

BELIS AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIGNIFIED WOMEN IN THE MARITAL SYSTEM OF EAST NUSA TENGGARA (NTT) PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

This study is designed in qualitative analysis which took the ethnography method under the perspective of cultural studies approach. The data were collected through observation and literature reviews to bring out the voices and experiences of the people concerning the tradition (belis). Belis or a typical bride price practiced by the East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) people is an inseparable part of their daily life which becomes the consequence of embracing the local customs and traditions. Belis considers the clan or ethnic grouping as an important identity. Each marriage will form an alliance and involve an exchange of assets between families or ethnic groups. The payment of belis plays a significant role as a legitimating the union of husband and wife contributing to the stability of marriage. Stability derives both from the way the woman is treated within marriage and from the man's marital commitment. Several of the women explained that belis serves to heighten the dignity and security of the wife as well as the husband's appreciation of his wife, which may reduce the chances of divorce. Being respectful and being respected are seen as key characteristics of a dignified NTT person. Interestingly, belis is also seen as a means to increase one's socioeconomic status. Someone or a family who has paid off their belis feels an increase in their social status.

Keywords: *belis*, marriage, tradition, dignity, East Nusa Tenggara people

Introduction

Marriage is a regulator of human behavior associated with their sex lives. Besides, marriage also gave provision of rights and obligations as well as the protection of children from the marriage. Marriages also meet the need for wealth and prestige in the community, as well as the custodian of good relations between groups of relatives (Koentjaraningrat, 1977, pg. 90). Therefore, when the marriage took place, it has always held a ceremony to celebrate. In the ceremony, each couple must go through stages and under certain conditions so that their marriage will be considered valid. One important requirement in a marriage is dowry or 'bride price'. Considering the precious and important sides of dowry in certifying a marriage, to some tribes in Indonesia giving dowry is done through conducting ceremonies, where it affects prestige and relations among the people's relatives.

People of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) make *belis* as a condition in their marriage tradition. The uniqueness of *belis* as a symbolic form of a dowry is neither pay with money nor with gold, but elephant tusk, like many in regions found around the East Flores. *Belis* has to be paid by a groom to the bride as the one who will be his wife. The amount of *belis* is determined by agreement of both the bridegroom families. *Belis* in NTT is one of the required attributes encompassing a series of traditional wedding ceremony which is still well-maintained till this day. East Nusa Tenggara Province consists of six major islands, namely Flores, Sumba, Timor, Rote, Sabu and Alor commonly known by the acronym FLOBAMORA, these districts have different perceptions regarding the essence and media of *belis*. The word of *belis* is derived from the root word of 'buying', which means purchasing or sort of obligation to give and receive something (as dowry) to the family of the woman before undergoing the wedding procession with a cash payment or a debt (Abdurrasyid & Hidayat, 2008, pg. 414).

The efforts made by the communities to preserve the tradition of *belis* procurement raise social inflammation. Then it results at least two sides, a group of conservative and dynamic groups. Sociologically the existence of such groups poses a dichotomy between social classes. If it is observed in depth, the *belis* procurement successfully forces the people of East Nusa Tenggara to

undergo a class transformation, respectively, the economic case. Said the elephant tusk as a manifestation of *belis* completeness. Of course, this left a polemic since it is undisputed that in East Nusa Tenggara there are no elephants exist. The implications of this tradition have consequences on the high price of elephant tusks which were sold in the marketplaces. This is an economic principle. According to the statement, elephant tusks have been widely used *belis* in which the cycle presence found around the regions of East Nusa Tenggara. That is, a transaction of elephant tusks is undergoing in those islands. But lately the tusks are replaceable with a large amount of money, despite the amount should be agreed upon (Kohl, 2009, pg.247). Though in the midst of pros and cons opinion, there are those who argue that *belis* has implications for gender relations in the people of NTT. For example, a study conducted by Setiawan (2004), among others concluded that the customary marriage and *belis* are correlated with the authority and power of men, it maintains the male domination over female in the household. Meanwhile, the Division of Women Volunteers for Humanity in Flores (TRUCK-F) found that *belis* potentially becomes a source of violence against women in the households (Samuel, 2006).

This study aims to develop an understanding of the relevant discourse *belis* given by groom to the bride and the concept of dignity of the East Nusa Tenggara people (NTT). The approach of discourse is used as views which not always controls what is said on specific socio-cultural situation, but also controls who, where and when a phenomenon considered a discourse. In addition, any arising phenomenon is a discourse. This study under the frame of Cultural Studies (CS). CS is an interdisciplinary field of research which investigates the ways in which "culture" creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations and power.

