Negotiating Merariq: Cultural Continuity and State Efforts to Prevent Child Marriage in East Lombok

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

A B S T R A C T

This study examines the role of the East Lombok government and Muhammadiyah in addressing child marriage within the Sasak community, with particular attention to the culturally embedded practice of *Merariq*. Conducted over two months of fieldwork between January and February 2025, the research employed a qualitative design that combined document analysis, participatory observation, and in-depth interviews with ten local community members, two religious leaders, and five government officials. Data were analyzed using an iterative coding process beginning with open coding to identify emergent patterns, followed by focused coding aligned with Bourdieu's framework supplemented by theoretical triangulation to enhance analytical rigor. The findings indicate that although legal frameworks have been formally implemented, their effectiveness is hindered by entrenched cultural norms, economic pressures, and the coexistence of overlapping legal systems. In contrast, Muhammadiyah's initiatives, particularly its reinterpretation of Islamic values and its community-based family-strengthening programs, have demonstrated greater cultural resonance and have offered practical alternatives to early marriage. These insights underscore the necessity for culturally sensitive and multi-institutional approaches that effectively integrate statutory enforcement, religious authority, and community engagement. The study contributes to broader discussions on child marriage prevention by illustrating how tradition, law, and religion interact within pluralistic societies, and by providing actionable pathways for local institutions to reduce child marriage while honoring cultural heritage.

A. INTRODUCTION

Lombok, home to approximately 3.5 million people (BPS, 2023), is widely known as Gumi Sasak, a term that reflects the deep cultural identity of the Sasak majority and their longstanding interaction with diverse ethnic and religious groups. The island's nickname, "The Island of a Thousand Mosques," further illustrates the centrality of Islam in shaping local social life (Syaoki, 2022). Historically, Lombok's religio-cultural landscape evolved through a complex synthesis of Hindu-Buddhist influences and animistic traditions prior to the arrival of Islam in the 16th century (Woodward, 2010). Over time, this layered history gave rise to a syncretic expression of Islam in which customary norms and religious teachings

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coexist, most visibly in practices such as *Merariq*, the widely recognized elopement-based marriage tradition (Umam et al., 2024).

Although *Merariq* is often celebrated as a symbol of courage, sincerity, and family honor, recent scholarship has highlighted its entanglement with child marriage and its growing susceptibility to misuse (Naamy, 2023; Telle, 2009). Studies by Hotimah and Widodo (2021) and Umam et al. (2024) examine the ambiguity of *Merariq* within Islamic jurisprudence, yet these works primarily focus on normative debates rather than the institutional and socio-political dynamics that sustain the practice. Moreover, while national and provincial authorities have expressed increasing concern over child marriage, particularly in West Nusa Tenggara, their interventions tend to remain top-down and insufficiently grounded in local cultural realities (Kementerian PPA, 2024).

At the same time, the role of Muhammadiyah as a major Islamic reformist organization remains understudied in this context. Existing literature discusses its theological reinterpretations advocating higher marriage age standards (Muhammadiyah, 2021), but little is known about how such reformist ideas are translated into community-level initiatives, especially in culturally conservative regions like East Lombok. This gap is significant given that legal, religious, and customary norms intersect and often compete in shaping marriage practices, a dynamic that current scholarship has not fully explored.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by examining how child marriage persists at the intersection of cultural tradition, legal pluralism, and religious authority, and by analyzing how local government and Muhammadiyah respond to these overlapping normative pressures. By integrating cultural, institutional, and religious perspectives, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how *Merariq* both constrains and enables efforts to reform marriage practices. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on culturally responsive governance and the role of faith-based organizations in promoting child protection within pluralistic societies.

B. METHOD

This article adopts a qualitative approach, relying on empirical data obtained through direct involvement in the International Community Service program of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta and Inha University, South Korea, as part of the Global Leaders Program 2025 in East Lombok. Data collection was conducted through document analysis, participatory observation, and in-depth interviews with the local community. While most previous studies have focused on Sasak traditions by highlighting unique aspects of their customary rituals, this research aims to bridge that gap by exploring the evolving dynamics of the *Merariq* tradition.

