

The Meyah Marriage System in Manokwari, West Papua, as a Means of Preserving Local Culture and Aesthetics

Yosias Dowansiba¹, Yafet Syuff², Monica M. Nauw³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Papua, Indonesia

Corresponding author: yosiasdowansiba.unipa@gmail.com

Abstract: Marriage as a means of procreation and establishing kinship networks forms the basis of societal structures, with offspring ensuring continuity of lineage and social status. The traditional marriage system of the Meyah tribe in Manokwari Province, West Papua, Indonesia, is of interest to study to assess a process commonly practiced by the indigenous people. In this research, an ethnographic approach facilitates a comprehensive examination of cultural practices and rituals, as well as their aesthetics, yielding significant insights into the relevance of the Meyah community's marriage customs. The analysis reveals that the implementation of the marriage system is currently a challenge for the majority of the Meyah population, especially young men and women. The indigenous Meyah community still has a limited understanding of cultural values, such as marriage structure, normative framework, legal system, and specific regulations still applied in daily life. The decline in traditional leaders leading this traditional system has resulted in differences between the older and younger generations regarding the understanding and implementation of marriage customs. This requires initiatives aimed at educating and representing the importance of cultural and artistic values.

Keywords: marriage system, indigenous people, tribe, culture, aesthetics

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Introduction

Marriage is fundamentally born from the biological human need to reproduce and form a family. As explained (Royani, 2023) in the Customary Law Textbook, marriage is seen as a means of procreating children and establishing kinship networks that form the basis of societal structures, as offspring ensure the continuity of lineage and social status. In other words, the institution of marriage addresses the natural human need for reproduction and social stability. Marriage is not merely biological; it also establishes a legal relationship involving both families. Esti Royani emphasized that through marriage, a person gains recognition from relatives and the customary community; without this recognition, marital status can be questioned. Therefore, marriage serves a dual biological and legal-social function.

Since 1974, the Indonesian government, through Law No. 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage, has codified the institution of marriage to maintain uniformity

in national law while respecting local religious and customary law. Marriages are required to be valid according to religion and recognized by the state, demonstrating how the balance between biological, social, and legal needs is maintained. The role of custom in resolving marital conflicts: when conflicts arise from failed marriage ceremonies, custom acts as a local mediator. For example, if an engagement is canceled, the aggrieved party can seek compensation through customary authorities and relatives to reach a peaceful resolution. This emphasizes the status of custom not only as a complement but also as an instrument for regulating and enforcing social norms in biological and social contexts.

Marriage, as defined by customary law, can manifest as a kinship, family, communal, or personal relationship, depending on the societal structure under consideration. The interpretation of marriage in Article 1 of the Marriage Law articulates that "Marriage is a physical and spiritual bond between a man and a woman as husband and wife with the aim of forming a happy and eternal family or household based on the One Almighty God." The consolidation of regulations in the field of marriage law was realized with the enactment of Law No. 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage (hereinafter referred to as the Marriage Law).

The Marriage Law requires all Indonesian citizens to comply with its provisions. When conducting or arranging a marriage, even if there is their own customary marriage law. Article 64 of the Marriage Law stipulates that, for marriage and all matters related to marriage under this Law, the provisions articulated in the Civil Code (*Burgelijk Wetboek*), the Indonesian Christian Marriage Ordinance (*Huwelijk Ordonantie Christen Indonesia 1933 No. 74*), the Mixed Marriage Regulations (*Regeling op gemeng de Huwelijken 1898 S. No. 158*), and other regulatory frameworks governing marriage, to the extent described in this Law, are declared null and void. "Other regulations governing marriage, to the extent regulated in this law, are hereby declared null and void." However, through a contrario interpretation, matters not regulated in this Marriage Law but contained in customary marriage law remain valid, including various forms of marriage ceremonies and related practices. Consequently, Article 66 of the Marriage Law serves as the legal basis for the application of customary marriage law.

