

THE CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE PROCESS OF THE MANGGARAI PEOPLE IN EASTERN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This research describes the process and stages of customary marriage among the Manggarai community in Eastern Indonesia. It is an ethnographic study aimed at gaining an in-depth, contextual understanding of Manggarai social and cultural practices surrounding marriage. Data were gathered through interviews and participant observation. The findings reveal that Manggarai customary marriage unfolds in five principal stages—mate selection, the bride's proposal, preparation of the marriage dowry, the customary wedding ceremony, and the bride's escort to the groom's village/home—each including multiple detailed sub-stages. These stages collectively demonstrate that marriage in Manggarai carries social, cultural, and religious dimensions. The study further finds that globalization has eroded local knowledge of the underlying philosophies and values of these customs. According to it, it recommends the proactive dissemination of these philosophies and local wisdom to prevent their disappearance and to enable broader learning from Manggarai traditional insights.

Keywords: Marriage, Custom, Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia, Rituals

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has introduced profound transformations across diverse aspects of life, including the constitution of local cultural identities. In Indonesia's mosaic of traditions, the influx of global influences poses distinct challenges to preserving the authenticity of indigenous cultures. Local wisdom—long the hallmark and heritage of these communities—faces the threat of being overshadowed by dominant foreign cultural forms. Manifestations of this cultural shift include the disappearance of ancestral customs, a waning sense of nationalism, and the weakening of communal bonds that have historically defined Indonesian society (Praditha & Wibisana, 2024).

As globalization accelerates, affection for indigenous culture diminishes, undermining both the existence of local traditions and the identity of native populations. The richness of regional cultural heritage serves as the foundational capital for forging national character and identity. Local wisdom, in essence, offers the philosophical underpinnings for constructing a collective national identity. Therefore, rediscovering and reaffirming national identity through these indigenous insights is crucial for uniting the archipelago's myriad ethnicities. Cultivating local values from an early age among younger generations is essential to sustaining this heritage (Kardana, Rajistha, & Satyawati, 2022).

Local wisdom comprises the attitudes, perspectives, and capabilities of a community in managing its spiritual and material environment, endowing it with resilience and growth within its territorial context. It is grounded in philosophies, values, ethics, and behaviours entrenched by tradition for the governance of natural and human resources. This body of knowledge and practice constitutes a community's worldview—its enduring scheme for interpreting natural and social phenomena (Afif, 2022). Such a worldview distinguishes one group from another and represents a creative response to local geographic, historical, and situational circumstances.

As a result, regional cultural revitalization and strengthening have become imperative. Revitalization denotes the process of re-emphasizing the importance of certain cultural heritages by re-examining and adapting them to contemporary needs. Rooted in existing philosophies, beliefs, socio-cultural norms, and historical context, this effort seeks to harmonize tradition with current environmental and aesthetic conditions. Ultimately, revitalization aims to restore the vitality of local cultures, rendering them significant and beneficial for their communities (Agus et al., 2021).

An essential component of cultural revitalization is scholarly research. Research constitutes a systematic effort to discover, interpret, and generate comprehensive knowledge about events, behaviours, or theories, while also opening avenues for practical application. Investigations into local knowledge not only enrich academic discourse but also strengthen cultural identity, expand solutions grounded in indigenous wisdom, and safeguard traditions at risk of obsolescence due to modernization (Sapsuha et al., 2024).

Local cultural knowledge involves supplying informational resources about a culture for promotional purposes, thereby ensuring its ongoing preservation. One key strategy for providing such resources is the systematic documentation of cultural practices. Documenting local knowledge represents a strategic and meaningful measure to safeguard a community's intellectual and spiritual heritage. In the absence of formal records, orally transmitted knowledge risks being lost over time, particularly if younger generations become disconnected

from their cultural roots. Well-executed documentation enables indigenous wisdom to enter into equitable dialogue with modern science or other faith traditions, allowing mutual enrichment of knowledge systems (Orole & Adejumo, 2021).

