

Research Article

Theological Study of The Belis Culture in Marriage of The West Sumba Community, Tana Righu District

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Abstract: This study examines theologically the practice of giving dowry in Sumbanese weddings. This tradition has been passed down from generation to generation and is often associated with church weddings. Various responses to dowry, especially from Christians, are the main focus. The method used is a literature study, with the object of study being the giving of dowry in the marriages of biblical figures such as Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, David and Michal, and Shechem and Dinah. The theological reflections produced include: First, dowry in the Bible functions as a sign of appreciation for women and their families. Second, dowry is not coercion, but rather a way for men to show love for their future wives. Thus, dowry in Sumbanese culture does not conflict with Christian faith and has a positive value for helping each other. The implications include: First, dowry must be in accordance with the man's ability. Second, dowry should not be used as a tool to fulfill personal ambitions. Payment of dowry should be for the common good. Third, dowry must be given in an honorable manner, without justifying any means to prove the ability to pay dowry at a high price.

Keywords: Belis, Sumbanese Marriage, Christian Marriage

1. Introduction

Marriage is an integral part of culture and the human life cycle (Oktarina, Wijaya, and Demartoto, 2015). This shows that marriage practices occur in various regions and times, and in all levels of society in the world. In a social context, marriage is not just a personal matter, but is also closely related to customary traditions, religious teachings, and state legal regulations. In Indonesia, this view is reflected in Law Number 1 of 1974 (Erwinsyahbana, 2012). In various indigenous communities in Indonesia, marriage is seen as a very important tradition and is strictly regulated by customary norms that are directly related to the social order of society. If customary provisions are not met, the marriage can be considered invalid or can only be continued after customary sanctions are carried out.

Churches in various places are always connected to the marriage traditions that live in the local community. In many cultures, the church even integrates these traditional elements into its religious liturgy. One form of this adaptation is the implementation of a church blessing after the couple undergoes the customary wedding procession.

However, in some cultural contexts, the church faces obstacles when couples do not proceed to the church blessing stage because they do not go through the traditional wedding procession. One example can be found among the people of Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara Province. In this area, marriages often occur through methods such as arranged marriages, elopements, or capture marriages. Wellem (2004) stated that in Sumbanese culture, there are forms of marriage that are not preceded by an official proposal process, such as bringing the partner to a meeting, running away, forcing their way into the house, robbing, or taking and raising the partner.

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This situation is related to Wellem's observation that many couples in Sumba marry without first receiving a church blessing. The church usually only provides guidance or marriage coaching after the couple has children. A real example of this phenomenon can be seen in Elu Loda Village, Tana Righu District, West Sumba Regency, where almost all couples, around 99.9%, only undergo a church blessing after being blessed with children (Mersi, interview, May 2025).

One of the important elements in a Sumbanese traditional marriage is the obligation to pay a dowry or dowry. This dowry is given by the groom to the bride. If the dowry has not been submitted, then the marriage is not considered valid according to tradition and has the potential to cause problems in future household life. A community leader who was a source for the author told a case in Elu Loda Village about a married couple with the initials G and M who had lived together and had two children, A and R. However, since the beginning of their marriage, G had not submitted a dowry to M's family. Even though they had been married for about 10 years, every time there was a conflict in the family, M's mother always brought up the issue of the dowry that had not been paid as previously agreed. This condition created its own pressure in the relationship between G and M (Mersi, interview, May 2025). In a situation like this, the party who has not paid the dowry is often considered socially disadvantaged, and this can be a factor inhibiting marital harmony.

The obligation to pay the dowry in the Sumbanese tradition can last for generations. When a woman is about to get married, her future husband cannot pay the dowry before the woman's father has paid off the dowry that was not previously paid to his wife. In other words, the father must first pay off the dowry debt to the mother of the future bride so that the process of paying the dowry by the prospective groom can continue.

The amount of dowry for a prospective bride is influenced by various factors, such as education level, social status, and the amount of dowry her mother received at the time of marriage. The value of the dowry for a daughter must exceed or at least be equal to the dowry previously received by her mother (Steven and Yunanto, 2019). As an illustration, if the mother had received a dowry of 50 horses, then her daughter must also receive a dowry of the same amount or even more. If these provisions are not met, the family of the prospective groom can be subject to customary sanctions and be considered inappropriate or socially or economically incapable (Uma, Handayani, and Nurgiri, 2018).