Sari *et al.* (2024) showed that indigenous communities continue to practice customary marriage, integrating it with civil registration requirements and national regulations without abandoning local cultural values. This integration reflects an effort to align the principles of national law with local customary values. Therefore, customary law can be recognized and applied in the realm of marriage practices, provided it does not conflict with the principles established by the Marriage Law. This integration of customary law provides communities with the opportunity to preserve their traditions and cultural values while ensuring that marriage practices align with the overall provisions of the national legal framework. This dynamic creates a balance between respect for cultural heritage and the need to comply with applicable legal norms, thereby providing protection for individuals in the context of marriage. In this regard, in indigenous communities, the institution of marriage is considered a guardian of cultural heritage, functioning as an activity

that can be revitalized through the transmission of tradition, as stated by Koentjaraningrat (1988),

"Marriage in culture... is the most important transition in the life cycle... not solely because of the relationship between two individuals but also the relationship between all relatives... considered important because of the formation of a new household... a path to widening the bonds of kinship."

The cultural value system manifested within the framework of marriage represents the pinnacle of customary practices. The institution of marriage, encompassing customs and traditions, is a fundamental aspect of human existence. This phenomenon not only alters the status of the individuals involved, namely the bride and groom, but also alters the kinship framework, influencing the dynamics of relational ties. Furthermore, marriage can redistribute rights and responsibilities among other relatives. Consequently, each wedding ceremony holds significant significance for enhancing the kinship network between the two parties involved. This event goes beyond being simply a sacred event for the couple; it also serves as a social cohesiveness that strengthens ties between families and communities. A marriage conducted with sincerity and adherence to tradition can foster a sense of unity among family members and strengthen the cultural identity of each party involved. Marriage evolves into more than just a union between two individuals; it also facilitates the expansion of social networks and the cultivation of a mutually supportive community.

The indigenous Meyah people of Manokwari, West Papua, live harmoniously side by side, as demonstrated by their mutual assistance in farming and daily activities, demonstrating a need for interpersonal connection. This social drive stems from the instinct to help and cooperate, manifested through daily interactions with others, which then form strong social bonds. These interactions foster the formation of communities that share a collective worldview and choose to live together in a specific area. This collective existence is then known as society, where every form of social interaction gives rise to ideas, values, and symbolic expressions collectively called culture.

Culture cannot exist separately from society; the two are closely and complexly intertwined, often difficult to separate. According to Damayanti *et al.* (2023), change is the transformation of a state toward a better outcome, although in reality, change does not always have a positive impact or constitute a transformation from the current state to an anticipated better future. This interdependence arises from the fact that culture cannot exist without society acting as its architect and steward.

In the communal life of the Meyah tribe, the marriage system, practiced through traditional ceremonies, serves as a crucial element in uniting clans or families. Each marriage structure adopted by the community is governed by a distinct set of rules. These customs have been passed down through generations by the community, particularly the Meyah tribe in Manokwari. This investigation is crucial and necessitates their preservation as a sustainable cultural heritage. This cultural heritage not only embodies the Meyah tribe's identity but also serves as a

social glue, strengthening relationships among community members through the management of enduring values and traditions. The presence of these wedding ceremonies, rich in symbolism and significance, serves as a channel for strengthening solidarity and fostering a sense of belonging among community members, encouraging younger generations to uphold and appreciate their cultural heritage. Furthermore, these ceremonies provide opportunities for community members to gather and celebrate collectively, creating valuable moments that strengthen social bonds. Through understanding and preserving this cultural heritage, future generations will be equipped to appreciate and perpetuate the traditions that have played a role in shaping the character and identity of the Meyah tribe for centuries.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology supported by ethnography. The ethnographic paradigm provides an in-depth understanding of cultural practices and social interactions within various societies, allowing researchers to observe in situ how these traditions are operationalized and embraced by community members. Ethnography is a combination of the words *ethno* (nation) and *graphy* (describing/portraying). It can be concluded that ethnography is an attempt to describe or depict culture or aspects of culture (Meleong, 2010). Ethnography is also defined as a body of knowledge that encompasses research techniques, ethnographic theory, and various descriptions of culture (Spradley, 2007).