Documentation of local culture encompasses the collection, classification, processing, and storage of human creative outputs—whether in print, audio-visual recordings, electronic formats, or via the web (Nurhidayah & Khadijah, 2024). This process consists of two principal activities: inventory and recording. Cultural inventory produces descriptive entries that identify an ethnic group's intangible heritage and stores this data in a reference database, providing comprehensive coverage of documented elements. Recording, by contrast, involves the principles and techniques used to generate textual, graphic, photographic, audio, or video documents that capture intangible cultural properties, thereby rendering them accessible for study and practical application (Pangabeau, Rizal, & Kusnandar, 2024). Indonesian Law No. 5 of 2017 (Paragraph 5, Article 28[1]) obliges national and regional governments to publish information on the inventory, safeguarding, maintenance, and rescue of Cultural Advancement Objects.

This study explores the customary marriage practices of the Manggarai people in Flores, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Despite the encroachment of modernity, Manggarai communities remain resolute in observing their traditional rituals, norms, and customary laws. In matrimonial matters, both the prospective couple and their extended families must undergo a sequence of ritualized stages. When a young man forms an attachment to a woman, his first formal act is to notify his parents. Thereafter, the extended family assumes responsibility for all further arrangements, guiding the process through successive customary events—from *tuké mbaru weda rewa* (the marriage proposal) to *wagal* and *podo* (the wedding feast and the bride's escort to the groom's home).

The significance of this research is underscored by the integration of Catholic norms that began with the faith's introduction to Manggarai in the early twentieth century. Today, Manggarai marriage practices reflect both indigenous traditions and Catholic requirements: couples must register their marriage intentions with their parish, complete premarital preparation programs, celebrate a sacramental wedding ceremony, and obtain civil marriage registration. Indonesian Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage, however, does not explicitly recognize customary law: terms such as “custom,” “culture,” or “ethnicity” are absent from its main provisions, appearing only in the explanatory note to Article 37 regarding property division upon divorce. This legislative gap leaves no formal accommodation for unions grounded in custom, thereby creating challenges for ethnic groups whose matrimonial practices diverge from the civil norm (Lon & Widyawati, 2021a).

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach within an ethnographic framework, aiming at achieving an in-depth, contextualized understanding of Manggarai marital culture. The researchers immersed themselves in the community—living alongside participants, observing daily life, engaging in dialogue, and recording lived values, norms, and meanings. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with customary leaders, community members, and cultural educators about the essence, stages, and practices of Manggarai marriage. Participant observation was conducted at customary wedding ceremonies, during which relevant information was documented. Analytical procedures included data selection and reduction, thematic grouping and explication, and the derivation of conclusions.

RESULTS

For the Manggarai people, marriage is an extended process involving multiple stakeholders and a series of ritual events. This process can be organized into five principal stages: partner selection (*kawé wina/rona*), engagement (*tuké mbaru* and *pongo*), wedding preparations (*kumpul kopé* and *sida*), the marriage ceremony (*wagal-nempung/umber*), and the bride's ceremonial escort (*podo* or *karong wina*).

1.1 Partner Selection: *kawé wina/rona*

In earlier times, partner selection was exclusively managed by parents and the extended family. John Lambert Gordon (1975) observed that all marriages were arranged by the parents in consultation with the village's customary elders, with prospective spouses nominated by their families. Lon and Widyawati (2021a), however, note that while parents and children play a decisive role in partner choice, this does not equate to unilateral matchmaking: in many cases, the child's consent is actively sought, although parental preferences often prevail in negotiations. In contemporary practice, most parents respect their children's views. When vetting a potential spouse, parents investigate the individual's lineage, genealogy, physical and mental health history, fertility, and social standing—specifically whether they descend from servile status. Once lineage is established, they assess personal attributes such as character, socioeconomic capacity, and overall demeanour. For women, additional criteria include industrialism, proficiency in weaving mats and baskets, hospitality toward guests, clear and radiant complexion, and measured speech.

