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## **WOMEN AND MATRIMONIAL LIVES IN ACEH 'MATRIFOCAL' SOCIETY: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY**

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### **Abstract**

*Some related marriage traditions, the religious rituals and cultural practices varied across Indonesian societies or ethnic groups. Apart from the principles guided by the Islamic injunctions, the cultural aspects involved in those practices are indeed not typical, modified and changes over the time. In a matrifocal society like Aceh, women had strong roles in adat (cultural) ceremonies such as marriage its related activities as well as ceremonies. This article elaborates some matrimonial tradition within Aceh matrifocal setting of [traditional] Acehenese society. What has changed, and driven behind those changes are among the focus of this brief portrait of women and matrimonial traditions. The data in this article came from my previous research on matrifocality<sup>1</sup>, which was then combined with some current data from the field that has connection to the marriage and its wedding practices and ceremonies.*

**Keywords:** *women, matrimonial traditions, Aceh, matrifocal*

## Abstrak

*Beberapa tradisi terkait perkawinan, dan praktik-praktik ritual dan cultural berbeda di berbagai masyarakat dan suku di Indonesia. Selain dari prinsip-prinsip yang diatur dengan aturan Islam, aspek budaya yang ada di dalamnya juga tidak tipikal, termodifikasi dan berubah sepanjang waktu. Dalam masyarakat matrifokal seperti Aceh, perempuan memiliki peran-peran yang cukup kuat dalam kehidupan upacara adat, seperti perkawinan baik dari sisi aktivitas maupun upacaranya. Artikel ini mengelaborasi beberapa tradisi perkawinan dalam setting masyarakat Aceh [traditional] yang matrifokal. Apa yang berubah, dan apa yang mendorong perubahan tersebut merupakan fokus dai gambaran singkat ini mengenai perempuan dan tradisi-tradisi perkawinan. Data-data dari penelitian ini berasal dari penelitian saya sebelumnya tentang matrifokaliti, yang kemudian digabung dengan beberapa data terbaru dari lapangan yang ada kaitannya dengan praktik-praktik dan upacara yang terkait dengan perkawinan.*

**Kata Kunci:** *perempuan, tradisi perkawinan, Aceh, matrifokal*

## Introduction

Within the Indonesia context, Aceh has been well known as a stronghold of Muslim community, with a majority of Muslim population, and a strong background of the political influences of the Islamic power/kingdom on its history, culture and traditions. This area has also been recognised as among the centres of the Islamic scholarship for Indo-Malay archipelago, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth century through the intellectual network between the local ulama and the *haramain* of the Middle East (see Azra, 2004). Until today, this region is still attached significantly to some formal Islamic rules or principles, among the most apparent and current ones is the formalisation of shari'a law, which officially started in 2002 during the leadership of Governor Abdullah Puteh. Since Islam has been already an in-separable part of the Acehnese society even before the formalization of the Shari'a law, consequently, a number of the cultural practices and traditions in Aceh has particular connections to their religious beliefs. The ritual of *peusijek* for instance, believed to be derived from the India-Hinduism tradition is 'Islamized' in its practice within the society. The *peusijek* ritual then started with the recitation of the *do'a* such as *Surat as al-fatihah* or *shalawat*, and concluded with the *do'a* (prayer) as well (Srimulyani, 2010: 323). Some might have special *do'a* (prayer) adjusted to the

situation why the *peusijuk* is/was conducted such as marriage or wedding ceremony. Most of the rituals in this society is following the Islamic teaching such as *aqiqah* (celebrating the birth of the new born), *sunatrasul* (male circumcision), *nikah* (wedding) that include *mahar* (dowry) payment as well as *ijabqabul*, and funeral rituals. Nevertheless, although it is affected by the Islamic teaching, the modifications, or even some local cultural influences could also be observed, this has made those cultural practices varied across different Muslim ethnics either in the Indonesian archipelago and beyond.