In fact, if traced from its original purpose, *belis* or dowry actually has a noble meaning. *Belis* originally aimed to strengthen family ties, build a spirit of mutual assistance in community life, and as a form of respect and protection for the woman's family. According to Muthmainnah, the main function of *belis* emphasizes strengthening the bond between the man's family and the woman's family. This can be seen from the fact that *belis* is not given directly to the prospective bride, but is given to her relatives (Muthmainnah and Trisakti, 2010).

The high value of the dowry often has various negative impacts. Many men are forced to agree to a large amount of dowry even though they have to go into debt, while others choose not to marry because they feel they cannot afford it. There are also cases where a woman does not marry because no man is able to meet the demands of the dowry for her. In fact, men from outside the Sumba tribe are often reluctant to marry Sumbanese women because of the high value of the dowry or dowry that is a marriage requirement.

In addition, expensive dowries can also trigger domestic violence. Some husbands feel they have full rights over their wives because they have "bought" them with high dowries. According to Yonatan, the large dowry can cause economic losses, worsen poverty, strain relationships between families, and even trigger conflict (Walukati, 2018). Kaleka also added that for lower-class people, the burden of dowries makes it difficult for them to build a family economy because in addition to having to meet daily needs, they are also burdened with the obligation to return the livestock used in the dowry (Kaleka, 2019).

The high cost of the dowry encourages many young couples to seek shortcuts to marriage. In his research, Boersema revealed that the high cost of the dowry is often a factor that triggers premarital sex (Boersema, 2015). When a woman is pregnant, usually both families have no choice but to agree to the marriage (Umbu, interview, May 2025). So, how should the church respond to this reality? The church also feels the impact of the high demands for the dowry, because many congregations end up choosing a path that is not in accordance with church marriage regulations. In fact, the blessing of marriage should be given to couples who will start their lives together legally in a Christian marriage bond, not to couples who are already married according to custom. To answer this question, the author conducted a theological study of the practice of dowry in the Sumba community in order to develop relevant recommendations for the church in dealing with this situation.

2. Research Method

This study uses a literature study method, an approach that relies on various written references as the main source in data collection. Through this method, the author collects, examines, records, and analyzes information from various literatures (Zed, 2008) in order to formulate answers to the problems studied and achieve research objectives. The main sources used as references include research results on the practice of belis, as well as theological studies of similar traditions in the Bible, such as the marriages between Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, David and Michal, and Shechem and Dina.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of a study of the practice of giving dowries in the Bible as reflected in the stories of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, David and Michal, and Shechem and Dinah reveal several important points. First, the dowry is given as a form of appreciation for the woman and her family. Second, giving a dowry is not coercive, but is an expression of love and commitment from the man to the woman he wants to marry.

If these principles are applied in the context of the belis culture in Sumba society, then it can be concluded that the practice of belis does not conflict with the values of Christian faith. On the contrary, belis actually has a positive meaning because it illustrates the spirit of togetherness and support between families. The implications of this understanding for the practice of belis in Sumba include several things: First, the amount of belis should be adjusted to the economic capacity of the groom. Second, belis should not be used as a tool to pursue the personal ambitions of the bride or her family, but should be directed towards the common interest based on mutual respect and tolerance. Third, the process of giving belis must be carried out in a dignified manner, and it is not justified if the prospective groom uses unethical methods to show his ability to pay a large amount of belis.

Discussion

The Bible's View of Marriage

From a Christian perspective, marriage is considered a sacred institution because it comes from God since the beginning of human creation. As stated by Calvin, marriage has a sacred nature because it is established, sanctified, and blessed directly by God (Calvin, 2001).

Thus, Christian marriage is not only a bond between a man and a woman or between two families, but also a spiritual relationship that involves God in it. This means that the two are not only connected to each other, but also spiritually bound to God. Therefore, couples who have been united in marriage are called to maintain the sanctity of their relationship before God, as written in Matthew 19:6: "So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate."

Marriage in the Christian faith is not just a union of two individuals who love each other and are committed to living together. Marriage has a sacred and holy nature because it is a decree from God. Since the beginning, God created humans in the form of couples. Jean Paath, Yuniria Zega, and Ferdinan Pasaribu stated that marriage is a permanent partnership and is built on the basis of commitment between men and women. This view is in line with the word of God in the Bible which states that a man will leave his family to be united with his wife, and the two will become one (Paath, Zega, and Pasaribu, 2020). Therefore, marriage is understood as part of the divine plan.