The foundational principle guiding partner selection is encapsulated in the proverb “ash meets ashes, dust meets dust (*ra'up cama rawuk, remong cama kebok*), which underscores the expectations that spouses will comment on socioeconomic status, education, physical attractiveness, health, moral conduct, and other markers of social parity (*cumang cama laki* = “meeting of friends”). In recent decades, however, young people themselves increasingly assume the initiative in choosing partners. Their criteria tend to be emotionally driven—based on attraction or affection—rather than the rational appraisals of social and genealogical background favoured by their parents. Thus, prospective spouses ground their choices in personal, emotional connections, whereas parental decision-making remains oriented toward rational assessments of familial heritage and social standing.

Adi Nggoro (2006) describes the role of a third party—referred to as a bridge, intermediary, or connector (*watang*)—in the matchmaking process. These intermediary relays information about a suitable young woman for a prospective groom or vice versa, providing both the betrothed and their families with background data on the candidate's lineage. If the response from either party or their parents is favourable, the *watang* arranges an introductory meeting. Such encounters may be direct—hosted at a designated home where the bride-to-be serves coffee or snacks to her prospective husband—or indirect, staged at public gatherings such as *caci wagal* performances, where participants wear distinctive markers to facilitate identification by their intended partner.

If the initial meeting fails to elicit mutual sympathy or affection (*toé manga beel oné nai*), the man is treated as an ordinary guest, and the interaction concludes without further development. By contrast, if attraction and affection do emerge (*manga beel oné nai*), the couple establishes an agreement, often symbolized by a token of affection such as a handkerchief presented by the man to the woman. In more recent practice, this gesture has evolved into the exchange of rings (*tukar kila*) as a formal sign of betrothal (Lon & Widyawati, 2021b).

1.2 Engagement (*Weda Rewa: Tuké Mbaru and Pongo*)

As a major communal event, Manggarai marriage usually begins with an official formal ceremony. The groom, accompanied by his parents and select kin, first performs a ritual libation to the ancestral spirits (*téing hang*) at his own home. Thereafter, they proceed on foot to the bride's village, entering through the village gate and the threshold of her family home (*weda rewa, tuké mbaru*). All participants don formal customary attire (*sélék kopé pasék broom*) and bring sacrificial animals—typically a goat (*mbé*) and chickens—alongside funds earmarked for the token of affection (*séng kembang*), ceremonial offerings (*seng raja do*), and the bridal dowry (*seng paca*). Upon arrival, the groom's party is ceremonially received (*ris agu kapu*). The male spokesperson articulates a formal plea for the visit to be graciously accepted and blessed by the bride's ancestors (*néka babang agu bentang*). The bride's family spokesperson then invites the groom's representative to declare his intention. Employing elevated, symbol-laden language, the groom's advocate (*tongka*) announces the proposal on behalf of his kin (*kembang/lumung/rongkas réko*). At this juncture, both parties' spokespeople enter into negotiations over the amount of the token of affection to be transferred from the groom's family to the bride's.

Following agreement on the token of affection, deliberations shift to the dowry. These negotiations can be protracted, as the bride's representative typically proposes a substantial sum while the groom's envoy counters with a more modest figure. Each side employs diplomatic rhetoric and customary bargaining strategies. Contemporary dowry values range from fifty million to three hundred million rupiah—and in exceptional cases may exceed one billion. Once consensus is reached, the formal engagement ceremony is held. Subsequently, both families register the upcoming nuptials at their local parish (*turuk empo*). Should the parties fail to agree on the dowry, however, the betrothal is dissolved at this stage.

1.3 Wedding Preparations

The wedding itself represents the most significant social celebration in Manggarai society, often requiring substantial financial and material resources. Preparations mobilize an extensive network: the groom's nuclear and extended family (including siblings in the same clan), the bride's maternal family, the entire village community, and close friends (*asé-kaé, anak wina, pa'ang olo ngaung musi*).