Specifically, it examines how *Merariq* has undergone transformation, moving away from older practices that contained elements of mystical beliefs, and highlights the role of faith-based organizations, particularly Muhammadiyah, in responding to this phenomenon. This study draws upon three interconnected theoretical perspectives to analyze the persistence of *Merariq* and the responses from institutional actors such as the government and Muhammadiyah in East Lombok.

Social Practice Theory (Bourdieu, 2020) provides a lens to interpret *Merariq* as more than a cultural ritual; it is a deeply internalized habitus perpetuated through repeated social practices and upheld by unquestioned doxic assumptions within the Sasak community. These dispositions shape how ritualized elopement is understood as a natural and socially acceptable expression of sincerity, bravery, and familial honor.

The persistence of *Merariq* as a pathway to early marriage can be more clearly explained through Bourdieu's social practice theory. Within Sasak society, *Merariq* is sustained by a habitus a set of deeply internalized dispositions that frames elopement not as deviance but as a morally correct and emotionally resonant expression of sincerity, bravery, and family honor. These embodied dispositions make the practice appear "natural," even when it conflicts with state law or contemporary Islamic reinterpretations. Families mobilize various forms of capital to justify and legitimize *Merariq*. Symbolic capital is evident in the prestige conferred upon parents whose daughters are "taken" honorably, while social capital emerges through community networks that normalize elopement and facilitate discreet coordination leading up to the act. Cultural capital, embedded in knowledge of adat procedures, further reinforces why certain families perceive *Merariq* as the most legitimate route to marriage economically, socially, and morally.

These forms of capital operate within a specific field: the arena of marriage decision-making in Lombok, where customary authority, religious interpretations, and legal regulations compete for legitimacy. In this field, institutional actors such as the government and Muhammadiyah seek to shift marriage norms through policies, certification programs, and religious reinterpretation. However, their interventions confront institutional isomorphism the tendency of local actors to reproduce long-standing customary practices even when new formal regulations are introduced. School-based counseling, legal sanctions, and religious guidance often fail because they do not penetrate the habitus that frames *Merariq* as honorable and morally necessary. Consequently, communities adapt to new regulations not by abandoning *Merariq* but by modifying it: conducting elopements more discreetly, manipulating ages, or framing early marriage as religiously permissible through selective interpretations.

Legal pluralism further intensifies this dynamic. Marriage decisions occur within a landscape where three normative orders state law, Islamic law, and adat coexist and frequently collide. While state law raises the minimum marriage age, Islamic law offers interpretive flexibility, and adat continues to exert everyday authority. In practice, families evaluate these systems pragmatically, selecting whichever normative order best legitimizes the desired marriage. For instance, when state law restricts

underage marriage, families rely on adat to justify elopement or seek religious dispensations from local clerics. This strategic navigation of multiple legal systems explains why state interventions rarely produce behavioral change: they do not override the symbolic and cultural capital embedded in adat-based habitus. Thus, the interaction of habitus, capital, field competition, and normative plurality collectively sustains *Merariq* and enables child marriage despite intensified regulatory efforts.

Institutional Theory and Legal Pluralism together reveal the structural and normative environment in which child marriage persists. While local government and Muhammadiyah seek to reshape marriage norms through regulation and religious reinterpretation, their efforts confront institutional isomorphism and cultural resistance. At the same time, the coexistence of state law, Islamic law, and customary adat produces overlapping and sometimes conflicting normative systems that continue to legitimize early marriage.

Through this multi-theoretical framework, the research captures the complex interaction between structure and agency, tradition and reform, and formal governance and cultural autonomy. These perspectives allow for a more nuanced understanding of how child marriage persists and how institutional actors attempt to intervene within an environment of normative contestation.

The data for this study were collected through field research conducted between January and February 2025 in East Lombok. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed direct knowledge and experiential relevance to the *Merariq* tradition and the issue of child marriage. The sample consisted of ten members of the local community, two prominent religious leaders, and five local government officials representing key administrative and regulatory institutions. This composition allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives across cultural, religious, and policy domains.

