decide to migrate or work elsewhere to generate additional income to pay off the *belis*. This decision reflects their commitment and dedication to repaying *belis* and building a life together.

Conclusions

This paper has delved into the intricate details of the belis tradition, highlighting its cultural and economic significance in Southwest Sumba, particularly within the Perono Buku Bani community. By examining the implementation of *belis* and its underlying meanings, the study has uncovered how this tradition functions as a marker of respect and social status while posing substantial financial challenges for couples and families. Furthermore, the research has illuminated the various factors influencing couples to seek alternative marriage arrangements, such as economic constraints and the desire for greater autonomy. These alternatives, *dowo koro* [entering the room], pregnancy out of wedlock [*pakabu ulu*], and elopement [*pakodong*], or softer approaches like paying belis and postponing marriage [*kahaya ulu mata*], reflect broader social and cultural shifts within the community, indicating a move towards more flexible interpretations of traditional practices. The community's responses to these evolving practices have been varied, with some members upholding the traditional belis system and others supporting more modern approaches to marriage. This dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity underscores the adaptability of cultural practices in response to changing social and economic conditions. Ultimately, this paper has explored the challenges and consequences of maintaining belis customs in contemporary society. While the tradition holds symbolic value, its financial demands and the evolving roles of men and women in the community present significant hurdles. Understanding these challenges is crucial for appreciating the ongoing negotiation between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to modern realities in Perono Buku Bani and beyond. This study is still highly open to further investigation. Future studies could focus on longitudinal studies tracking changes in belis practices over several decades, providing deeper insights into how modernization and globalization influence this tradition on youth generations.

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