Although Islam is understood to endorse the patrilineal values, some ethnic groups in Indonesia such as Aceh is indeed a matrilineal society (Siegel, 1969: 138), and this is also applicable in another stronghold Muslim society in Indonesia like Minangkabau. In his work, Siegel (1969) mentioned that Acehnese society is a matrifocal society with dominant roles of women, particularly within a family, which has caused the 'marginalisation of men' in the household. In defining matrifocality, Tanner believed that matrifocality is not only "mother focused", but also implies "two constructs: (1) kinship systems in which (a) the role of mother is structurally, culturally, and affectively central and (b) this multidimensional centrality is legitimate; and (2) the societies in which these feature coexist, where (a) the relationship between the sexes is relatively egalitarian and (b) both women and men are important actors in the economic sectors." (Tanner, 1974). The practice and meaning of matrifocality differs from 'female-headed household' (*perempuan kepala keluarga*) as state used to refer in their demographical policies and data. The head of the household (*kepala keluarga*) is almost always understood as man in the policy of the state. It is only in specific cases of widowed family, a woman is considered as the head of the household. The matrifocality traditions do not reflect such a specific case of widowed family. The relative power of women could be attained with or without their husbands or other male clans' presence. Beyond the state affairs or official document needs, the people in Aceh rarely identified a head of a household, particularly as sometimes more than one nuclear family might inhabit the house. The fact showed that within



this familial setting women, especially the elder ones, used to have a relative 'power' and social bargain.

In a matrifocal tradition with the uxorilocal dwelling system, for a husband, their social interaction is not with his wife and children at home, but mostly with his other men of the village in the *meunasah* or *surau* (small mosque), which functions as place or prayer as well as for [men] social interaction. Within matrifocality tradition a man is 'marginalised' in his wife family as a 'guest' (Hurgonje, 1906: 339). As a guest he has limitation in terms of power and access for family decision making. The men are also not close with their children as it is commonly found in a nuclear family. Men of the traditional Acehese society also sometimes preferred to leave their village to earn money or generate income for the family. *Meurantau* has indeed strengthened the matrilineal kinship. As children observed their father was away while their mother and her family were in support of them daily basis. Another strong matrilineal society like Minangkabau also has a strong traditions of *meurantau*. If a husband was in *rantau*, and far away from his family, a wife will be responsible for any affairs of family back home. This situation indeed made her much more independent, even when the husband has returned. Had she needs any assistance during his absence, she relied on her extended family which used to live near by, and sometimes within the same compound of the house with her.

### **Women and Matrimonial Lives**

In her work on marriage custom, Jayawardena (1977b) explained the process of marriage that used to be a business of parent in finding a suitor for their children, and sometimes by involving a matchmaker (*seulangke*). The marriage was also an event, that would involve the entire villagers. The marriage proposal always comes from the groom or his family, in local term it is said as "*sumur tidak pernah mencari timba*" (well will never seek for bucket), under no circumstance a girl or her family will propose to a man or his family. Although, if the marriage is arranged, still the 'official' proposal for marriage will always come from the groom or his family. For this process, the groom or his family will seek the help from some trusted and usually

elderly people from their relative or from the well respected people of the neighbourhood to act on their behalf to be a *seulangke*. The *seulangke* at this stage is mostly men, however, if there is any need to verify something peculiar and more confidential before this formal proposal, women played the roles. This could be also to ensure what is called as suitability, which is in Islamic jurisprudence called as '*kafa'ah*' (suitability) of the couple. The close female family member will do some early observation to the girls family to get to know earlier about this matter.

The main arrangement of the marriage followed the Islamic injunctions according to the Islamic jurisprudence, particularly in the aspects related to the main requirements for the validity of Islamic marriage. One of the requirements for the marriage contracts in Islamic law that has a strong cultural influence is the dowry. In Islam, a man has to pay a dowry for her future wife. In some parts of Minangkabau society, such as Pariaman the matrifocality also influences the concept of dowry payment. It was women or her family who payed the dowry for her future husband (see Evelyn, 2000). The matrifocality on Aceh did not affect the method of dowry payment, although later on, after the couple's marriage it was wife's parents who supported the life of the newly wed couple had they are not independent yet in earning income to support their new family.

