

THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE IN MARRIAGE WITHIN THE FANAN CUSTOMARY GROUP IN THE ARU ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the traditional marriage practices of the Fanan community in the Aru Islands, with particular attention to the Odar Serol ceremony as a form of honorable marriage. While previous studies on bridewealth in Eastern Indonesia primarily emphasize its economic or ritual dimensions, limited research has analyzed its role in strengthening social cohesion and maintaining structured kinship relations in small island communities. This study addresses that gap by situating Fanan marriage within a broader framework of social exchange and communal integration. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with traditional leaders and community members, and documentation of customary rituals. The findings show that Fanan marriage operates across interconnected dimensions: economic exchange, symbolic meaning, kinship formation, moral obligation, and cultural transmission. Bridewealth functions not merely as material compensation but as a structured mechanism of reciprocity that legitimizes alliances between families, reinforces social obligations, and affirms respect for customary norms. The Odar Serol ceremony institutionalizes these exchanges through the mediation of traditional authorities, ensuring adherence to adat rules and preserving the integrity of the marriage process. As such, marriage in the Fanan community serves as a central social institution that sustains solidarity, regulates social relations, and reproduces collective identity across generations. This study contributes to the literature on kinship and bridewealth by demonstrating how customary marriage rituals in small island societies function as mechanisms of social cohesion and moral regulation, extending beyond transactional interpretations toward a governance-oriented understanding of social integration. *This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA license.*



INTRODUCTION

Marriage in human society is fundamentally a social institution that regulates relationships, obligations, and collective identity. Although mating among living beings involves processes such as partner selection and reproduction (Xu et al., 2022; Wulandari et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2022), in human communities marriage extends far beyond biological reproduction. It is embedded in systems of norms, values, and structured exchanges that organize kinship and social order.

From a sociological perspective, Social Exchange Theory explains that relationships are formed through reciprocal interactions in which each party expects benefits and assumes obligations (Ulinnuha, 2025). Reciprocal exchange constitutes the foundation of social behavior, shaping trust, cooperation, and long-term commitment. Within this framework, marriage can be understood as an institutionalized form of exchange that binds individuals and families into enduring alliances governed by shared expectations (Tsen et al., 2022).

Marriage between two individuals is therefore not merely a personal union but a socially regulated process shaped by customary norms and intergenerational values (Sakir, 2025). These norms define roles between the bride-giving and bride-receiving groups, establishing reciprocal rights and responsibilities (Ruciswandaru et al., 2025). Obligations are negotiated through consultations and deliberations involving extended kin networks (Jun & Eckardt, 2025). Such collective involvement underscores that marriage operates as a mechanism of kinship integration rather than as an individual act (Gupta, 2023).

As a major life transition, marriage symbolizes the shift to adulthood and family responsibility (Gamella & Muntean, 2023). Wedding ceremonies express cultural continuity and social legitimacy (Croll, 2023). Legally, marriage is recognized as a physical and spiritual bond intended to establish a stable and enduring family (Chabelita et al., 2024; Anwar et al., 2025). Its validity depends on compliance with legal, religious, and customary regulations, as well as individual maturity and responsibility (Ali et al., 2022). In practice, marriage is negotiated through agreements shaped by law and local traditions (Abdou et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2023; Afunugo, 2025).

Despite extensive scholarship on marriage and reciprocity, studies applying Social Exchange Theory to customary marriage systems in Eastern Indonesia remain limited. Much of the existing literature discusses ritual forms, legal aspects, or symbolic meanings, yet fewer studies examine how structured exchange processes regulate kinship balance, authority, and social cohesion within small island customary groups. This research addresses that gap by analyzing marriage within the Fanan customary group of the Aru Islands as a structured system of social exchange.

In the Aru Islands, marriage practices are deeply embedded in local customary systems. Several customary groups exist in Central Aru, including the Fanan group and the Akwan group, which includes the Hayar and Atutu subgroups. Each group maintains distinct traditions influencing marital arrangements and social relations.

Within the Fanan customary group, marriage follows long-established traditions that regulate engagement procedures, bridewealth payments, and authority structures. The group is concentrated in Central Aru, primarily on Kobror Island, and consists of villages such as Kojjabi, Balatan, Karaway, Dosinamalau, Jirlai, Irloy, Algang, Lorang, Manjau, Kwarbola, Ponom, Murai, Kobadangar, Kobaseltimur, and Kobaselfaara. Kojjabi Village serves as the customary center, where authority is vested in the holder of the betel-nut place, functioning as mediator and customary judge.