Fundraising activities spearheaded by the groom's family include several formal gatherings: *neki weki de asé-kaé, sida anak wina, kumpul kopé, and bekang*. At the *neki weki de asé-kaé* assembly, the groom's father convenes his siblings (*wa'u*) to review the terms of the proposal (*tuké mbaru, weda rewa, pongo*), detailing each participant's financial obligations as well as those of the bride's maternal relatives. The next event, *sida anak wina*, solicits direct contributions from the bride's maternal kin. The *kumpul kopé* gathering then extends the call for solidarity support to neighbours and friends. Approximately one week before the wedding, both families reconvene to finalize the collection of funds and livestock destined for the dowry (*bekang* or *pati rochang*).

Throughout these preparations, the bride's family frequently reminds—and at times presses—the groom's family regarding the wedding date (*soka* or *ngo kéngko woé*), especially if arrangements are lagging behind schedule. In instances where dowry provisions prove inadequate, the groom's family formally notifies the bride's relatives of the shortfall (*baro kurang*) (Lon & Widyawati, 2021b).

1.4 *The Marriage Ceremony (Wéé agu Wagal/Nempung)*

One to two days before the appointed wedding day—referred to locally as *wagal*, *nempung*, or *umber*—the groom's extended family assembles to visit the bride's household. They usually travel, including all villagers and friends who have contributed to the dowry preparations. Their goal is to arrive at the bride's home between 18:00 and 19:00. Upon arrival, they are welcomed with locally brewed palm wine (*tuak curu*) and escorted to a designated reception hut, where they are served coffee and additional palm wine and afforded time to change into formal attire. In some instances, the bride's family encourages liberal consumption of palm wine to induce conviviality—and, strategically, to lower the groom's spokesperson's guard so that he may offer a more generous dowry.

Following the evening repast, the bride's spokesperson (*tongka anak rona*) formally invites the groom's delegation (*anak wina*) to present the agreed-upon dowry and livestock. This segment, known as *coga séng*, employs elevated diplomatic language in which the bride's advocate urges maximum generosity, while the groom's envoy emphasizes that every effort was made to raise funds and appeals for understanding, stressing that the marital bond will endure permanently rather than temporarily.

The following morning, at approximately 09:00, the formal wedding rites commence with the *wéla héndéng*, the marriage inauguration, and a communal meal. During *wéla héndéng*, the bride's family theatrically introduces a decoy bride—typically two attendants—in order to test the groom's recognition. The bride's spokesperson asks whether the presented figure is her betrothed; he must decline and offer a monetary token to dismiss the decoy. Only when the true bride is unveiled does she affirm her identity, declaring, "Yes, this is my intended wife."

Thereafter, the couple is seated side by side, and both families solemnize the union by sacrificing a buffalo or, alternatively, a pig (*cikat kina wagal/wagak kaba, ela lé lancung sili*). A traditional invocation (*tudak*) is offered, beseeching ancestral favour for a lasting marriage (*paténg wa waé worok éta golo*). The marriage is ratified when the blood of a white chicken or pig is daubed on the newlyweds' toes. The bride's family then bestows ritual cloths as a symbol of their blessing, for which the groom's kin renders financial compensation. The formal rites conclude with a village-wide festival (*caci*). After nightfall, the ceremony of *karong lo'ang* legitimizes the couple's conjugal union. The celebrations end when the groom's family presents tokens of gratitude to the bride's household (*séng tadu lopa, séng nolak, séng dés*).