Ethnography is very important in qualitative research (Mahendra *et al.*, 2024; Rezhi *et al.*, 2023; Rosaliza, 2024; Sari *et al.*, 2023). Ethnographic inquiry is a qualitative research design in which scholars investigate behavioral patterns, linguistic usage, and actions associated with a specific cultural cohort over an extended period of time (Creswell, 2013). By employing data collection methodologies such as comprehensive interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, researchers can delve deeper into the intrinsic values upheld by a society, as well as their adaptive responses to evolving temporal contexts.

Qualitative methods are a crucial component in the development of scientific research; without systematic scientific inquiry, scientific progress stagnates. The rationale underlying research methodology and the autonomy to foster and direct scientific endeavors toward the emergence of new paradigms serve as a critique of the data relative to prior theories regarding genealogy, environment, and mythology. Critical data for exploratory purposes serves as a mechanism for societal control, using certain principles, systems of proof, logical models, and rationalistic modes of thought, thereby positioning humanity as objects of the system rather than enabling individuals to exist authentically.

Researchers studying culture, social systems, marriage systems, and related phenomena are essentially limitless. Any suitable social and cultural environment represents a potential subject for scientific inquiry. Furthermore, beyond the diversity of themes, social and cultural contexts can also be examined. Most

research focusing on cultural aesthetics and other social dimensions is characterized by a carefully delineated study framework, commonly referred to as a research design (Black, 2001).

The expected results of this research are expected to make a significant contribution to increasing understanding of the cultural dynamics inherent in the Meyah people's culture, as well as the various challenges they face in preserving their heritage amidst the tide of modernization.

Results and discussion

Humans are essentially social creatures characterized as *homo humanicus*, *homo economicus*, and *homo culturalis*. As inherently social beings, humans have historically lived together in groups; since their inception, individuals have existed within a structured framework that regulates their personal existence as members of society. This intrinsic quality makes humans *homo humanicus*, signifying that as a social entity, humans possess an innate sense of community and the capacity to maintain balance among their peers through various affiliations, such as lineage connections, kinship networks, marriage customs, language frameworks, and more. This function is crucial in shaping an individual's cultural and social identity, which then contributes to the sustainability of the overall social construct.

According to Dowansiba (2008), the Meyah traditional marriage system is not merely an individual bond, but a means of building a broad kinship network that maintains social cohesion. Through institutions such as matchmaking, proposals, and sacred dowries, the Meyah community maintains the continuity of inter-family relationships and maintains inherited cultural values. This structure serves as a strong foundation for maintaining community identity. As a result, interpersonal dynamics within the community not only fulfill basic needs but also act as channels for cultivating creativity and innovation that drive the advancement of human civilization. Furthermore, social interactions that occur within these groups facilitate the exchange of ideas and values, enabling individuals to adapt and develop according to their environmental context. In acculturation, Dowansiba (2008) also noted dynamics in Meyah marriage behavior due to cultural acculturation and modernization. For example, rigid matchmaking customs have begun to give way to courtship, and forms of dowries have begun to adapt to the modern context, taking the form of money or electronic goods. This transformation shows how the Meyah community is adaptive, not passive, to external forces, without losing the core cultural essence of its traditional marriage.

The identity of the Meyah indigenous marriage system is related to the distinctive characteristics of individuals or members of a particular group or social classification. The term "identity" comes from the Latin word "*idem*," which in Latin means "same"; therefore, "identity" encapsulates the idea of similarity or unity among individuals within a defined territory or context. In addition to signifying similarity, identity embodies the concept of difference. Identity can also indicate distinguishing characteristics that distinguish an individual or group from others. Identity encompasses a dual meaning, namely the aspect of equality and the

aspect of difference. The aspect of equality of identity arises when an individual shares similarities with other individuals in a group. Conversely, the aspect of difference of identity arises when an individual or group possesses certain traits that distinguish them from other individuals or groups. Rummens in (Santoso, 2017) this identity not only functions as a connecting element among individuals within the collective but also plays an important role in shaping social perceptions and interactions between different groups. Strong identity can increase the sense of belonging and solidarity within the group, motivating individuals to actively engage in pursuing common goals. Furthermore, identity can also be a source of conflict when differences between groups are not adequately managed. Therefore, it is very important to understand and appreciate diversity in society.