Once the marriage proposal are agreed by the bride's parents or family, the amount of dowry which is in local language called '*jeuname*' is decided in a bride family meeting or by her parent with a consultation with their close family relatives, especially the elderly ones (*yang dituakan*). Originally, the dowry is known as religious injunction mentioned in the Qur'an. It is a gift from a husband for his wife, and would be an 'asset' of a wife during their marriage and even upon the divorce. Dowry is a condition or one of pre-requisite to make the marriage valid from the perspective of Islamic law. Since, the Qur'an does not explain a detail of what kind of dowry should be provided by a groom for his bride, the Muslim community around the world have their own tradition in interpreting the materials provided by the groom to his bride. In Indonesia, some of dowries are in the

form of money, jewellery or others, such as '*seperangkat alat sholat*' (a set of materials for prayers).

Dowry in Indonesian language is called as '*mahar*' or '*mas kawin*'. Although, it is said as *mas kawin* (gold of marriage), in reality, the local practices in some Indonesian ethnic communities, it is not always in kind of [*e*]*mas* (gold). In Acehese, *mahar* is called *jeuname*. According to Hurgronje (1906), this is from the word '*jame*' (guest) since a husband is considered as a guest in the family of his bride. In Aceh, *jeuname* is currently always in kind of gold. Although before, it was provided in a money currency such as guilders during the Dutch colonialisation in Aceh (Amir Hamzah, 1980) or in Indonesian currency of *rupiah* (Jayawardena, 1977b). However, more currently, all of *jeuname* are provided in kind of gold, mostly jewellery. According to Amir Hamzah (1980:429), this is due to the fluctuating values of money currency, whereas gold is considered to have more stable values instead (see also Srimulyani, 2010: 330).

How much amount of *jeuname* a groom has to provide, usually depends on some factors or background, such as the socio-economic status of the bride family, and also the groom and his family financial ability to pay for a [suitable] dowry. The higher status of bride family or in some cases the bride herself (such as in terms of her educational background and position), the higher *jeuname*, a groom might pay. In the past, the highest amount of *jeuname* was about 100 guilders, some of them were also 50 guilders or even lower. For golden *jeuname*, the highest one is around 100 *mayam*<sup>2</sup> (1 *mayam* is equivalent to 3,3 gram), however there are also *jeuname* of 50 *mayam*, 10 *mayam* and so forth. (Amir Hamzah, 1980: 430). Also, how much amount of *jeuname*, a groom has to pay sometimes also referred to the area of origin where the bride family came from. Some areas in Aceh such as Pidie has been known for its higher *jeuname*; someone who will marry a girl from Pidie area will pay higher *jeuname* to the bride compared to the girls from other areas or districts. In Pidie and surrounding areas the *jeuname* of 20 – 25 *mayam* is normal, whereas it is relatively high for other areas. In some areas of Aceh Barat and Nagan Raya, the standard of *jeuname* is around 16 *mayam*, locally known as *si bungkai*, sometimes the bride family will require even lower, however

usually it would not be lower than 5 *mayam*, although the bride comes from an unfortunate family background.

After the first daughter married, the next one will marry based on the dowry ‘rate’ of her previous married sister. The younger sister’s dowry should not be lower than her older sister. The bride will receive a small portion of gold when the marriage proposal is approved, and will be given a full amount during the *ijabqabul* ritual. In reality if the bride family came from a wealthy backgrounds, the dowry will belong to the wife/bride, and she is free to use it for her owns. However, sometimes for those from the poor family, then the dowry might be used for the purpose to support the wedding ceremony. Since most of the dowry takes form in a gold jewelry, a wife might wear it in daily life or for special occasion or ceremonies. Gold is also a popular traditional saving mechanism among traditional Acehnese society, and is quite popular among the Acehnese until currently. Apart from the fact that the Bank is far away from their villages, the gold also does not fluctuate much as the money currency. As a gift for a wife, a dowry will have a meaning for her economic ‘security’ had something happen to her of the family. However, in some families, this meaning has transformed into the idea that dowry is a gift from a groom to finance the marriage ceremony or to buy some furniture for newly wed couple mostly bed and others for ‘the newly wed couple room’ (*kamar pengantin*). This is also because in Acehnese society, basically there is no concept of ‘*uang hangus*’ or a cash provided by the groom to support the ceremony, especially in rural area. In some urban areas, the groom started to provide *uanghangus* to the bride family to cover the cost of the marriage ceremony, and this financial support is not included as part of the dowry.