Method

This study was designed in a qualitative-descriptive method, emphasizing the ethnic point of view, their perspectives on the marital system of NTT people, the decision making process and the effects of their psychological states, economic, and social well-being. The fieldwork was carried out in East Nusa Tenggara which consists of 22 regencies encompassing the islands of Flores, Sumba, Timor, Rote, Sabu dan Alor; these regencies are constructed in the acronym FLOBAMORA. The selection of the sites for this study was determined as much by variety of materials use and perceptions of the societies regarding with *belis* which relates to the dignity of NTT people. In addition, research sites were selected because of the willingness of individuals to cooperate, the convenience of the situation for the researcher and contacts already established by the researcher. Data collection applied in-depth Interviews: Multiple semi-structured in-depth interviews to 8 informants of informal leaders (*tetua adat*) or village leaders. Interviews were private and confidential. The majority of interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language. Observation: observing the women's interaction with their families, with female and male friends, and with other community members to gain wider insight into women's position concerning the practice of *belis* among the societies of NTT.

Discussion

Belis in Relation with the Dignity of NTT People

According to Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) *belis* is a treasure given by the male or groom party) to the bride at the time of marriage proposal process. According to public opinion the meaning of *belis* in kinship bound understanding is a sign for showing a gratitude to a female who wishes moving to her new family relationship which in turn honoring her role as a wife of the groom. *Belis* is authorized in determining the marriage validity which act as a compensation for efforts of parents in raising the bride, renaming and putting down on the bride family's name and thus improving the reputation and dignity of the groom's family.

It is inevitable that in everyday life of *belis* ownership in the *fam* can be seen as a social identity, the social status, social image and mentality of the people. The progress of *belis* procurement tradition in today has become as a lifestyle of the East Nusa Tenggara people and regarded as a sacred and high culture to the supporting communities. It should be emphasized here that marriage in the tradition and social life of NTT people generally adopt genealogical patrilineal system (following the paternal line) and place the clan or tribe as an important identity. In relation to this, the system upholds the *belis* (a type of dowry). Octavianus (1985:41) stated that:

Belis cannot be money or the purchase price for female, but rather a gift or reward from the groom to the bride party. The means to *belis* is normally comprised of traditional goods or money.

Thus, before the wedding took place, the male candidates underwent stages of traditional marriage, ranging from stage of proposing, giving up for *belis*, and on the last stage to secure ratification. Therefore, after the ceremony, it is stated that the groom has to make a payment of *belis* to completion or to cut off. Thus, since that time the bride along with her next descendants are to declare a breakup for her former customs (former family's customs) and going into the other tribe / clans of her husband.

For some people of NTT, asking for *belis* equals to selling their daughters, for it often develops an understanding in the community that if a female was paid for her *belis*, then overall she becomes the ownership of the groom's family. Consequently, it is incumbent on her to follow the clan of her groom, both the groom and his family have rights to do anything to the bride, including prohibiting to visit her family (Verkuyl, 1985:182). Despite traditionally the practice of *belis* is well-maintained; there are those who feel it such a burden, especially at the marriage time. This burden economically oppressed the poor families, because of the limited assets they own to pay off the *belis*.. Thus, the aesthetic value of *belis* has been calculated in this case. Related to this, there is an evident in the NTT, that the more people uphold the tradition (*belis*) that is maintained

hereditary, though it potentially remains negative for them. These people are more appreciative to their local custom rather than attempting to be apart from it.



The payment of *belis* is an important prerequisite for the legitimization of the marriage.

Belis has several functions for both the groom and bride, among others: (1) as a means to strengthen relationship between *fam/* family, (2) a means of deciding the marriage validity, (3) as a social marker that the female had been out of the family */fam* origin, (4) a means to enhance the degree or name of the male's family. The positive impact of giving *belis* as follows;

- 1) Improving the groom's family dignity. Through the provision of *belis* it enhances the groom's family dignity, because the groom and his family are considered capable of paying *belis* which determined by the bride's family.
- 2) Families of the bride feel appreciated. The purpose of *belis* provision reflects a compensation for services or respect for fatigue, pain and toil of the bride's parents for giving birth and nurturing her up to the adulthood.
- 3) Create and deepen new kinship. By providing *belis* will strengthen the relationship between the new kinship *fam/* her family and a family man. *Belis* made as a binder.

Personal communication with Ahmad Bethan (52 years old) Samsudin Beleng (47 years old) (01, December 2015).