In terms of language, the term marriage in Hebrew comes from several words, namely yabam and raba which mean to marry, and khathan which means to marry. The words yabam and khathan specifically refer to humans, while raba can also be used to describe marriage in the context of animals. Because khathan is only used for humans, marriage does not only include spiritual aspects, but also biological relationships. Mandipu explains that according to the Bible, marriage takes place between men and women biologically. Since the beginning of creation, God formed male and female and gave them the command to be fruitful and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28) (in Nainggolan and Harefa, 2020). Thus, marriage is a divine decree that aims to glorify God, continue the lineage, and fill the earth.

Humans are created in the image and likeness of God, and are the most noble creation among all His creatures. God gave humans the mandate to carry out His will on earth, and provide everything they need for their survival. Paath and his colleagues assert that because

marriage is part of God's own design, He blesses those who live in marriage (Genesis 1:27–28; 2:19, 21–25) (Paath, Zega, and Pasaribu, 2020).

God created humans as male and female, then united the two in a marriage relationship. In this relationship, each has an equal role, complementing and supporting each other, without any superiority or inferiority between them.

Therefore, in Christian teachings, marriage needs to be prepared seriously and with full consideration. One important step in this process is getting to know each other deeply between prospective partners (Dendeng, 2014), including understanding each other's family backgrounds (Sugitanata and Rozak, 2020). Once they feel ready, couples are advised to attend a premarital counseling session facilitated by the church. This counseling has a strategic role in equipping couples spiritually and emotionally before entering married life.

Togatorop and colleagues emphasized that premarital counseling is very important in maintaining and strengthening the relationship between husband and wife in marriage (Togatorop et al., 2019). The purpose of this counseling is for couples to deeply understand the meaning of true marriage according to God's will (Nazara, 2005). The final stage of marriage preparation is the marriage blessing in the church. In this procession, the bride and groom make a promise of loyalty before God, and the promise is confirmed in His name. This confirmation is the basis for couples to maintain and maintain the bond of marriage for life.

Belis in the Bible

The Bible also contains a number of stories about giving dowries which have similarities to the practice of belis in certain cultures. Among them are the marriage events between Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Shechem and Dinah, and David and Michal. The following explanation will review these stories one by one.

Isaac and Rebekah

In Genesis 24:1–67, it is told that Abraham sent his servant, Eliezer, to find a wife for his son, Isaac, from his own homeland. Eliezer went with various gifts such as jewelry and camels as a sign of the seriousness of the proposal. Upon arriving in Ur of the Chaldees, he met Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor and Milcah, and after the introduction and proposal process, Eliezer presented the gifts to Rebekah and her family.

According to Henry (2014), the gift was a form of respect for Rebekah and her family as the prospective bride (Gen. 24:53). This act reflected the wealth, generosity, and gratitude of Abraham and Isaac. Boersema (2015) also explained that this dowry functioned as a symbol of respect for the bride and her family.

Wycliffe added that the gifts were also a form of consolation for Rebekah's family upon her departure from home (Harrison and Pfeiffer, 2014). Kamuri and Toumeluk (2021) stated that these gifts were also likely related to Rebekah's virginity, not as a form of selling value, but as an appreciation for her purity and the honor of her family.

Jacob and Rachel

After seizing the birthright from his brother Esau, Jacob fled to the home of his uncle Laban, his mother's sister Rebekah, in the region of Paddan Aram. There, Jacob met Laban's daughter Rachel and fell in love with her. When Jacob expressed his desire to marry Rachel, Laban set a condition that Jacob must first work for seven years. However, after that period was up, Laban married Jacob to Rachel's sister Leah. Although disappointed and feeling cheated, Jacob still insisted on marrying Rachel. Laban then set the same condition: Jacob must work for an additional seven years.

Some experts believe that Laban's request was because Jacob did not have the wealth to pay the dowry directly. As a form of his love and commitment to Rachel, Jacob was willing to fulfill these conditions. Bidaya (2019) explains that if a man is unable to provide a dowry in the form of material, he can replace it by working for the father of his prospective wife. This is what happened in Jacob's story. This is also reinforced by Kumowal (2021) who stated that although there was no talk of property in Jacob's proposal process, it did not mean that there was no dowry. Jacob's willingness to work for seven years was a concrete form of the dowry given to Rachel's family.