1.5 *The Bride's Escort (Podo/Karong Wina)*

The final ritual in the Manggarai marriage sequence is the *podo wina* or *karong wina*, the bride's formal transfer to her husband's home. It begins with a tearful farewell at the bride's residence. The bride's kin (*anak rona*) load all items gifted by her parents—collectively termed *widang* or *wida*—onto a procession, including bedding, kitchen implements, clothing, and textiles received during the *wagal/nempung* rites (*lipa lecak, lipa létang waé, lipa pecing béo, and lipa peher*). They also bring a pig known as *ela péntang pitak*, used to ritually "cleanse" the bride of her ties to her original family.

Dressed in celebratory garments and riding a horse led by her male relative, the bride departs first, followed by her husband on horseback, the accompanying procession, and attendants bearing the pig. The bride's father—acting as her formal presenter (*anak rona ulu*)—carries a basket of rice (*béka hang*) and a bamboo tube of sticky rice (*sorék*). Neither basket nor bride may touch the ground and route; if halted, the basket is hung from a branch or rested upon a lap, and the bride must be carried aloft or seated upon a rock.

Midway, the bride's party is met by the groom's relatives in the ceremonial reception of the bride (*curu wina*). Historically, this entailed a cavalcade of at least twenty, and sometimes more than fifty, horses, each adorned with bells (*nggorong*) to announce their arrival amid gong music and folk songs (*curu béla*). Upon entering the groom's village, the bride is presented at the threshold of her clan house (*mbaru gendang/mbaru tembong*) in a rite known as *gerep ruha*—"stepping on the egg"—to symbolize her formal introduction. Finally, the pig-cleansing ritual (*péntang pitak*) is performed to release her from all bonds to her natal lineage, thereby inducting her fully into her husband's clan (*wa'u*) and its customary life (*lut ceki de ronan*).

DISCUSSION

Marriage is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing interrelated and mutually reinforcing aspects. At its core, marriage constitutes the encounter between two individuals who freely choose one another and establish a life partnership. It is a context in which each partner discloses vulnerability and integrity (Kuang et al., 2025). As a result, marriage involves personal history, aspirations, wounds, forgiveness, and growth. Within this framework, love transcends mere affection to become a sustained practice, lived through imperfection. Marriage thus provides a channel for cultivating the existential depth of a bond in which two persons commit to love, trust, and build a life together—not in response to social coercion or cultural mandate, but out of authentic inner commitment (Gordon, 2024).

Beyond the personal dimension, marriage also forges broader connections among families, communities, and even generations. As a social event, it demands the participation and acknowledgment of multiple stakeholders—extended kin, friends, and the wider community. Marriage plays a critical role in preserving the

continuity of a clan's existence, serving as an institutional mechanism to maintain group identity and prevent cultural extinction. In many indigenous societies, including the Manggarai, matrimonial unions weave networks of relations that span clans and tribes; they become arenas for reinforcing solidarity, resolving conflicts, and transmitting traditions. Marriage not only consolidates kinship ties but is believed to safeguard communal wealth from dispersing to other lineages. In some contexts, marriage elevates the social status of not only the spouses but also their extended families. Paradoxically, this prominence of familial interests may overshadow the agency of the individuals entering into union, sometimes resulting in arranged marriages or parental coercion (Widyawati, 2024; Pallathadka, Pallathadka, & Devi, 2022).

From a cultural standpoint, marriage constitutes a pivotal ritual that expresses and reinforces communal values. It offers an entry point for understanding the symbols, norms, and ethics that define a society. In the Manggarai context, for example, ceremonies such as *wuat wa'i*, *belis*, and *kapu gendang* not only unite two families but also reaffirm social norms, honour codes, and relational ethics. As a rite of passage, marriage marks a transition in social status for individuals and their families, simultaneously symbolizing continuity of tradition and a moment of renewal (Mahmud, 2021). Through rituals, symbols, spatial arrangements, and the choreography of time, marriage links individuals to ancestral roots and communal solidarity. Symbolism embedded in attire, dance, cuisine, and the delivery of blessings or prayers exemplifies how marriage enacts a community's value system (Muchsin, 2023). In many cultures, these events also function as sites of cultural diplomacy. Narratively, weddings generate cultural archives—stories of “how our ancestors wed,” knowledge of gender relations, and shifts in communal values can be traced through evolving matrimonial practices.