The bride's family received the dowry from the representative of the groom family, and she showed the dowry to the audience after the *aqad* of *ijabqabul* in a mosque. This picture also showed how women are also involved significantly in the wedding ceremony.

All of the marriage arrangement or processes are discussed and agreed by the two families accordingly, especially in terms of dates, dowry, and some other relevant technical matters. Before the political conflict between Aceh Independent Movement and Indonesian central government intensified around 1980s or earlier 1990s, most of the *ijab qabul* ritual took place in the house of the bride, and mostly in the evening, and a group of villagers accompanied the groom and his family to the bride's house. This no longer exists in the conflict time due to security and safety reasons. Apart from this religious ritual of *ijab qabul*, some families conducted another party or ceremonies called "*resepsi*" or "*pesta*", with bigger crowds and guests to celebrate the wedding. The people from the neighborhood will spend days or even weeks in preparing the *resepsi*, from the decoration, food, and so forth. The close relatives will be among the busiest ones, and mostly the people believe if someone has more relatives they would have more hands available if s/he prepares for a *kenduri* (community party) such as *pestaperkawinan* (wedding party). The *resepsi* will take place twice in both the bride's house as well as in the groom's. In most situations, women usually have more significant and extensive roles in preparing the *adat* ceremony (Robinson, 2002), in the wedding

ceremony, as well as in other ceremonies beyond such the cultural rituals for pregnancy, etc.

### *Uxorilocal Dwelling and Property Ownership*

Upon the marriage, traditionally a groom will stay in bride's family. This is quite common in matrifocal society like Aceh or Minangkabau as well. It is believed that this tradition has already started and was mentioned in the local historical bylaws enacted during the kingdom of Aceh Darussalam, particularly since the reign of Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah in the eighteenth century, the first successive female rules of Aceh kingdom. This dwelling system also had an implication of inheriting house or part of the house by the parent to the daughter particularly after the born of the first child, which was celebrated as was known as the tradition of *gepeumekleuh* (to make it separated) (see Seigel, 1969). In this context, also the maternal family has more influence on the spouse who are married and stayed with them upon their marriage. Traditionally, the couple who are just married will reside in the family of the wife. Even, if they become independent, usually, they moved in to a house provided by the wife parent for the couple. This house in culturally and legally belong to the wife, and not shared property asset. It means, in a case of divorce the house is not an asset divided between the spouse as it is not part of their shared asset.

In Aceh, a house has a strong connection to women, until currently, parent mostly inherited house to their daughters, it is in a very rare situation, the house will be inherited to their sons. For well-to-do families in the region like Pidie, even parents already prepared the house to be provided for their daughters. It is said this is also a reason why the dowry among the community of Pidie was quite high. Wives in local Acehnese language is "*po rumoh*" / "*njangpo rumoh*" means the one who owns the house, this will also rest power over women had the house is belong to her, and put her and children in a stable situation if an internal conflict between her and husband emerge. In a case they have to separate temporarily, the husband will leave the house, and [in traditional] Aceh society, he would stay in *meunasah*. Even, in the case of divorce, the inherited house is still the property of women, and it is not part of *harta bersama* (shared

property) between husband and wife. For inheritance, a local religious leaders (*teungku*) will be consulted by the family for inheritance process. The common Islamic jurisprudence principle is applied as women received half than that of men; 2:1, nevertheless this will not include the *hibah* like the house or the land that has been given the daughter. All in all, women did not receive less than her male siblings, in some situations, she might get even more.