To enhance the credibility and robustness of the findings, data collection employed multiple qualitative methods as part of a triangulation strategy. These methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis of relevant legal, institutional, and organizational materials. Triangulation not only strengthened the validity of the results but also enabled a deeper understanding of the complex socio-cultural and institutional dynamics surrounding *Merariq* and child marriage.

Data analysis was carried out using an iterative coding process characteristic of qualitative inquiry. The first stage involved open coding, during which recurring themes, actions, and meanings were identified without relying on predetermined categories. This inductive process allowed the data to speak for itself, ensuring that emerging patterns were grounded in participants' lived experiences. These initial codes were subsequently refined through focused coding, where conceptually related elements were grouped into more coherent analytical categories. The resulting categories were then aligned with Bourdieu's theoretical framework, particularly the concepts of habitus, capital, and field, which enabled a deeper interpretation of how cultural practices, such as

Merariq, are reproduced and sustained across generations.

To strengthen analytical rigor, the study employed theoretical triangulation using Bourdieu's structural perspective alongside complementary institutional and socio-legal insights. This triangulation enabled the cross-examination of findings from multiple theoretical perspectives, thereby enhancing the validity of the interpretations and providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between cultural norms, institutional interventions, and legal pluralism in the context of child marriage.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the *Merariq* tradition continues to play a pivotal role in shaping child marriage practices in East Lombok, not only as a cultural ritual but as a socially embedded structure reinforced by doxic beliefs and intersecting legal norms. Unlike previous studies that primarily attribute child marriage to economic hardship or limited education, this research reveals a more complex configuration in which cultural habitus, institutional resistance, and legal pluralism collectively sustain the practice despite ongoing policy reforms. While earlier publications emphasize structural poverty and parental coercion as key drivers, the present study highlights how religious reinterpretation and institutional interventions particularly those led by Muhammadiyah offer emerging counter-narratives that challenge long-standing customary norms. These findings indicate a significant departure from existing literature by showing that cultural tradition does not merely influence early marriage but actively competes with state and religious authority, thereby producing a uniquely contested socio-legal environment that requires more culturally sensitive and institutionally coordinated responses.

1. *Merariq* Tradition and Child Marriage

The *Merariq* tradition remains a defining marriage practice among the Sasak people, characterized by an elopement-based process in which the groom "abducts" the bride without prior parental consent. The groom's family must notify the bride's family within three days. After this, the marriage ceremony is conducted at the groom's home, followed by Nyongkol, a procession symbolizing respect for the bride's family. For many community members, *Merariq* signifies sincerity, bravery, and continuity with ancestral norms, although its meaning has shifted as customary knowledge has weakened. Field data reveal diverse interpretations: while the general public considers *Merariq* acceptable if aligned with religious principles, educated groups increasingly question its social and legal implications and promote simplified marriage pathways.

Empirically, *Merariq* often functions as a practical solution for couples facing parental disapproval, status disparities, or arranged marriages. In some households, parents legitimize or even encourage elopement, viewing it as honorable. Economic pressures also play a major role, with some informants describing *Merariq* as the least costly and fastest route to marriage compared with belako' (formal proposals), which involve higher material

expectations. The tradition is deeply institutionalized: even when parents are aware of planned elopements, they frequently refrain from intervening. The fieldwork further shows a clear correlation between *Merariq* and child marriage, driven by social expectations, economic precarity, and male-initiated decisions.

The findings illustrate how *Merariq* persists not simply as a ritual but as a deeply embedded habitus (Bourdieu), reproduced through everyday moral reasoning and social expectations. The symbolic elements of *Merariq's* bravery, family honor, and sudang berang constitute doxic beliefs that naturalize the practice and limit the community's willingness to adopt alternative marriage norms. This cultural habitus shapes the field of marriage decision-making, making state policies and religious reform attempts appear secondary or externally imposed.

Religious reinterpretation by Muhammadiyah, particularly efforts to decouple marriage eligibility from biological markers of *baligh*, constitutes an attempt to reshape the field by redefining legitimate forms of marriage through scriptural arguments. However, such reformism often clashes with the entrenched symbolic capital of *Merariq*, which holds greater cultural authority than formal legal or religious directives. From the lens of institutional theory, this tension illustrates how traditional norms produce institutional isomorphism, where communities continue to replicate existing practices despite regulatory changes.