In Fanan society, marriage represents an alliance between extended families rather than a private relationship between two individuals. Four recognized forms of marriage illustrate how exchange and obligation are institutionalized.

The first and most honorable form is Odar Serol, a formal proposal marriage conducted according to all customary procedures. Negotiations over bridewealth and ceremonial requirements are mediated by elders, reinforcing legitimacy and reciprocity. The second form, Sersuunai (elopement), bypasses initial procedures but is later legitimized through customary negotiations involving sanctions and compensation. This process demonstrates how social exchange mechanisms restore balance and social order. The third form, Fanlavu (uxorilocal marriage), requires

the husband to reside within the wife's family lineage, often to ensure succession or maintain lineage continuity. This arrangement reflects adaptive exchange within the kinship structure. The fourth form, *Sersaiyaikul*, involves abducting another man's wife and constitutes a serious violation of customary norms. Severe sanctions and ritual mediation are imposed to restore equilibrium, illustrating how exchange principles regulate conflict resolution.

Bridewealth payments, fines, and compensatory systems such as "tooth for tooth" symbolize balanced reciprocity and collective negotiation. These exchanges are not purely economic transactions but structured mechanisms that sustain kinship equilibrium and communal cohesion.

Recent social transformations have influenced marriage procedures and bridewealth systems within the Fanan group. Modernization has altered patterns of obligation, reciprocity, and authority, yet the underlying exchange principles remain central. These dynamics highlight the evolving yet resilient nature of marriage as a social institution.

Based on this context, the transformation of social exchange processes within Fanan marriage presents a significant field of inquiry. By situating customary marriage within Social Exchange Theory, this study contributes to understanding how indigenous institutions in Eastern Indonesia function as mechanisms of governance, reciprocity, and social integration.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a strong ethnographic orientation to examine marriage practices within the Fanan customary group in the Aru Islands. The research seeks to understand meanings, values, and structured social exchanges embedded in customary marriage by observing phenomena in their natural setting. The researcher functions as the primary instrument, engaging directly with community members to capture lived experiences and culturally grounded interpretations. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of marriage as a socially embedded institution rather than merely a formal procedure.

Fieldwork was conducted in Kojjabi Village, East Central Aru District, which serves as the customary center of the Fanan group. The site was purposively selected due to its authority in regulating customary affairs, particularly marriage practices. Informants were chosen through purposive sampling based on their social position, experience, and involvement in customary processes. Key informants included traditional leaders, customary mediators, and senior community members from Kojjabi, complemented by participants from other Fanan villages to ensure broader contextual understanding.

Data were collected through participant and non-participant observation, in-depth face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. These techniques enabled the researcher to examine ritual processes, negotiation practices, and bridewealth exchanges within their social context. Interview guidelines were used flexibly to facilitate open-ended dialogue while maintaining focus on research objectives. Documentary sources and archival materials were used to complement and contextualize field data.

Data analysis followed an interactive model of qualitative analysis involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Analysis was conducted inductively to identify patterns of social exchange, authority, and reciprocity within marriage practices. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility strategies such as prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data sources and methods, and cross-checking findings with key informants. These procedures strengthen the validity of interpretations and enhance the reliability of the study's conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

General Overview of Marriage in the Research Location

This study was conducted among the Fanan indigenous community in the Aru Islands, where marriage operates not merely as a cultural ritual but as a central social institution that structures kinship, authority, and social cohesion. In the Fanan context, marriage is not confined to the private sphere of two individuals; rather, it constitutes a regulated mechanism through which alliances are formed, obligations are distributed, and collective identity is reproduced. The Fanan customary group remains one of the most cohesive indigenous clusters in Central Aru and East Central Aru,

particularly on Kobrur Island, and this cohesion is sustained through institutionalized customary norms that govern interpersonal and inter-family relations.

Villages belonging to this group are primarily located along the coast and collectively identify themselves as “Fanan Abil.” This shared identity reflects more than geographical proximity; it represents a moral and institutional community bound by shared customary law. Rather than functioning as fragmented settlements, these villages are structurally integrated through a recognized hierarchy of authority that regulates dispute resolution, ritual propriety, and marriage procedures. In this sense, marriage becomes one of the principal arenas in which customary governance is enacted and reproduced.