As a religious event, marriage carries a relational depth that transcends social and cultural horizons. In religious experience, marriage signifies participation in the divine mystery. Within Christian tradition—particularly Catholic theology—marriage is understood as a sacrament: a visible sign of God's love embodied in the covenant between two persons united in a bond of love. Thus, the marital relationship is not merely symbolic but participatory, echoing the self-giving love between Christ and the Church. Liturgical rites—such as the exchange of vows before the altar and the presence of the faith community as witnesses—underscore this dimension. Consequently, marriage is not a private affair but a commitment enacted in the presence of, and together with, God. As Karl Rahner observed, human beings remain “mysteries to themselves,” and in marriage, two mysteries encounter one another—not to dominate, but to accompany each other on a pilgrimage seeking meaning. In this regard, the conjugal relationship becomes a field of spirituality: a space where divine love is incarnated in the concrete, daily love shared by spouses (Danilevičius, 2023; Lasnoski & Lasnoski, 2022; Steinmetz, 2012).

In indigenous societies whose religiosity is embedded in cosmology, matrimonial rites frequently commence with the invocation of ancestral spirits, blessings on the natural world, or expressions of gratitude to the Creator. In Manggarai, each stage of the customary marriage process begins with the *teing hang ritual*—offerings to deceased ancestors and kin. The solemnization of marriage also includes the *tudak wagal*, or wedding prayer. Notably, these religious dimensions are deeply intertwined with customary law: prayers to *Mori Kraéng*, invocations of blessing, and sacred symbols within the ritual process demonstrating that marriage is not solely a worldly event but also a transcendent, relational encounter (Lon & Widyawati, 2021b).

Finally, as a juridical event, marriage illustrates that the lived experience of marital love requires legal recognition and protection. Law functions not merely as a constraint but as a framework enabling love to endure concretely and equitably. The legal dimensions of marriage carry profound implications for individuals' rights and obligations. A prenuptial agreement, for example, delineates the consequences of the marital bond—particularly concerning property relations (Damayanti, 2024).

In sum, customary marriage rites are far more than inherited tradition; they constitute a living expression of local wisdom, collective identity, and communal spirituality. Preserving and disseminating these practices is thus not an exercise in nostalgic romanticism but a strategic imperative for safeguarding cultural roots amid the homogenizing currents of globalization.

CONCLUSION

Marriage encompasses a range of critical values that shape human life. For couples, it provides a pathway for both spiritual and personal growth, offering a space in which to learn love, forgiveness, and fidelity—continuous acts of commitment despite human limitations. At the societal level—especially in agrarian or communal contexts—marriage assumes social, cultural, and religious dimensions. These dimensions carry economic implications through the forging of resource alliances, the management of inheritance, and the conferral of social status, all of which influence broader community structures.

Preserving and disseminating local customary marriage practices is therefore not an exercise in nostalgic romanticism but a strategic imperative to safeguard cultural roots against the homogenizing forces of globalization. Effective strategies for cultural preservation and reinforcement include: 1) Producing scholarly books, documentary videos, and peer-reviewed articles that record local narratives, customary symbols, and the deeper meanings of rituals; 2) Integrating indigenous matrimonial concepts into local educational curricula and pastoral formation programs; 3) Establishing intergenerational forums or dialogue spaces in which elders

transmit the significance of customs to younger generations beyond just ceremonial form; 4) Organizing cultural festivals, training programs for customary mediators, and creative workshops to reactualize traditional practices; 5) Framing customary marriage within a scientific and reflective discourse to bolster its legitimacy and expand its reach. Through these coordinated efforts, communities can ensure that their matrimonial heritage remains a living tradition—vibrant, meaningful, and resilient in the face of global cultural change.

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