Legal pluralism further explains the persistence of *Merariq*-related child marriage: state law, Islamic law, and adat coexist, but it is adat that often holds everyday legitimacy. Community resistance rarely manifests as open rejection; instead, it emerges as subtle noncompliance, quiet approvals, selective interpretation of religious rules, or framing early marriage as moral protection. Thus, while *Merariq* may offer symbolic meaning and social cohesion, its institutionalized form creates structural barriers to child marriage prevention efforts.

There are several reasons why *Merariq* is practiced (Hotimah & Widodo, 2021). First, it serves as a demonstration of the groom's sincerity toward the bride. Second, it symbolizes bravery, akin to that of a warrior. Third, it has historical significance. Fourth, it arises from competitive motives. However, in recent times, the *Merariq* tradition has undergone significant shifts in values and practices due to a lack of understanding among its practitioners regarding customary regulations and religious teachings. The Sasak Muslim community holds two differing views on *Merariq*. The first perspective, held by the general public, considers *Merariq* acceptable as long as it adheres to customary and religious principles. The second perspective, held by the educated class, evaluates the potential consequences of the practice from start to finish, advocating for simpler and more suitable alternatives to mitigate any negative impacts. From the perspective of Islamic marriage law, there appears to be a gap between the practice of *Merariq* and Islamic legal principles, both in normative terms and in its overall societal benefits.

The practice of *Merariq* requires careful consideration between both parties, the man and the woman, particularly in strategizing their elopement to avoid suspicion from the bride's family. Mutual agreement between the couple is a crucial aspect for the *Merariq* process to take place, although in some cases, the decision to proceed with *Merariq* is entirely determined by the man. In this context, *Merariq* is not only a part of the marriage tradition but also a means to achieve certain objectives. For instance, *Merariq* is often used as a solution for couples facing parental opposition due to differences in social status or as a form of resistance against arranged marriages imposed by families on individuals who do not love their chosen partners.

The *Merariq* tradition can be categorized as a form of rational-traditional action, as it has been practiced for generations among the Sasak people, particularly in Sembalun Bumbung, and has become an integral part of their collective culture. In the context of the Sembalun Bumbung community, *Merariq* is more than just a customary ritual; it carries symbolic meaning. Taking a woman away from her parents' supervision signifies that the couple is ready to bear the responsibility of married life independently. Additionally, this practice represents the concept of sudang berang in Sasak culture, in which the groom's parents demonstrate their readiness to accept the consequences of their son's decision.

The execution of *Merariq* typically involves thorough consideration, especially by the man who initiates the elopement with the woman he loves. The traditional nature of *Merariq* is evident in how the practice has been preserved across generations. In some cases, *Merariq* is carried out without the parents' knowledge, while in others, the parents are aware but choose not to intervene. In certain situations, they may even encourage the practice. For some parents, having a daughter "abducted" in the *Merariq* process is considered a source of pride. This reflects how elopement-based *Merariq* is legitimized by tradition as a means to fulfill desires. Alternative marriage processes, such as *belako'* (formal marriage proposals), are often perceived as more complex and burdensome for the groom, both economically and psychologically. Uncertainty regarding proposal acceptance, social expectations from the bride's family, and the requirements that the groom must fulfill further complicate the marriage process. As a result, for some couples, *Merariq* through elopement is seen as a more practical solution for realizing their marriage.

Deeply rooted in Hindu, Buddhist, animist, and dynastic traditions, Merariq was already well-established before Islam arrived in Lombok. However, as Islam spread across the island, it did not simply displace existing customs. Instead, Islam and local culture engaged in a process of mutual adaptation, creating what is now known as Islam Sasak, a distinctive blend that reflects Islam's ability to harmonize with diverse cultural traditions, including *Merariq*. This interaction illustrates Islam's inclusive and tolerant nature, allowing it to coexist with deeply ingrained cultural practices.