The villages within the Fanan customary group include Kojjabi, Balatan, Karaway, Dosinamalau, Jirlai, Irloy, Algadang, Lorang, Manjau, Kwarbola, Ponom, Murai, Kobadangar, Kobaseltimur, and Kobaselfaara. Among these, Kojjabi Village—locally known as Kampung Besar (Fano Sinan)—functions as the customary center. Its authority is not merely symbolic or ceremonial; it operates as a governance node where decisions concerning marriage legitimacy, ritual correctness, and conflict mediation are coordinated. The holder of the betel container (ngarfafi busiferei), referred to as the judge (orang tengah), embodies institutional authority within this system. His role illustrates that marriage is embedded within a structured framework of customary governance, where exchanges are supervised, validated, and normatively regulated.

Fanan marriage customs consist of four recognized forms: Odar Serol (Maso Minta Nona), Sersuunai (elopement), Fanlavu (uxorilocal residence), and Sersaiyaikul (taking another’s wife). Each form reflects structured variations in how social exchange and kinship realignment are negotiated. The existence of multiple forms demonstrates that marriage is not a rigid institution but a regulated field of possibilities governed by customary norms. This study focuses on Odar Serol as the most legitimate and honorable form, not only because it adheres fully to procedural norms but because it most clearly reveals how marriage institutionalizes reciprocity, authority, and collective legitimacy. In Odar Serol, exchange is formalized, supervised, and publicly acknowledged, making it analytically central to understanding Fanan social organization.

The Maso Minta Nona Process (Odar Serol)

The Odar Serol process begins with internal deliberation within the male family, underscoring that marriage is conceived as a collective and intergenerational decision rather than an individual romantic choice. This preliminary consultation signifies that the proposed union implicates the honor, obligations, and future alliances of the entire kin group. From an institutional perspective, this stage functions as internal authorization before entering a broader exchange network.

Preparatory items—betel nut, betel leaf, lime, and tobacco arranged in a betel container—operate as symbolic capital that communicates sincerity, respect, and readiness to assume responsibility. These objects are not arbitrary; they constitute culturally recognized media of exchange that initiate reciprocity. From a social exchange perspective, the presentation of the betel container represents the first formal gesture in a sequence of reciprocal acts. It establishes the moral tone of negotiation, signaling that the male family approaches the alliance with humility and adherence to custom.

Communication with the female family is facilitated by Fanan Niailele, whose mediating role reinforces that exchange does not occur spontaneously but is channeled through legitimate authority. This mediation prevents direct confrontation and maintains ritual propriety, ensuring that negotiation unfolds within recognized norms. Traditionally, proposals were delivered metaphorically, reflecting cultural refinement and indirect politeness. The contemporary shift toward more direct language indicates adaptive modernization, yet the mediating structure remains intact. This continuity demonstrates that while communicative style evolves, the institutional framework governing exchange persists.

The deliberation period granted to the female family further illustrates balance within the exchange process. By allowing time for consultation, the system prevents asymmetry and reinforces equality between bride-giving and

bride-receiving groups. This stage embodies regulated reciprocity: neither party can impose unilateral decisions without risking social disapproval.

Negotiations concerning bridewealth (*harta pamali*) occur in formal meetings, often held in the morning, which is considered auspicious within Fanan cosmology. Items such as a white plate, sarong, and monetary contributions function as structured obligations rather than mere economic transfers. These objects symbolize recognition of the bride's value, respect toward her lineage, and the assumption of long-term responsibility. The examination of these items by Fanan Niailele ensures procedural legitimacy and confirms that obligations are fulfilled in accordance with customary standards.

Ritual acts following negotiation—presenting coconut oil, sounding the gong, and the bride stepping onto the stairs—mark the transformation of negotiated agreement into socially recognized alliance. Coconut oil symbolizes purification and blessing; the gong signals communal acknowledgment; stepping onto the stairs formalizes integration into the husband's kinship network. Analytically, these stages institutionalize exchange by converting private negotiation into collective endorsement. Through this process, marriage transcends individual union and becomes a publicly validated mechanism for reproducing social order, authority, and kinship continuity within the Fanan community.

Challenges and Adaptations in Modern Context

Modern influences—migration, formal education, market integration, and the expansion of national legal systems—have not simply altered procedural aspects of Fanan marriage but have reconfigured the field within which customary authority operates. Rather than interpreting these influences as forces of erosion, this study situates them within a framework of negotiated adaptation. The replacement of metaphorical language with more direct communication in marriage proposals, for instance, can be read as a process of rationalization. However, this rationalization does not eliminate symbolic depth; instead, it repositions symbolism within a more time-efficient and socially mobile context. In this sense, ritual transformation reflects recalibration rather than cultural dilution.