A person's identity can be categorized into personal identity (persona/identity) and social identity (social/identity). Personal identity is the culmination of an individual's self-identification and the evaluations made by others of that individual. Personal identity encompasses distinct characteristics inherent in individuals that distinguish them from others. This personal identity can manifest in physical attributes such as facial features and stature, or in psychological characteristics such as traits, behavior, and speech. Social identity, on the other hand, arises from the perceptions and identifications made by others, representing the identifications approved or ascribed to individuals by social actors (Santoso, 2017). More explicitly, social identity refers to an individual's awareness and self-perception as a member of a collective, in addition to the individual's recognition as part of a group by the group itself (Giles & Johnson, 1987). Furthermore, social identity can significantly influence how individuals engage with others and the perceptions they receive in the broader social context. A strong social identity can enhance an individual's sense of belonging to their group, as well as influence their behavior and decisions in social interactions. An established social identity can play an important role in fostering solidarity among group members, while also offering emotional support and resources amidst shared challenges.

Maintaining balance and bonding through marriage in the Meyah tribe establishes unwritten guidelines or rules that must be observed and upheld by the supporting communal group. This means that indigenous Papuans, as a society that respects traditional values in their community practices, exemplify this adherence through their marriage customs. These customs not only symbolize cultural values that have been passed down from generation to generation but also serve as a mechanism for strengthening social connections and collective identity among the community's constituents. Such marriage customs often include a series of significant rituals and ceremonies, resulting in invaluable experiences that unite families and communities.

Hadikusuma explains that marriage within the framework of Indonesian customary law is not merely considered a civil union, but also a customary affiliation that simultaneously represents kinship ties and commitment (Hadikusuma, 2014). However, customary marriage in the Arfak Papuan community differs from customary marriage practices observed in the broader

archipelago, particularly with the incorporation of firearms into the dowry offering. A community's worldview significantly influences the behavior of individuals living within that communal environment; for an individual to integrate and thrive within a community, it is crucial for them to understand the customs, perspectives (principles), and regulations (norms) prevalent within that society.

Regarding parental perceptions of shifting values, in Salabai (2010) entitled "Perceptions and Responses of Arfak Parents to Shifting Values of Customary Marriage," two patterns of parental response to these changes were found: one that strictly maintains traditional values, and another that accepts change as long as core values are respected. It is this adaptive pattern that helps Meyah culture remain relevant amidst modernization and national marriage laws.

The marriage proposal system of the Meyah Tribe is mostly regulated by men towards female tribe members. This means that descendants of the Meyah tribe are allowed to marry with other tribes in Papuan society and its surroundings, including tribes from Bugis, Java, Sumatra, and even individuals from foreign countries, as long as the prospective bride and groom declare that they like each other and comply with the customary rules enforced by the Meyah tribe. This proposing process exemplifies the adaptability and acceptance demonstrated by the Meyah tribe in fostering intercultural interactions, which consequently enriches the sociocultural tapestry of the Papuan population. Moreover, this process not only reaffirms the importance of indigenous customs but also illustrates the Meyah tribe's commitment to fostering harmonious relationships and mutual understanding among diverse cultural entities.

The delivery of gold (dowry) takes place before the wedding ceremony. The gold requested by the women is delivered through a gathering of the prospective bride's female relatives. This demonstrates that the Meyah tribe in West Papua maintains a strong adherence to traditional values in community practices related to wedding customs. However, in the traditional marriage practices of the Meyah tribe in the Arfak Mountains and various communities throughout Papua, one well-known area is Manokwari, West Papua. Interestingly, the marriage system exhibits variations based on customary practices common among the island's people in general. The dowry historically included the request for firearms as a remnant of past conflicts; this tradition persists today, although various forms of weaponry retain equal value. This system serves as a testament to the rich culture and historical lineage of the Meyah people, where each component of the wedding tradition not only carries symbolic significance but also strengthens social ties within families and communities.