One of the unique findings of this study, based on in-depth interviews with informants, is the correlation between the *Merariq* tradition and the high rate of child

marriage in Lombok. This phenomenon is influenced by various factors, particularly economic conditions and social dynamics, in which both men and women agree or are encouraged to marry at a young age. In the context of social development and education, deeply rooted cultural traditions should not merely be viewed as objects of criticism to be eradicated. Instead, they can serve as strategic alternatives to support the fulfillment of educational rights, as outlined in government policies. However, excessive reliance on certain traditions should be minimized to ensure that access to education remains more inclusive and sustainable.

Furthermore, government policies should not only target children who are unable to continue formal education but also consider the welfare of other vulnerable groups, such as housewives in remote island communities who still face limited access to employment facilities and infrastructure. Therefore, a holistic and inclusive approach is essential to ensure that the policies implemented can have a broader and more sustainable impact on society.

2. Policy Makers' Contribution to Child Marriage

Data indicate that the child marriage rate in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) increased from 16.23% in 2022 to 17.32% in 2023 (Kementerian PPA, 2024). The interpretation of child marriage varies among different segments of society. From the government's perspective, this practice is categorized as a legal violation. However, for some communities, child marriage is perceived as an inevitable part of fate and the natural cycle of human life, regardless of the individual's age at marriage.

Nevertheless, there are also groups within society that recognize the negative impacts of child marriage, particularly on young girls, and its contribution to the high divorce rate in NTB. To curb child marriage rates, various efforts have been undertaken by both the government and civil society, including the imposition of sanctions on violators, educational outreach programs, and collaboration with traditional leaders, religious figures, and community organizations in Lombok to foster collective awareness about the risks and consequences of this practice.

The findings from a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with underage married women and government representatives, particularly village heads, revealed that economic and social factors are the primary drivers of child marriage. Socially, child marriage often occurs at the request of men who seek wives with good manners and morals. Additionally, labor migration in Sembalun Bumbung contributes to this practice, as migrant workers, particularly men, choose to marry young to fulfill their emotional and reproductive needs upon returning home.

Data from 2023 indicates that the number of migrant workers from East Lombok Regency reached 10,585, with a significant gender disparity: 9,584 were men, while only 339 were women (Dinas Tenaga Kerja dan Transmigrasi Kabupaten Lombok Timur, 2023). This high rate of labor migration plays a crucial role in shaping social dynamics and influencing child marriage practices in the region.

This issue has become a major concern for the government. For many officials well-versed in Indonesia's legal framework, child marriage is unequivocally recognized as a violation of the law. A similar perspective is shared by religious and customary leaders, such as those holding the title of Tuan Guru, who emphasize that child marriage contradicts Islamic principles, which stress that marriage should be based on physical maturity, financial readiness, and adequate religious understanding. Furthermore, child marriage is highly susceptible to triggering various domestic issues. According to these religious leaders, child marriage does not merely contravene a single legal system; rather, it simultaneously breaches three overarching legal norms: Religious law, which considers it sinful. State law, which may impose criminal sanctions. Customary law can result in social exclusion or alienation due to the sanctions imposed by the community.

Despite the proliferation of regulations aimed at reducing child marriage in West Nusa Tenggara, government interventions continue to fall short because they confront deeply embedded cultural norms that operate with greater legitimacy than formal law. Policies such as regional regulations, action plans, and task forces are grounded in a legal-rational framework, yet they enter a social landscape shaped by adat-based expectations, gendered moral values, and economic pressures, particularly labor migration, which reinforces the demand for early marriage as a means of securing companionship and fulfilling reproductive expectations. As Legal Pluralism suggests, these policies compete with customary and religious norms that often hold stronger moral authority within Sasak society, leading communities to selectively comply with state law while prioritizing adat practices, such as *Merariq*.