House is a property inherited to daughters not to the sons of the family. Some parent who have daughter(s), sometimes prepared houses or land to build a house for their daughter(s). There has been an assumption that the high *jeuname* a groom provided for his wife is in line with the effort of the family bride to provide a house for the new couple, in which as a husband was then exempted from the responsibility of providing shelter for his family. For women, having a house of her own will give more 'power' or bargaining position in the family or household. This situation will also benefit women in the a case of divorce, when one of them has to leave the house, she will remain there as the property is belong to her own and not part of shared property with her husband. If parents have no daughters, then the house will be sold when the parents passed away, and the money earned from the sale will be divided among the sons (Siegel, 1969: 142). Since young as teenagers, for the community with strong matrilineal and matrifocality tradition, boys do not have the room in their own to stay over during the night, they used to stay in *surau* or in local term in Aceh called as '*meunasah*'. Until 1980s, this was still widely practiced among the community in Aceh, but not currently. The young boy teenagers nowadays stay in their family, and mostly with their nuclear family, not maternal extended family. The association of women and the house has also currently reduced. The term '*po rumoh*' is still used to refer to a wife until currently, but the meaning has seemingly shifted from the original meaning of "the one who own the house" to the "one who stay at home".

Until currently, the fact that parents provided house or land to built a house for daughters are still practiced in some parts in Aceh or among some families, but not as common as before. When Siegel conducted a research in 1960s in Pidie region, he found clusters of

house in the same yard and fences of several families, most of them related through their maternal kinship. It suggest that parents gave the house or the land surrounding their own house to their daughters, who then resided close to the parents' residence and make a particular family compound. This kind of compound still can be found until nowadays.



A compound of a house, the middle one is the house of the parent, whereas the two on the left and the rights sides of the first houses are the houses of their daughters who have been married. All of the houses shared the same yard, fence and gate. (Photo taken from Kembang Tanjung of Pidie district in March 2011)

When the parents passed away, the house already given to the daughters are not parts of the *faraidh*.<sup>3</sup> in which the inheritance is based on mainstream Islamic jurisprudence rules of 2:1, means two part for son and one part for daughter. However with the above local tradition of providing house and land for daughters, what she had from her parent from the *faraidh* division when her parents passed away plus the previous ones the parent provided for her is equivalent, or even higher from his brother's inheritance proportion. If nowadays, there have been some critic of Islamic jurisprudence injustice in inheritance proportion between men and women, the [traditional] community sometimes have had their local wisdom to solve the problem wisely through these practices callled as *hibah*<sup>4</sup>, and succesfully avoid any clash and paradox with the existing mainstream of Islamic jurisprudence on inheritance.



*What has changed?*

Nowadays, with more chances available for girls and boys to meet and get to know each other, or being educated in the same schools, the roles of parent or family in choosing their future husband or wife have been less significant. Nevertheless, still in its tradition the consent of the parent, particularly the parents of girls or bride are still recommended and would decide whether the marriage proposal can be proceeded further by the couple to the '*pelaminan*'. The *ijabqabul* which used to always take place in the home of the bride, are now conducted in the mosque, this has been a national 'trend', most of the marriage watched by local people from the TV for instance, and especially those of famous people, celebrity were/are in the mosque. Some mosque such as the Mosque of Baiturrahman in Banda Aceh would have a long list of couple who would like to get married in this historical sacred place. Although still limited, this has been now practices also in some regents in Aceh, not only in Banda Aceh. For the urban society in Banda Aceh, the wedding ceremony is supported by the catering agent, rented venue, and sometime organised by the wedding organiser, and less or almost not depended any longer from the help of their families, relatives as well as neighbour .

In terms of women's relative power in the household, the policy of state *ibuism* has been applied from high national bureaucracy down to the villages or rural levels.<sup>5</sup> This policy has limited and changed some matrifocal values of the Aceh society. Women that are perceived as independent and active in economics productivity are now supposed to be someone who are dependent and supporters of their husband's public works. For the civil servant, their supports were manifested in the wives organisations of Program Kesejahteraan Keluarga (women welfare movement), and Dharma Wanita or Dharma Pertiwi for police and military institutions.