As types of assets transfer between families, the value or quantity of *belis*, therefore, varying and there is nothing standard amount of payment for a *belis*. *Belis* can take many forms, including money, cattle, and goods, such as *sofren* (cash or gold plate), or depending on the consensus of the related local tribes. However, in general, the value of *belis* depends on several factors. For marriages, the amount *belis* influenced by, first; the social status of the family; the higher the social status, the higher the value for an individual's *belis*. Secondly, it affected by the agreement or the outcome of negotiations between the families of both men and women (Smeru Research, 2006). In every marriage, the male's family party usually gives up some livestock, cash, and also *sofren* (now replaced with cash). If each one measured by the value of money, then the amount of *belis* may range from 5 million up to 10 million of rupiah. The payment of *belis* for a marriage can be done in several ways. The first, the payment is carried out in cash at a course of time before the marriage ceremony. Secondly, it is carried out by way of payable or installments. However, the payable *belis* shall be paid. Suppose a husband who has not paid off *belis*, and passed away, the repayment becomes the responsibility of her husband family.

The High Value of *Belis* Impacted on the Economic Situations in NTT

The obligations regarding the payment of *belis* are still very dominant in the NTT, it even has turned out to raise a wide range of attitudes and opinions, both pros and cons. Various anthropological studies and cultural studies have been done to people of NTT, found various opinions on the problems related to *belis* (Mawardi, 2006). One of the most often mentioned opinions by people in the communities are the influences of *belis* on the families' welfare conditions. Various districts and regencies of NTT wherein the indigenous living around, especially from the younger generation perceive the practice of *belis* has turned to sort of burdensome, especially at the time of marriage and death. This burden is felt the family's economic burden, especially for the poor families, because of the limited assets they own to pay off *belis*.

On the other hand, one of the biggest remaining problems from the practice of *belis* is the more emergence of unlawful marriage as a resistance against the unresolved poverty problems. Since a marriage without careful preparatory work will lead to poor families in economic terms. Related to the statement, in general, the NTT people ironically hold a wedding party at a very expensive cost. In contrast when it is viewed in economic terms, the average populations of NTT are living under the medium

economic level and the income per capita is very low. That is why, according to the opinion and observations to local people, researchers in community activities, especially marriage without marriage is found more expensive.

The shift views of the NTT people towards *belis* making it as an intermediary symbol of commercialization practice and religious customs. The movement has shifted to a sense of profanation on cultural attributes This is no longer perceived to contain sacred cultural message but as the fulfillment of the needs of industrial markets. The survival of the tradition of *belis* raises dilemma between upholding the noble values of culture or even increase poverty levels to the culture supporters¹. No doubt that people literally still stuck on symbols rather than interpret the essence behind the symbols. Even when the symbol of indigenous traditions replaced into a market system, the cultural heritage such as *belis* tradition becomes a means of supporting the economic needs. Serious impacts of these events become more frequent and explicit phenomenon of capitalist exploitation of the succeeding generations and the cultural symbols of the myths that are not being used properly. In harmony with the opinion of Soekanto (1990, pg. 20) that the social and cultural changes are always closely related to economic growth. Similarly, economic growth in the region will result in changes in many public institutions.

The Essence of *Belis* and Its Link to the People's Dignity

Marriage, in the view of a person, is a natural fact, which brings together both men and women and sanctified by love. Something that every one has historically recognized and many people reflect the Divine nature or, for others, it can be observed by natural reason alone. For those who hold this view think that two people can marry each other or two women to marry each other make sense, and as ontologically impossible two people trying to be brothers or two women trying to become brothers. In another view, marriage is a social construct, something that is not given in nature but something that is selected and determined by humans. Something that was chosen by the will and purified by love; something that everyone should recognize.

In a customary marriage of NTT people, the existence of *belis* is regarded as a symbol of appreciation and recognition to the dignity of a woman. In other words, *belis* becomes an indicator for women and men in this culture being respected and appreciated. This is as reflected in the Floresian proverb (a region in NTT): "*dua naha nora ling, nora weling, loning dua utang ling labu weling, dadi ata lai naha letto wotter*" (each female has a value, has a price, while her gloves and clothes also have value and prices, so that every man must pay for them). The phenomenon of *belis* as a tradition has come to be ironic if the existing social condition remains unstable. In actual fact, whenever the practice of *belis* is done under the payment intended to enriching one party against the other, it shall lessen the cultural sacredness. Consequently this raises negative perceptions either from the people themselves or people of other ethnicity. The community of today started to blame customs. Many practices in the name of custom abused this system; people tend to increase the demands for *belis* that exceed the limits of a person or group associated for it is pride and prestige (Banfatin, 2012). Objects refer to *belis* used to reflect symbols for power and social status by slow degree started to be ignored by the method of payment using cash as the replacement.