Government officials and religious leaders may denounce child marriage as a violation of Islamic, state, and customary law, but this condemnation does not necessarily translate into behavioral change. Resistance emerges not through explicit rejection of policy but through subtle forms of noncompliance: parents quietly supporting *Merariq*, village leaders issuing informal approvals, or families framing early marriage as a moral safeguard for girls. Economic constraints further weaken policy impact, as households view marriage as a pragmatic solution amidst migration-driven family separation. Consequently, regulatory measures such as marriage certification requirements or sanctions tend to produce symbolic compliance rather than substantive change. The failure of these policies thus lies not in their design, but in their inability to penetrate the cultural habitus and social incentives that sustain child marriage. Effective reform requires interventions that negotiate with adat, mobilize trusted local actors, and reshape the field of normative authority rather than merely strengthening legal instruments.

Child marriage poses a significant threat to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Human Development Index (HDI). Moreover, it has a positive correlation with the Poverty Depth Index (IKK), exacerbating poverty cycles and increasing school dropout rates. Given that most children who marry before the age of 18 discontinue their education, this phenomenon has

profound implications for national development. Children are the nation's most valuable assets, playing a pivotal role in safeguarding and realizing national aspirations. Thus, ensuring their protection and fulfilling their rights is an obligation of the state, one that must be systematically and sustainably implemented.

To combat child marriage, the government has devised a multifaceted strategy encompassing several key aspects:

1. Regulatory Enforcement and Implementation – Ensuring the effectiveness of child marriage prevention regulations while enhancing institutional governance.

2. Provision of Essential Services for Children – Guaranteeing access to comprehensive services that promote child welfare and well-being.

3. Program Synergy and Convergence – Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination to optimize child marriage prevention efforts.

4. Capacity Building for Children – Providing education on reproductive health and sexuality in a comprehensive manner while raising children's awareness of the risks associated with early marriage.

5. Strengthening the Role of Parents and Communities – Actively involving families, educational institutions, social organizations, and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in fostering an ecosystem that supports child marriage prevention.

As a concrete measure to curb child marriage, the government introduced the Marriage Certification Policy in 2020, requiring all prospective couples to complete a certification program before marriage. This initiative aims to reduce divorce rates, prevent underage marriages, and mitigate domestic violence. The government has set an ambitious target: by 2030, child marriage will be entirely eradicated in Indonesia.

To support this national agenda, various initiatives have been launched, including the Joint Movement for Child Marriage Prevention (Geber PPA). This movement seeks to mobilize collective action across all sectors of society to cultivate a high-quality generation in pursuit of Indonesia's Golden Vision 2045.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has played an active role in accelerating child marriage prevention through educational strategies, such as:

a) Conducting community outreach programs through religious counselors.

b) Implementing guidance and awareness programs for students in both Islamic and public schools.

c) Organizing marriage counseling for university students as a more comprehensive form of premarital education.

Through multisectoral collaboration involving the government, civil society, and educational institutions, it is expected that child marriage prevention efforts will be executed effectively. This holistic approach will break the cycle of early marriage and pave the way for a future generation that is healthier, more educated, and better equipped to contribute to national development.

3. Role of Religious Organizations

Muhammadiyah's reformist interventions can be understood as an attempt to challenge the cultural habitus that sustains *Merariq* and, by extension, child marriage in Sasak society. Within Bourdieu's framework, the habitus consists of deeply internalized dispositions that make early marriage appear natural, honorable, and religiously permissible. By promoting contextual reinterpretations of Islamic teachings, particularly through *Majelis Tarjih's* reassessment of *baligh* and the hadith on Aisha's age, Muhammadiyah disrupts these doxic assumptions and introduces alternative moral logics that contest the cultural legitimacy of early marriage. This reinterpretation reshapes the field of marriage norms by altering the distribution of symbolic capital: practices once valorized as expressions of bravery or familial pride increasingly lose their legitimacy when reframed as harmful to children's welfare, women's rights, and Islamic ethical principles. Such reformist efforts also shift the hierarchical power dynamics within the field, positioning religious authority as a counterweight to customary authority and creating new pathways for norm transformation.