Similarly, the simplification of bridewealth demonstrates economic pragmatism shaped by contemporary livelihoods. Monetary adjustments and the reduction of certain items indicate responsiveness to changing material conditions, particularly in communities increasingly connected to wage labor and regional markets. Yet the persistence of core symbolic objects reveals that bridewealth remains a moral contract rather than a market transaction. This dual movement—simplification without symbolic abandonment—illustrates adaptive continuity. Marriage thus becomes a site where tradition negotiates with modernity without collapsing into either.

The coexistence of customary ceremonies and state registration further reveals institutional layering. Customary authority confers moral and social legitimacy within the community, while civil registration provides juridical recognition and legal protection under national law. Rather than producing institutional conflict, this dual recognition reflects complementary governance. Customary law regulates relational obligations and communal accountability; state law secures formal rights and administrative certainty. Their coexistence demonstrates plural legal rationalities operating in parallel, illustrating that governance in Fanan society is dialogical rather than hierarchical.

Generational tensions regarding ritual strictness also illuminate evolving interpretations of propriety and legitimacy. Younger members often prioritize practicality and mobility, while elders emphasize procedural integrity and symbolic completeness. Customary leaders increasingly mediate these perspectives by preserving normative principles while allowing procedural flexibility. This balancing act suggests that resilience does not lie in rigid preservation but in controlled transformation. In this framework, adaptation becomes a mechanism of cultural sustainability rather than a sign of decline.

The Role of Community in Fanan Marriage

Marriage in Fanan society is not confined to two individuals or even two families; it is enacted as a community event that transforms private intention into publicly validated alliance. Collective participation—through labor,

material contribution, ritual attendance, and advisory roles—creates a network of mutual oversight and shared responsibility. This public dimension ensures that marriage is socially accountable. By involving the wider community, the process embeds the union within a moral economy of reciprocity.

Community contribution operates through generalized reciprocity. Assistance provided during one marriage—whether in preparing food, organizing rituals, or contributing symbolic items—is not immediately repaid but circulates across future ceremonies. Over time, such circulation constructs durable inter-family alliances. Reciprocity therefore extends beyond material exchange to the reproduction of trust and long-term solidarity. The wedding becomes both an event and an investment in relational continuity.

Moreover, customary elders and mediators play a critical role in safeguarding the ethical framework of marriage negotiations. Their involvement prevents disputes from escalating and ensures that exchanges align with collective values. Authority here is not coercive but regulatory: it structures negotiation so that neither party dominates. In this sense, marriage operates as a governance process embedded in community structure. It distributes obligations, clarifies rights, and reaffirms interdependence through institutionalized exchange.

Through these mechanisms, marriage functions as a micro-level system of social integration. It organizes alliances, redistributes resources, and reaffirms collective norms. Rather than being a purely domestic arrangement, Fanan marriage constitutes a structured arena where authority, reciprocity, and communal legitimacy converge.

CONCLUSION

The Fanan marriage tradition in the Aru Islands represents a complex social and cultural system that intertwines economic, symbolic, kinship, moral, and communal dimensions. Through the Odar Serol ceremony, families engage in structured exchanges of gifts, obligations, and rituals that strengthen alliances, uphold social hierarchy, and transmit cultural values. Economic and symbolic elements of the bridewealth reinforce respect, moral responsibility, and social legitimacy, while kinship ties create enduring networks of cooperation. Community involvement ensures collective accountability, and traditional leaders safeguard cultural norms through regulated mediation and ritual authority. The preservation of these practices depends on intergenerational transmission, adaptability, and active participation, securing Fanan marriage as both a cultural heritage and a mechanism for social cohesion and harmony.

Theoretically, this study contributes to broader debates on kinship and exchange by demonstrating that bridewealth in small island societies functions not merely as a transactional transfer but as a governance mechanism that institutionalizes reciprocity, moral regulation, and collective legitimacy. By situating Odar Serol within a framework of social integration and plural authority, the study expands understanding of how customary institutions operate as adaptive systems capable of negotiating modern legal and economic pressures while maintaining normative coherence.

This study is limited by its focus on one customary cluster within the Aru Islands and primarily on the Odar Serol form of marriage. Variations across other indigenous groups or alternative marriage forms were not examined in equal depth. Future research may benefit from comparative analysis and longitudinal observation to capture broader transformations and inter-community dynamics.

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