As the time develops and the world global impact embraced by the society, so the mindset of the modern society in the East Nusa Tenggara. The demands for *belis* required by the bride's family slowly free from binding, though by no means the practice of *belis* contract is totally abolished (Octavian, 1985: 41). People of NTT continuously maintain *belis* for it has been practiced hereditary and thus becomes sacred. The sacredness point of *belis* making it should not be overlooked. For example, the demand for bride price has to standardize to the *belis* had ever once received by the bride's mother (by her father) at the time of the marriage proposal taken place (Haning, 2006): 14; TPKK, 1989: 16-17). It was then perceived as a burden for generations to modern society in the province, "the practice of marriage with the bride price is considered to be a burden to be met, especially at the time of the marriage, so the demands of *belis* considered as a burdensome to the economy of the family, especially for those who are among the poor families because of having limited assets to repay the *belis*" (Smeru Research, 2006: 26).

People of Sumba interpret *belis* as suppression of cultural values and which is not termed as the "exchange price" that nominally countable. It was strongly associated with the local beliefs (local genius) of Sumba people (Marapu). When humans move from one cosmos to another, the cosmic place of origin will be empty so that it becomes imbalance. For women who are ready to get married and was paid for her *belis* is believed her cosmos (the family) is imbalance. *Belis* given to the woman is believed to be the replacement for the void of the cosmos place of origin (Kapita. 1976: 15).

Despite there were perceptions against *belis*, most people feel that *belis* as a benchmark for the high and low value especially to the candidate's wife, her future children and her clan. The greater amount and value of *belis* a man could pay, the higher the value of the appreciation to the woman. There is the reply for the paid *belis* for it is to appoint the high value of the wife being appreciated to their daughters and the wife taker. If the reply is not equally valued the *belis*, the wife giver will be despised by the public and is deemed her parents have sold their daughter (Wellem, 2004). It at least triggers speculation among people of low economic condition; Kruit (in Wellem, 2004) says *belis* in the East of Sumba is greater in value when compared with the West Sumba. Consequently there are many unmarried men in the East Sumba with the highest reason mainly due to unable to pay their *belis*.

The assets that often used as a means of *belis* payment are farm animals, such as cows and pigs. Thus, people would save their assets or savings in the forms of farm animals and the other forms of savings (such as money) that can be immediately used at any time in case there is a customs' need (*belis*). For *belis* marriage, the numbers of cattle to be given to the women often exceed the amount of assets held by the grooms that they have to repay the payments *belis* for years, even so, many people found that they are indebted to pay off the *belis*.

Image 2: Elephant tusks as a payment media of *belis*



Elephant tusks are perceived as the symbol of the highest honor to a female's entity who shall be a future wife of a male. The payment of *belis* reflects a trust, honesty, sincerity and friendliness which are associated with the female. Willingness to hold the custom of *belis* with the media of elephant tusks to the family of the bride is an effort to build a harmonious atmosphere for the local socio-cultural life.

In some important regions such as Lamaholot, for instance, elephant tusks become the main media used as a symbolic icon for *belis*. A marriage culture demand that relates the elephant tusks is being transformed into the other forms of provision. The intended change has an impact on *belis* demand. It becomes an evident that the reducing on numbers of the elephant tusks for *belis* were turned into cash. This conversion is done solely to keep running the culture which has been well-maintained hereditary. In case the requirement of this tradition does not undergo conversion, the culture of marriage with *belis* in the districts around NTT especially in Lamaholot will slowly disappear for it is increasingly difficult to implement.

People of NTT typically pay their *belis* with two to seven bars of elephant tusks, and sometimes up to nine bars of tusks although it is rare. The amount *belis* is influenced by descents, education, social, economic, employment, and the beauty of their daughters. Thus, the higher education strata of them the more increase number of bars of tusks to be paid by the prospective groom.