Islam is inherently a missionary religion, sharing certain characteristics with the proselytizing tradition of Christianity. Etymologically, dakwah refers to "a call to Islam" or "the propagation of Islam." However, in a broader sense, the concept extends beyond religious proselytization to encompass social welfare and missionary activities. Islam was introduced to the Indonesian archipelago centuries ago and became the dominant faith by the 16th century, surpassing Hinduism and Buddhism in terms of adherents. Christianity, on the other hand, was introduced during the colonial period through Western missionary efforts.

In Indonesia, Islam constitutes the majority religion in Java and Sumatra, with certain regional exceptions. For instance, North Sumatra hosts a significant Protestant Christian population with German-oriented influences. In several other islands, such as Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, Bali, North Sumatra, and Nias, Islam remains a minority. However, in regions where Islamic influence has long been established, such as Kalimantan and South Sulawesi, Islam continues to be the predominant faith.

Several Islamic organizations, including Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam, and the Indonesian Islamic Propagation Council (DDII), play a crucial role in dakwah activities, particularly in remote areas where non-Muslim communities form the majority. Upholding the principle of Islam as rahmatan lil 'alamin (a mercy to all creation), these organizations prioritize Islamic outreach in border regions and the nation's outermost areas. Muhammadiyah, for example, has been actively engaged in Islamic propagation efforts within rural and transmigrant communities, focusing on social and economic development as an integral part of its missionary work.

The missionary landscape in remote regions also reveals a competitive dynamic between different religious groups. Muslim *mubaligh* (preachers) often find

themselves in direct competition with Christian missionaries and adherents of indigenous belief systems, all seeking to expand their religious influence in areas that remain open to religious conversion.

In Islamic teachings, the family is regarded as the fundamental institution that serves as the backbone of a nation's future. The concept of a *sakinah* (harmonious) family is a universal aspiration, shared by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. From an Islamic perspective, a *sakinah* family is characterized by serenity, tranquility, and peace, founded upon faith (iman) and piety (taqwa) and firmly committed to upholding divine law (shari'ah) to its fullest extent.

The phenomenon of early marriage has had a profound impact on both family quality and the human capital development of Indonesia. Despite amendments to the Marriage Law, which raised the minimum legal age for marriage, child marriage rates have continued to rise, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abdul Mu'ti underscores that, in addition to economic and cultural factors, religious interpretations also play a crucial role in perpetuating the practice of child marriage (Muhammadiyah, 2021). He argues that misinterpretations of religious teachings have contributed to the persistence of this issue. In response, Mu'ti proposes that Majelis Tarjih, the highest fatwa-issuing authority within Muhammadiyah, should take a more active role in addressing this issue by reassessing the religious arguments that have long been used to justify child marriage.

In this context, the definition of *baligh* requires a more critical reassessment. One of the most frequently cited hadiths used to justify child marriage is the narration stating that the Prophet Muhammad married Aisha at the age of nine. However, this hadith necessitates a contextual re-evaluation, particularly given that *baligh* has often been defined solely based on reproductive markers, such as the onset of menstruation in girls. A literal and decontextualized interpretation of this hadith has contributed to high divorce rates, broken families, and increased cases of childhood stunting, stemming from the physical and psychological unpreparedness of individuals entering early marriage.

To address these issues, Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah have developed the Keluarga Muda Tangguh Nasyiatul Aisyiyah (Resilient Young Families) program as part of a holistic strategy to both prevent and mitigate the impacts of early marriage while simultaneously strengthening family resilience.

From an institutional perspective, Muhammadiyah functions as a normative and cognitive institution that redefines what "proper" Islamic marriage should entail, emphasizing maturity, preparedness, and protection rather than cultural symbolism. Programs such as Keluarga Muda Tangguh, PASHMINA, and premarital education act as practical mechanisms for embedding new norms into everyday social practices, gradually recalibrating the community's moral expectations. These initiatives challenge institutional isomorphism by offering an alternative interpretive framework that competes with entrenched customary logics. At the same time, by

providing both preventive and intervention-based services, Muhammadiyah increases the community's capacity to negotiate between overlapping legal systems, state law, Islamic law, and adat, thus strengthening agency within a legally pluralistic environment. In this way, Muhammadiyah does not simply oppose tradition but actively reshapes the normative field through religious reinterpretation, community engagement, and social service provision, enabling a more culturally resonant strategy for reducing child marriage.