Some essences of local tradition which has ever existed in traditional Acehnese society such as *meurantau*, or matrifocality traditions have currently went through some changes and shifting in contemporary modern society. More apparently, some cultural practices in marriage custom and child rearing also changed due to modernity and social changes. Nowadays, some of those traditiona has

not been popular anymore, the changes of extended family to more nuclear family has also affected those local traditions practiced before in traditional Aceh society.<sup>6</sup>

Also, in current modern workforce, most people might not reside in the same village as their parents do. This would limit the practices of the uxorilocal dwelling which is indeed among the elements of matrifocal practices. In this situation, a daughter will not live with her parent any longer after the couple get married, but she lives with her nuclear family instead. The power and authority of women's parents for the new family decreased or even disappeared, and more patriarchal family households emerge. However, for the daughters whose husbands also work in the same village, they will stay with their parents, at least until the first child is born. The professional works have ensured people with stable lives and will allow their families to stay with them while *meurantau*. With more opportunities for women to attend formal education, in which they have also to go out for their own house for the sake of education, the opportunities to marry someone from outside her village is becoming greater, and the tradition of same clan marriage also reduced. The earlier ethnographical record of Aceh society showed the preference of cousin to cousin marriage, which is no longer commonly practiced. The extended marriage pattern also makes the earlier matrifocal tradition difficult to be preserved, lesser women-centred-kinship models exist. (Srimulyani, 2010).

### Remarks

The Islamic values 'embedded' in a number of cultural practices of the Acehnese people, such as in "the rites of passage" rituals or traditions. Nevertheless, although Islam is understood to endorse the patrilineal values, the [traditional] Acehnese society is a matrilineal society with matrifocal practices. With these social settings, women had a specific position since matrifocality is women-centred kinship that also provides some relative independency of women in the household or in their marital lives. The matrimonial traditions, that include dowry, wedding ceremonies. Dwelling systems after marriage, are not typical over time, it is subject to be modified or change.

The modernity and social changes have been among some factors behind those changes, and also the shifting from matrifocality to nuclear family model, and state gender ideology have also given more space for patriarchal values that might contribute the vulnerability of women indeed.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Some parts of this research has been published in *Al-jamiah Journal of Islamic Studies* vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 321 – 342. Under the title: *Islam, Adat and The State: Matrifocality in Aceh Revisited*.
- <sup>2</sup> It is very rare to hear any *jeuname* required by the bride family more than 100 *majam* (equivalent 330 grams).
- <sup>3</sup> Islamic inheritance rules
- <sup>4</sup> Assest given by parent to their children when they are still alive, and this is not considered as inheritance proportion.
- <sup>5</sup> Julia I. Suryakusuma, “The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia”, in Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 92–119.
- <sup>6</sup> From the interview conducted, some parents concluded the dowry price for their daughters based on the educational background of their daughters. If the bride is a SMA graduate, the dowry lower than 10 *mayam*, the bachelor ones is around 10 – 15 *mayam*, and those who had master degree, the range will be between 15 – 20 *mayam*. This standard are limited to some families only. The bride family has to be very careful in deciding the dowry, because sometime, a higher dowry price might cause the groom cancel his marriage proposal. On the other way around, if the bride’s would like to reject the marriage proposal, they propose a higher even the highest dowry price.

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The article submitted should be original based on academic works. The article submitted is never published before in any journal or is being reviewed for possible publication. All the articles submitted will be reviewed by certain editors, editorial board as well as blind reviewers appointed by the journal. Any article does not meet the requirement of the guidelines will not be considered and will be declined.

The number of the words is between 10000 to 15.000 words. References, tables, figures, appendices and notes are included in those words. As for the abstract is 150 words with 5 key words. The articles with quotations and passages from local or foreign language should be translated into English. Electronic submissions are welcome and should be sent to mail journal.

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تركزت هريتيج اوفنوسانتارا للبحث في المؤلفات الدينية سواء كانت معاصرة أو قديمة، والتراث الديني الواقع فيجنوبشرقآسيا، وترجمتها من اللغتين العلمائيتين واللاهوتية في هذا المجال.

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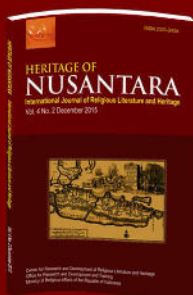
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