Shechem and Dinah

Dinah was Jacob's only daughter. When her family was returning to their homeland in Canaan, they stopped and settled in the area of Shechem. There, Dinah caught the attention of Shechem, who then approached her and raped her. After this incident, Shechem told his father that he loved Dinah and wanted to marry her. With his father's support, he proposed to Jacob's family. In Genesis 34:11–12, Shechem said to Jacob and Dinah's brothers: "Let me have mercy on you; whatever dowry and gifts you ask for, I will give you, if only she will become my wife."

This verse shows that in the Bible, money is also used as a form of dowry in the proposal process. According to Wycliffe, Jacob accepted the offer and agreed to the request of Shechem and his father (Harrison and Pfeiffer, 2014), which shows that giving a dowry in the form of money was considered legitimate and acceptable.

David and Michal

Another example of dowry giving in the Bible is the story of the marriage of David to Michal, the daughter of King Saul. As David's military successes increased, so did King Saul's hatred for him. When Saul learned that David wanted to marry Michal, he took advantage of the situation by demanding a dowry of one hundred Philistine foreskins as a ploy to destroy David. However, David accepted the challenge bravely.

According to Stanislaus (2019), David's action in fulfilling Saul's request in order to obtain Michal can be understood as another form of dowry payment. David carried out this request by killing a number of Philistines and handing over one hundred foreskins as requested by Saul.

From the four stories in the Bible about giving a dowry, it can be concluded that the practice of dowry has been known since the time of ancestral figures such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the biblical narrative, a dowry is given as a sign of respect for women and their families. This gift is not a forced burden, but rather a manifestation of a man's sincerity and love for his future wife.

Belis in the Perspective of Christian Faith

Belis or dowry, in essence, is a tradition that has positive values and should be maintained, including in the lives of Christians, because it contains noble meanings. The main value contained in the belis tradition is a form of respect for the prospective bride and her family. In addition, belis also reflects a sense of responsibility and an expression of gratitude from the man to the woman's family who have cared for and raised their prospective wife with love.

However, the practice of giving a dowry in the Bible provides a number of important lessons that can be used as guidelines in implementing the belis tradition, especially in the context of Sumbanese culture. One of them is that the amount of the belis should be adjusted to the ability of the prospective groom. In the story of Jacob and Rachel, Laban did not demand a dowry in the form of jewelry or wealth, but instead accepted Jacob's labor in return. This shows that belis can be a means to instill a sense of responsibility in men towards the women they love. He is required to work hard and make an effort to get his life partner. Therefore, the woman's family should also not demand a belis that exceeds the prospective groom's ability.

Second, the dowry should not be used as a tool to fulfill the personal ambitions of the bride and groom or their families. The giving of the dowry should be based on a spirit of togetherness, mutual respect, and tolerance. In the story of David and Michal, King Saul manipulated David's sincere intention to marry his daughter for his own interests, by setting a condition that David kill his enemies, namely the Philistines. In current societal practices, it is not uncommon for the family of the prospective bride to set a very high dowry in order to gain honor and social status. On the other hand, the groom often forces himself to meet these demands in order to show their financial capabilities. In fact, this pattern actually deviates from the original purpose of the dowry, which was not intended as an arena to show off wealth or social status.

Third, the process of giving belis should be carried out with dignity. In the story of David and Michal, David shows his sincerity by fulfilling Saul's request, namely killing one hundred Philistines—an act that in his time was considered a great sacrifice in the name of love. However, in the current context, such actions clearly violate the law and are classified as criminal acts. Therefore, prospective grooms should not use unethical or unlawful methods just to prove that they can afford high belis fees.

Thus, it can be concluded that the belis tradition is not actually contrary to Christian teachings. On the contrary, belis actually contains noble values such as the spirit of helping each other and building relationships between families. This tradition is also an important part of the marriage process designed by God, as seen in the story of Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Rachel.

4. Conclusions

Christian marriage is a balanced and complementary bond, as God established from the beginning through the marriage of Adam and Eve. The main purpose of marriage is for husband and wife to live in love, serve each other, and together carry out God's will in family life.

The tradition of paying dowry in marriage in Sumba society is not actually contrary to the Christian faith. Belis has a positive value that aims to help and assist each other. Therefore, belis cannot result in burdening one party. Belis also cannot be held to satisfy family ambitions, especially if the goal is only to achieve social status or prestige. In addition, belis must be submitted in a dignified manner.

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