In addition to firearms, remnants of historical conflicts, including colonialism, wedding gold can also manifest in alternative forms, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Double-eye eastern cloth

This eastern cloth, originating from Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, comes in both double-eye and single-eye varieties. The double-eye cloth is valued at around IDR 200 million, while the single-eye cloth is estimated at around IDR 100 million.



Figure 2. The shape of Toba cloth, a beaded Eastern cloth, is part of the Meyah tribe's dowry.

Toba cloth also comes in three varieties: the first, a 20-eye Toba cloth, can cost Rp. 200 million; the 15-eye Toba cloth costs around Rp. 150 million; and the 13-eye Toba cloth can cost Rp. 120 million.



Figure 3. The dowry is handed over from the groom's family to the bride's family and received by the clan and tribal elders.

The white beaded bracelet is priced at around IDR 10 million, while the beads themselves are valued at around IDR 5 million. The cloth is purchased in batches of 100 pieces, with each piece costing IDR 500,000. The cumulative financial outlay for all the materials mentioned above can reach significant sums, reflecting the cultural significance and traditions attached to each item. Investment in these materials not only generates economic benefits but also plays a vital role in preserving rich cultural heritage, such as funding cultural education programs and preserving local traditions. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize and support the local artisans responsible for creating these pieces, ensuring that their traditions and skills are preserved for future generations.

In addition to the dowry given to the prospective bride's family, the exchange also includes various livestock, particularly pigs, as well as branded vehicles with Toyota HILUX badges, motorcycles, and other essential items. Most important is the financial contribution known as "sugar money," which the prospective groom must pay to the bride's mother. This money is given to the mother who gave birth to and raised the child until adulthood and marriage, and grants the groom's family the right to manage the household thereafter. This cultural practice not only forges a sacred union between two individuals but also

strengthens the relationship between the respective families, fostering an environment of mutual respect and accountability that is intended to be passed on to future generations. Such customs encapsulate deep cultural values and a deep respect for the role of family in the wedding ceremony, with each component having significant symbolic connotations. Furthermore, this tradition exemplifies the groom's commitment and sincerity in building the partnership, highlighting his recognition of the sacrifices made by the bride's mother. As an integral aspect of this process, the wedding ceremony typically involves rituals that depict the transition and transfer of responsibilities, ensuring that both parties understand the importance of their roles in fostering a harmonious domestic environment.

After the successful completion of the aforementioned ceremonial process, the bride's family approves of the union, culminating in a mutual agreement between the two parties. The wedding can then be held in a church, subject to the remaining terms and conditions. All proceedings are conducted in a church setting under the auspices of church authorities, guided by a priest until the announcement of the prayer. After seeking blessings, the bride and groom will exchange their solemn vows in the presence of family and friends, marking the beginning of a new phase in their marriage journey.

After the marriage contract has been properly executed, and the dowry has been given to the bride's family, if the groom is unable to pay any of the dowry, the groom has the right to request a deferral of payment and settlement at a later date. Typically, payment of the dowry can be made over a longer period, depending on financial capacity. The Meyah wedding customs are designed to strengthen kinship ties and foster mutual respect between the bride and groom's families. The traditions surrounding dowry in the Meyah tribe are not simply transactional exchanges between families, but rather malleable customs, reflecting the ethos of the community, allowing for adjustment based on the consensus of both families involved. These traditions are also rooted in the traditional practices of the Meyah tribe in Manokwari, reflecting adherence to their customary system.

The involvement of the extended tribal family is crucial in enforcing wedding traditions. Furthermore, this custom undoubtedly yields positive outcomes and functions. The tradition of giving wedding gold is intended to strengthen and solidify the kinship ties between the two parties involved in the marriage. Furthermore, this practice creates a pathway for the younger generation to gain knowledge and understanding of their cultural heritage, enabling them to safeguard it for the future. The importance of preserving and maintaining this tradition lies not only in its social implications but also in fostering a strong cultural identity among members of the Meyah tribe.