According to Ahmad Bethanⁱⁱ, as an implementor of *belis* and a Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council of Larantuka, recounted the history behind the practice of *belis* with elephant tusks:

"Our custom is also influenced by the lives of the past, which it grows and develops in kingdomhood territories. There were kingdoms called Adonara, the Lamahala and the kingdom of Larantuka. Here there are no elephant tusks but they are affordable around everywhere. It was a history in the state where there is a barter trade exchange made by the kingdom of Adonara and Larantuka with a kingdom in the Island of Sumatera. Our kingdoms gave up spices and then they would barter them with elephant tusks. That is why we uphold the tradition of *belis* using elephant tusks for they are difficult to obtain from, anyone who is able to get an elephant tusks or a man who could convince to the family of his future wife that he could accomplish the payment (of *belis*) with the tusks, it shows he is an earnest man. I think that is about my view as a public figure, at least just that".

The other was recounted by Samsudin Beleng, as a public figure of NTT, East Flores, district of Larantuka who relates the history concerning the practice of *belis* requiring the elephant tusks as follows:

The history of *belis* with elephant tusks has begun from our ancestors to enact *belis* with elephant tusks, and this has been implemented hereditary. Elephant had been there from before we humans exist in the world. There are no elephants in Flores but the tusks could be here it's because traders from Sumatra, Malaysia, India they came to Flores by bringing the elephant tusks and then exchanged with spices, antique stuffs which existed at the kingdomhood era hundred years ago in Flores mainland (Beleng, 2015)ⁱⁱⁱ.

The practice of *belis* with symbolic media in the form of elephant tusks to the most community in NTT has occurred not because of there are a lot of elephants in the land of East Flores or the islands of NTT at large, but they were obtained from the result of a transaction or trade barter system in early society. Trading was conducted by the NTT people with some traders from Sumatra, Malaysia, and India in exchange for elephant tusks to the indigenous sources such as spices, antiques, etc.

Similarly, the reason for choosing elephant tusks as something they want to get to barter with agricultural products, antiques and other things that they have, it is understood that the tusks are the most difficult stuffs to find in the people's area. It is known that in the land of East Flores no elephants live, either in the forest or farm community, it makes the elephant tusks as an appropriate tool in the barter transaction at that time.

The enactment of *belis* with elephant tusks practiced by society living in the East of Flores recounted by Ahmad Bethan, as follows:

It's included in the group of indigenous peoples of East Flores was totally into the clan NTT and who are also subjected to customary law of NTT although various groups of tribe depend on each island, they are the subjects to the provisions of local indigenous respectively but by law all people subject to customary law of NTT. One of customs of NTT is on the marital level in which the practice of *belis* in marital laws including Islamic law is also familiar with the honest marriage (*jujuran*) or *belis* system (Bethan, 2015)^{iv}.

Thus, it can be seen that the marital system by paying the *belis* is done by all indigenous people living in the area of East Flores. Although in some cases the provisions or the amount of money and cattles for *belis* are specified to follow the tribes or groups on their respective islands. However, the applicability of *belis* exist in each tribe and regional groups in East Flores both Moslem and non-Muslims.

Conclusion

Belis or a typical bride price practiced by the East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) people is an inseparable part of their daily life which becomes the consequence of embracing the local customs and traditions. *Belis* is authorized in determining the marriage validity which acts as a compensation for efforts of parents in raising the bride, renaming and putting down on the bride family's name and thus improving the reputation and dignity of the groom's family. It is inevitable that in everyday life of *belis* ownership in the *fam* can be seen as a social identity, the social status, social image and mentality of the people. Being respectful and being respected are seen as key characteristics of a dignified NTT person. Interestingly, *belis* is also seen as a means to increase one's socioeconomic status. Someone or a family who has paid off their *belis* feels an increase in their social status. The progress of *belis* procurement tradition in today has turned the East Nusa Tenggara people's lifestyles and regarded as a sacred and high culture to the supporting communities. Essentially, *belis* has several functions for both the groom and bride, among others: (1) as a means to strengthen relationship between *fam*/ family, (2) a means of deciding the marriage validity, (3) as a social marker that the female had been out of the family /*fam* origin, (4) a means to enhance the degree or name of the male's family.

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Notes:

ⁱ The individuals' income of each worker in East Nusa Tenggara Rp. 35, 000 per day. This suggests that the eastern region of Indonesia, especially East Nusa Tenggara and West Nusa Tenggara of Indonesia were classified as regions with the highest poverty index. ie 67% to 45% rates of malnutrition. The existence of a wedding tradition with *belis* was taken into consideration on the poverty rate (Suryahadi et al, 2005 at the Overseas Development Institute and Institute Research Institute).

ⁱⁱ Ahmad Bethan, Personal Communication, 52 years old, December 1, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Samsudin Beleng, Personal Communication, 47 years old, November 27, 2015

^{iv} Ahmad Bethan, Personal Communication, 52 years old, December 1, 2015

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