This program offers a comprehensive solution through two key approaches: prevention and intervention.

1. Prevention Approach

Preventive measures are systematically implemented through various initiatives, including:

a) PASHMINA (Pelayanan Sehat Milik NA) – a community-based healthcare service focusing on reproductive health and nutrition.

b) Zero Stunting – a program aimed at preventing childhood stunting through nutritional education and healthcare interventions.

c) Family Learning Center – a family education center providing training on parenting strategies, family communication, and marital preparedness.

These preventive programs are conducted regularly and tailored to meet the specific needs of targeted communities.

2. Intervention Approach

For individuals and couples who are already married or facing challenges in family life, Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah offer an intervention-based approach, including:

a) Samara Course – a marital readiness and family strengthening course rooted in Islamic values.

b) Paralegal Services – legal assistance for women and families encountering marriage-related legal issues.

Additionally, premarital education plays an integral role in this initiative, encompassing:

1) Premarital Education for Adolescents – designed for individuals under 19 years old, particularly junior and senior high school students, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the religious, health, social, and legal implications of early marriage.

2) Premarital Education for Marriage-Age Individuals – intended for individuals aged 19 and above, in accordance with legal marriage age regulations, focusing on mental, emotional, and financial preparedness before marriage.

3) Premarital Guidance for Engaged Couples – a program ensuring marital readiness, enabling couples to establish a harmonious household based on the principles of *sakinah* (tranquility), mawaddah (affection), and rahmah (compassion), while striving to become qurrata a'yun (a source of joy) and exemplary leaders for the righteous.

This initiative aligns with the principles articulated in Surah Al-Furqan (25:74): "And those who say: 'Our Lord,

grant us from among our spouses and offspring comfort to our eyes and make us an example for the righteous.'" Through a structured, value-driven approach, Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah remain committed to cultivating a resilient younger generation and fostering high-quality families, ultimately contributing to the sustainable well-being of society.

D. CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the role of the East Lombok government and Muhammadiyah in addressing child marriage within the Sasak tradition, particularly the practice of *Merariq*. As a deeply rooted cultural practice, *Merariq* has undergone significant transformations and frequently intersects with religious and legal discourses. While traditionally regarded as a rite of passage for Sasak men, its implications for child marriage remain a major concern, particularly given its socioeconomic and legal consequences. The findings of this research indicate that *Merariq* is not merely a cultural artifact but rather a practice shaped by historical, religious, and socio-economic dynamics. While some segments of society uphold its traditional values, others recognize the urgent need for reform, particularly in light of the high prevalence of child marriage in Lombok. This study highlights the crucial role of religious organizations, particularly Muhammadiyah, in advocating for marital practices that align with Islamic principles and human rights standards. Similarly, the local government has implemented policies aimed at curbing child marriage, yet challenges persist due to deeply ingrained social norms and economic vulnerabilities. Using a qualitative approach, this research contributes to broader discussions on cultural adaptation, governance, and the role of religion in social change. It underscores the importance of a collaborative approach involving religious institutions, government agencies, and local communities in mitigating the adverse effects of child marriage. By situating *Merariq* within both historical and contemporary policy frameworks, this study offers insights into how tradition and modernity can be reconciled to foster more equitable social practices.

While this study provides valuable insights into the intersection of culture, religion, and governance in the context of child marriage prevention, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was geographically limited to specific communities in East Lombok, which may not fully represent the diversity of Sasak traditions across other subregions. Cultural practices and the effectiveness of interventions may vary significantly in different districts or provinces, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the qualitative approach, while rich in contextual depth, relied primarily on interviews and participatory observations. The absence of quantitative data, such as longitudinal trends in child marriage rates post-policy implementation, restricts the ability to evaluate long-term impacts or causality. Third, the perspectives of young people directly affected by *Merariq* were limited in this study due to ethical and accessibility constraints.

Future research could expand this inquiry by employing mixed-methods approaches that integrate both qualitative and quantitative data. Comparative studies across different ethnic communities in Indonesia, which face similar challenges, would also be valuable.

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