Furthermore, this customary practice embodies a deep respect for the cultural values and norms that have been passed down from generation to generation within the Meyah community. This custom not only strengthens family ties but also plays a crucial role in preserving the local culture that shapes the identity of the Meyah people. Consequently, marriage within this framework transcends the mere union of two individuals, evolving into a ceremony that unites

the community and fosters a sense of solidarity among its members. As previously mentioned, there are several stages to navigate, both before and after the marriage ceremony. From this phase, it becomes clear that the groom not only provides monetary compensation to the bride, but the bride also reciprocates with items known as the *noken basis*. The *noken basis* represents currency or other valuables given by the female partner to the male counterpart upon completion of the marriage ceremony. According to the explanation of the marriage system among the Meyah indigenous people, this aims to foster mutual respect between the bride and groom. Not limited to just wedding gold, the *noken basis* serves as a traditional reward; after marriage, the husband is expected to provide for his wife's essential living needs. The husband is obligated to fulfill and provide for both basic and additional needs to uphold the family's future livelihood.

Cultural compilations often transcend the realm of social structures, obscuring the intrinsic relationship between indigenous systems and the supporting communities (users). Expanding to the social dimension of the environment, the focus shifts from the micro-scale examination of environmental studies to the concrete, macro-level of everyday life, achieved through direct observation of communities in their efforts to maintain their environment and investigate its significance. The challenge lies in the fact that formal and functional values are the main essence, making the study of the marriage system in the Meyah community a defense and strength that opens the door wide to integration from the "confusion" of contradictory cultural assumptions. Even if it depicts the contours of syncretic, eclectic, or hybrid styles. Therefore, in reality, the manifestation of cultural representations, as articulated by the indigenous Meyah people, tends to emphasize multiple meanings (polysemy) rather than a single meaning (monosemy). It is crucial to recognize that in this context, the multitude of emerging meanings reflects the complexity of prevailing social and cultural interactions, as well as how the Meyah community adapts to transformations while maintaining their distinct identity.

Customary law in marriage practices can be applied and legally recognized, as long as it does not conflict with the basic principles of Marriage Law No. 1/1974. The author highlights the incorporation of customary law as a means for communities to maintain their traditions and cultural values while aligning with the national legal framework. This aligns with the article (Darmawan *et al.*, 2023) that marriage practices can be applied and legally recognized, as long as they do not conflict with the basic principles of the Marriage Law.

Conclusion

The custom of giving gold in the context of marriage within the Meyah customary marriage system embodies positive meanings, as this practice seeks to acknowledge the groom's efforts in nurturing their offspring. The intensity and capacity of the "meyah-ness" population in Manokwari Province, West Papua, cannot be understood as a mere one-dimensional phenomenon, but rather as a complex, dialectical domain. Such assertions transcend individual and social

interpretations in terms of agency, encompassing the dynamics of group interactions across various temporal and spatial contexts. This dynamism is further complicated by cultural influences, aesthetic frameworks that categorize the marriage system as an ongoing discourse on identity formation. This perspective aligns with the conceptualization of the marriage system in terms of ideals and values; narratives serve to encapsulate the zeitgeist of the times, manifested universally through the communities that support them. This phenomenon undoubtedly arises from cultural fragmentation, the depiction of social strata, and the influence of prevailing ethnic paradigms.

As previously mentioned, the traditions surrounding the Meyah wedding ceremony have positive implications, as this custom is intended to honor the woman's parents who have raised their daughter. The marriage framework used by the Meyah indigenous community serves as a determinant in the enactment of tradition, the transition from the female to the male domain, where inheritance rights are granted to women. This arrangement further facilitates the customary process, where determining the golden wedding payment involves deliberative discussions that take into account the social status, educational background, and professional involvement of the prospective bride.

The Meyah indigenous marriage system can be linked to the idea of renewal within the scope of environmental ideology, in accordance with the paradox of "surviving and striving to maintain local wisdom, preserving life, preserving cultural paradoxes," as the condition of difference in connecting meanings will be the trigger for cultural survival.

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